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‘I won’t have time to be lonely,’ Lisa snapped. ‘I have a career to think of.’

Empowerment and Agency in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* by Marian Keyes

Master’s Thesis

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**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****Faculty of Philosophy****Discipline:** English Studies**Author:** Suvi Lehtipää**Master's Thesis:** 'I won't have time to be lonely,' Lisa snapped. 'I have a career to think of.'  
Empowerment and Agency in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* by Marian Keyes**Degree:** Master of Arts**Date:** 2015**Supervisor:** Tiina Mäntymäki

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**ABSTRACT**

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tutkia feminististä/postfeminististä voimaantumista sekä naisten toimijuutta irlantilaisen kirjailijan Marian Keyesin chick lit -romaaneissa *Sushi for Beginners* (2001) ja *The Other Side of the Story* (2005). Lisäksi tutkimus tarkastelee naisen asemaa nykypäivän yhteiskunnassa erityisesti työelämän, ulkonäköpaineiden ja romanttisten suhteiden näkökulmasta. Chick lit -genre voidaan nähdä romanttisen kirjallisuuden jatkeena, joka nostaa esiin uusia aiheita naisten maailmasta romanttisten suhteiden lisäksi ja antaa lukijoilleen mahdollisuuden samaistua päähenkilöihin kertomustensa ansiosta. Feminismin kehitys luo uusia mahdollisuuksia kokeilla erilaisia ja uusia identiteettejä sekä haastaa sukupuoliroolien rajoja. Romaanien päähenkilöt arvostavat naisellisuuttaan ja seksuaalisuuttaan, mikä mahdollistaa voimaantumisen, joka puolestaan toimii heidän toimijuutensa pohjana.

Tutkimus tarkastelee päähenkilöiden tarinoita kehityskertomuksina, joissa erilaiset kokemukset nähdään tilaisuuksina oppia ja kehittyä ihmisenä. Sukupuoli-identiteetin näkeminen performatiivisena avaa päähenkilöille uusia mahdollisuuksia kohdata yhteiskunnan ennakkoluuloja ja haasteita sekä määritellä uudelleen kysymyksen siitä, onko mahdollista saada kaikki. Näin ollen päähenkilöt ovat vapaita tekemään itsenäisiä valintoja. Tutkimuksesta käy ilmi, että yksityis- ja työelämän yhdistäminen on vaativaa, sukupuoliroolien eriarvoisuus vaatii luovia ratkaisuja, naisten välinen solidaarisuus on arvokasta uratavoitteiden kannalta ja perhe-elämän sovittaminen työelämään tulisi tehdä vaivattommaksi. On tärkeää tunnistaa median ja kulttuurin luomat ulkonäköpaineet, koska ne saattavat olla vahingollisia. Kaikesta huolimatta ulkonäköön ja sen muokkaukseen liittyvistä seikoista voi saada myös voimaa ja itsevarmuutta. Avioliitto, äitiys ja vanhemmuus puolestaan ovat vahvasti yhteiskunnan odotuksiin sidottuja. Näitä odotuksia päähenkilöt murtavat vähitellen tilannekohtaisilla toimillaan ja valinnoillaan. Tällaiset narratiivit vaikuttavat sosiaaliseen ja poliittiseen ilmapiiriin yhteiskunnassa, koska ne sisältävät voimaantumista ja lukijat voivat samaistua niiden päähenkilöihin.

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**KEYWORDS:** feminism, empowerment, agency, chick lit, bildungsroman, gender



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Popular fiction for young women promotes representations of young, modern women that are successful, beautiful, smart, sexy, chic and who have it all. There is a vast number of qualifications, pressures, standards, demands, rules, ideals and codes according which young, modern women are supposed to lead their lives in order to appear successful and appreciated in our society. These expectations are placed upon young women partly by themselves, their close acquaintances, the working environment, the media, popular culture; the whole of our society, actually. Even though these popular, young, female characters seem to meet the expectations of success and appreciation, their fictional lives also include a great deal of problems, contradictions and challenges. Despite the fact that gender equality has come a long way, and especially women's position in society has improved along the years, there are still practices and attitudes concerning gender roles that are taken for granted. As a consequence these assumptions should be questioned in order to promote tolerance.

### 1.1 The Aim of the Thesis

The aim of this thesis is to study feminist/postfeminist empowerment and female agency in Marian Keyes's chick lit novels *Sushi for Beginners* (2000) and *The Other Side of the Story* (2004) and explore the ways in which they depict attitudes and appreciation towards different roles of women in modern society. I will analyse the ways in which the women characters of the novels manage to deal with the pressures of society, common beliefs and the norms set for them.

This thesis concentrates on the female protagonists in the novels and studies their choices and actions in contemporary society as well as the way society sees them. Furthermore, this thesis explores the depiction of the social and political atmosphere in contemporary literature when considering women's position in society and discusses the challenges and expectations concerning the women characters professional lives,

returning to working life after maternity leave, managing a young family with an uncertain income, caring and nurturing in a mother-daughter relationship, appearance pressures, their romantic relationships as well as mental health issues.

### 1.2 *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* by Marian Keyes

Marian Keyes was born in Ireland in 1963 and has so far published 16 bestselling novels translated into 36 different languages, according to her website [www.mariankeyes.com](http://www.mariankeyes.com) (2015). Both *Sushi for Beginners* (2000) and *The Other Side of the Story* (2004) deal with different kinds of expectations and challenges for women in contemporary society. The novels include common themes such as career development, motherhood, daughterhood, appearance pressures, friendships, romantic relationships, marriage, single life and mental health. The most intriguing connection seems to be how to manage different areas of a woman's life simultaneously – the dilemma of having it all. There are three young, female characters in both novels. *Sushi for Beginners* tells a story of a magazine editor, Lisa Edwards, Lisa's assistant Ashling Kennedy and Ashling's best friend, a housewife Clodagh Kelly. *The Other Side of the Story*, in turn, introduces an event organizer Gemma Hogan, Gemma's future representative, a literary agent, Jojo Harvey and Jojo's client, Gemma's former best friend, a writer called Lily Wright. Each heroine has her own narrative, but their stories are connected within the novels. Both novels are divided into chapters according to the characters and the chapters are written from the specific character's point of view.

*Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* share mutual elements from the viewpoint of the thesis statement. In *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa encounters challenges with career development: she works as a magazine editor in London and expects a promotion to work in New York. However, she is transferred to Dublin to launch a new women's magazine, which seems like a demotion compared to working in New York. Lisa works hard but is underestimated, whereas in *The Other Side of the Story* Jojo's merits speak for themselves and yet she loses the promotion. Jojo works in a busy London literary agency and excels at her profession. She has an affair with one of her



colleagues, Mark, who is a partner at the agency and their love affair affects Jojo's career development causing her to lose a promotion.

Returning to working life after maternity leave appears challenging for Clodagh in *Sushi for Beginners*. Clodagh encounters difficulties in searching for employment and arranging her own income after having children and being a housewife for five years. Clodagh is interested in decorating and expected to be happy with her children, husband and their dream house. Nevertheless, she chooses to change her life and pursue a career. In *The Other Side of the Story* Lily, Anton and their baby called Ema form a young family with an uncertain income. Lily's challenge is to support their family financially because Anton's business ventures are not profitable at the moment. Lily's situation as a sole provider of her family is stressful, because her income is tied to advancing in her career as a writer, namely writing another book. In addition, Lily's and Anton's inefficiency with economics and providing for a new baby increase the financial challenge.

Caring and nurturing are themes that are included in a mother-daughter relationship in *The Other Side of the Story*; Gemma nurtures and cares for her mother during a difficult time period. Gemma is a thirty-year-old career woman who faces a difficult and surprising situation in her personal life: her father decides to leave her mother for another woman. Gemma takes care of her mother and has to adjust her own life according to a new schedule. Moreover, in *Sushi for Beginners* Ashling's relationship with her mother is complicated due to her mother's mental illness in the past. Ashling tries to accept her past dealing with her mother's depression and receives a great deal of support from her group of close friends who form a so-called urban family.

The importance of appearance is highlighted in both novels: in *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa is always on a diet and in *The Other Side of the Story* Jojo's attractive looks cause confusion in professional circles. Lisa chooses to concentrate on her career and appearance while living as a single woman in a new country. Jojo, in turn, receives a great deal of support from her cousin, Becky, in managing various professional and personal challenges, including appearance-related attention. Friendships are tested in

both novels, for example in *Sushi for Beginners*, Clodagh gets involved with Ashling's date twice. Even though Ashling and Clodagh have been best friends since childhood, Clodagh is married to Ashling's former crush, Dylan. Furthermore, Clodagh falls in love with Marcus, Ashling's new boyfriend, which ends Clodagh's marriage to Dylan. In *The Other Side of the Story*, in turn, Lily starts a relationship with Gemma's boyfriend, Anton. The end of her friendship with Gemma bothers Lily, because she has to live with a bad conscience for stealing Gemma's boyfriend.

All of the heroines have relationship issues with their romantic partners. Clodagh's marriage is unhappy. Lily's domestic partnership crumples under financial difficulties and a stressful house building process. When Lisa moves to Dublin, she is in the middle of divorce proceedings with her husband, Oliver, who stays in London. However, Lisa's divorce seems to be an impulsive solution. Ashling, Gemma and Jojo are single and dating. However, building a new relationship is demanding. Ashling has to deal with a cheating boyfriend, a stand-up comedian called Marcus. Gemma is preoccupied with her previous relationship; she is getting through a prolonged break-up because her boyfriend, Anton, left for London with Gemma's best friend, Lily. Moreover, Gemma is dealing with an ending of a friendship with Lily. Gemma writes emails to her friend Susan about her ordeals, which later develop into a book. Jojo, in turn, is involved with a man who is married and has children. Mental health issues are also visible in both novels; major life changes require a strong mind. Lisa, Ashling, and Lily struggle with depression. Lisa's relationship with her family is distant and she has only few friends. Living in a new country without close social connections is mentally difficult for Lisa. Ashling has to fight against depression due to relationship issues and *weltschmerz*. Combining motherhood and social relationships is demanding for Lily; she feels lonely in a new city as a new mother.

## 2 CHICK LIT AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

Chick lit novels are very popular especially among young women. These novels deal with current issues. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (2006: 3) define chick lit as a type of women's fiction that tells about single, young career women and their problems in working life as well as challenges with relationships and everyday life. Ferriss and Young (2006: 3) further continue that chick lit has a specific audience and narrative style. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is considered to be the cornerstone of chick lit. However, according to Rocío Montoro (2012: 6), by the time *Bridget Jones's Diary* appeared in Britain, Marian Keyes's first novel, *Watermelon*, published in 1996, was already creating interest in Ireland. Candice Bushnell's *Sex and The City* (1997) is also a popular example of chick lit. Joanna Webb Johnson (2006: 143) states that "[a]lthough the term [chick lit] is new, the genre is not. Chick lit can trace its roots back to works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48), Jane Austen's novels and the plethora of sentimental U.S. women's novels in the nineteenth century". Moreover, according to Ferriss (2006: 71), there is an obvious connection between *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), because Fielding has borrowed features concerning the plot and characters of *Bridget Jones's Diary* from *Pride and Prejudice*, thus bringing the classic Jane Austen novel up to date. Fielding's Bridget Jones is represented similarly to Austen's Elisabeth Bennet; however taking into account social and political change in society during the time the novels have between them. *Bridget Jones's Diary* plays with styles and humour as well as introduces new ways of social interaction, such as treating a group of friends as a family unit and looking for advice from self-help books, which have become common features of chick lit. For instance Stephanie Harzewski (2011: 63) states that "Bridget's 'urban family' of single friends also became a stock feature of the genre". In *Sushi for Beginners* Ashling has her own urban family of single friends and their relationships are very close.

When considering literary genres, chick lit can be seen as a further application of romance literature, often including a romantic plot in addition to contemporary issues concerning modern women's lives. A. Rochelle Mabry (2006: 200) notes that

[b]eyond similar marketing strategies and textual devices, perhaps the most important connection – as well as the most significant point of departure – between emerging chick culture and the women's genres that preceded it is that the primary focus of each of these texts is not simply on the woman but on the woman's place in world in general and in sexual relationships in particular.

*Sushi for Beginners* as well as *The Other Side of the Story* include themes that are important to women and belong to their everyday lives. They depict woman's place in the world and in romantic relationships, creating a possibility to explore and discuss society's views in the process. Social and political change in society has altered the position of women as well as expectations of society. These changes have also an effect on literature, and as a result, chick lit has an opportunity to introduce new matters into discussion in addition to the issues that classic romance literature presented.

The popularity of chick lit is partly based on straightforward protagonists that are easy to relate to. The change compared to earlier representation of women in fiction is considerable. The new heroine is no longer required to behave modestly and bashfully; instead, she can be a typical, modern woman with everyday problems and challenges. Ferriss and Young (2006: 3) explain that

[t]he typical chick-lit protagonist is [...] not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers' 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 features of the new heroine have developed through time to meet the challenges and changes that modern society introduces. Harzewski (2011: 87–88) states that “[c]hick lit extends the bildungsroman's plot of a protagonist's venturing into a city for a 'real world' education, for preparation not only in a career but also in the experience of urban life.” Chick lit novels tell stories of the lives of the heroines following their development through a certain time period. Accordingly, Harzewski (2011: 203n17)

explains that the bildungsroman is considered the development novel of a young man, such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. However, she (2011: 203n17) continues that in the 1970s second-wave feminist scholarship adduced the female bildungsroman which had a revised form, distinct myths and patterns. Chick lit protagonists' development and learning from life lessons can be seen as features of the female bildungsroman. In total *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* have six heroines, whose stories as well as characters develop through learning from their challenges, mistakes and success. Thus, *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* can be seen as bildungsroman.

In addition to the flawed and easily relatable protagonists, chick lit's humorous or lightly sarcastic tone is a part of the genre's appeal and success. Harzewski (2011: 4–5) argues that chick lit uses humour as a medium in presenting a new novel of manners. She (2011: 4–5) further explains that the novel of manners concentrates on society and culture satirically. In other words, chick lit uses humour to deal with society and culture. According to Harzewski (2011: 68), chick lit with its lighthearted essence, has had an impact on literature by changing the representation of the humorous single woman who is no longer laughed at but laughed with. Humour can be used to resolve different kinds of situations and it can become an important factor when considering social interaction as well as personal attitude. Both *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other side of the Story* include features of the novel of manners and have humour.

Along with humour the narrative style of chick lit plays an important role in making the heroines easily relatable. Particularly the first-person narration creates more possibilities to reveal intimate details about the main characters. Accordingly, readers are able to connect with straightforward characters. Mabry (2006: 196) argues that

[t]he move toward first-person voice in most contemporary chick lit novels not only strengthens the heroine's voice and increases the reader's opportunities to identify with her but also offers at least a temporary escape from the feeling of constantly being watched or controlled by a male-dominated society.

When the voice is the heroine's own, only she can control the story. Thus, the reader is provided with an authentic reading experience, which is not opinionated by a narrator outside the story. An authentic woman's point of view can provide a possibility to momentarily escape from a male-dominated society and see matters differently.

In addition to first-person narration, chick lit novels often include dialogues, e-mails, multimedia messages, notes and letters. The same approach applies to *Sushi for Beginners* as well as *The Other side of the Story*. These narrative techniques enhance the closeness between reader and character by increasing the authentic feeling of the story. Moreover, Shari Benstock (2006: 256) states that "e-mail and instant messaging function in chick lit to capture the rapid, clipped pace of contemporary life and conversation". For example Jojo's and Mark's e-mail exchange captures successfully the intense and passionate nature of their relationship. On the other hand, these different narrative techniques can also create calmness in a hectic situation, for instance Lily's list of notes helps her to structure her thoughts and make an important decision.

Furthermore, the narrative style of chick lit can be used to portray the heroine's problems genuinely and create uplifting feelings of success. Montoro (2012: 93) explains that chick lit uses negative presentation of femaleness combined with positive sentiments characterizing the story's resolution as a deliberate strategy. In other words, chick lit highlights triumphs that are gained by overcoming problems and challenges as well as accepting personal flaws, sometimes even turning them into an advantage. Montoro (2012: 93) continues that

[i]n turn, 'celebrating' those shortcomings also make Chick Lit women come out all the more triumphant when those errors and blunders are eventually overcome. In fact, for some, this attempt at some apparent authenticity with regard to real representation of twentieth- and twenty-first-century women is the real secret of the genre's success and this faithful tracing on to paper of real women's concerns allegedly also necessitates the portrayal of certain negative aspects.

It is important to portray the problems of women authentically, because presenting also the negative aspects provides a wider perspective.

Various topics can be brought to discussion by means of narration. For instance chick lit presents challenges and problems that are clearly intact with patriarchal society. Chick lit women characters make feminist claims in the stories and these claims introduce viewpoints that are difficult to ignore. For example Jojo is fully aware of the existence of the glass ceiling when a partnership in her firm is decided. Jojo expresses this clearly in a dialog. Montoro (2012: 135) argues that

[t]he more marked freedom from any intermediary reporting allowed in Chick Lit, coupled with the apparent authenticity in these women's expression of inner concerns, underscores that these female characters are not ready to give up their, admittedly unorthodox, claims to feminism, albeit understood in the context of twenty-first-century circumstances.

Even though society has evolved towards equality between genders, it seems that the feminist agenda appears valid in certain areas of life. Chick lit depicts situations that reveal unequal circumstances and creates possibilities to discuss and resolve them.

## 2.1 The Status of Chick Lit

Historically, literature aimed at women and by women writers has not been considered overly significant or important. Rita Felski (2003: 48) states that

[o]ne of the tasks of feminist criticism has been to take seriously books that are aimed at female readers. Such books have often been seen as less significant, less valuable, less geared to the universal because of their concern with romantic love, female friendship, domestic life or other "trivial" themes.

However, Felski (2003: 48) continues that "[t]he stories that Emma Bovary loved to read, stories of "romantic love in far-away places" still speak to the needs and desires of large numbers of women, while causing many men to shake their heads in condescension or puzzlement". Nevertheless, romantic love, female friendship and domestic life as themes of literature include depictions of social situations and manners. Felski (2003: 76) explains that "[m]odernist and postmodernist fiction, rather than the

Victorian novel, were now mined for the new truth of gender—the truth that there is no truth, that femininity is a fragile fiction, that gender is nothing but travesty, surface, and performance”. Gender becomes visible when considering society’s ways and policies that literature conveys. Harzewski (2011: 5) argues that “[a]n underanalysed body of postmodern fiction, chick lit serves as an accessible portal into contemporary gender politics and questions of cultural value”. Through chick lit contemporary gender politics can be studied and discussed.

In order to study and analyse chick lit a larger context can be useful. Ferriss and Young (2008: 1) place chick lit within chick culture along with chick TV programming, chick flicks and other pop culture manifestations, defining chick culture as “a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty- to thirtysomething middle-class women”. Chick culture creates awareness on women’s issues and captures the attention of feminists, regardless of generation. Ferriss and Young (2008: 3–4) consider “chick” postfeminism most relevant to the study of chick culture and define the chick postfeminist aesthetic as “a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girlpower, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girly goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories.” *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* are part of chick culture and promote the idea that femininity and feminism can be combined and women can have both successful careers and relationships at the same time. Ferriss and Young (2008: 3) explain that even though it is possible to see the relationship between feminism and postfeminism as a continuum instead of a conflict, the ideas associated with postfeminism and the presumed conflict between feminism and postfeminism are central to the consideration of chick culture. Thus, it is important to consider feminism and postfeminism when studying chick lit.



## 2.2 Feminism, Postfeminism and Chick Lit

The relationship between feminism, postfeminism and chick lit appears to be complex. According to John Storey (2006: 105), feminism can be considered “a political movement concerned with women’s oppression and the ways and means to empower women”. Feminism can be divided into three waves according to time periods. Carol M. Dole (2008: 59) places second-wave feminists at the height of the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and the 1970s and explains that third-wave feminism, originated in the 1990s and spread through popular culture, is less politically active than the second-wave feminism and for the most part “closer to an attitude of confidence than to agenda”. The agenda of postfeminism, on the other hand, divides opinions. Deborah Barker (2008: 94) notes that there is often a generational divide between second- and third-wave feminism when it comes to debates about postfeminism. Barker (2008: 95) continues that although third-wave feminism and postfeminism share some characteristics, postfeminism is apolitical and more individually oriented whereas third-wave is more socially, politically and globally minded. Chick lit includes elements of feminism and postfeminism.

In order to connect chick lit to feminism and postfeminism, it is useful to clarify some major distinctions of feminism and postfeminism. Table 1 is based on a list of features according to Ferriss and Young (2008: 3–4):

**Table 1.** Features of Feminism and Postfeminism

FEMINISM	POSTFEMINISM
Reliance on political action, political movements, and political solutions	The personal as political; agenda is replaced by attitude
The primacy of equality; resistance to and critique of the patriarchy	A rejection of second-wave anger and blame against the patriarchy
Choice is collective – it refers to women’s right <i>not</i> to have children and to enter careers and professions formerly closed to them	Choice is individual – whether of family, career, cosmetic surgery, or nail color

A rejection – or at least questioning – of femininity	A return to femininity and sexuality
Suspicion of and resistance to media-driven popular culture and the consumerism it supports	Pleasure in media-driven popular culture and an embracing of the joys of consumerism
Humor is based on the disjunction between traditional women’s roles and women as powerful, independent people.	Humor is based on the discrepancy between the ideals put forward by both feminism and the media, and the reality of life in the modern world; as such, the humor of postfeminism is often ironically self-deprecating.

First, even though chick lit embraces existing and new forms of individualism associated to postfeminism, it also depicts the unequal treatment of gender roles in the patriarchal society important to feminism. Pam Morris (1993: 4) defines the concept of patriarchy as follows:

These self-sustaining structures of power, [social structures like the law, education, employment, religion, the family and cultural practices through which institutionalized male dominance operates] by means of which women’s interests are always ultimately subordinated to male interests, constitute the social order known as ‘patriarchy’, a designation which applies to almost all human societies, past and present.

Contemporary society seems equal for men and women at times; nevertheless, it all depends on situation specific circumstances and the point of view. Although postfeminism aims to replace agenda with attitude and reject the blame against patriarchy, there are still evidence of patriarchy’s existence. Diane Negra (2009: 4) states that “[o]ne of the signature features of postfeminist culture is the way in which it extends and elaborates “backlash” rhetoric, producing discursive formulations that would often seem resistant to feminist critique.” However, she (2009: 4) argues that postfeminist texts can be analysed with feminist tools and declares the postfeminist presumption about outdated feminism incorrect. From the standpoint of chick lit, feminism seems to be a valid ideology to study and analyse phenomena of contemporary society.

Secondly, chick lit heroines make individual choices such as career decisions; however, those choices can be restricted by society's norms and manners. Thus, choice in chick lit can be seen as individual from the corner of postfeminism, and as collective from the standpoint of feminism. Due to media-driven popular culture and consumerism, the focus has shifted toward the individual. Moreover, celebrating femininity goes hand in hand with consumerism and therefore individualism. Femininity, sexuality, popular culture and consumerism are important themes in chick lit and they are presented from different points of views connecting the genre to feminism and postfeminism.

Thirdly, humour in chick lit draws on contemporary society, including feminism. On the basis of the Table 1, the target of humour has shifted from feminism's collective group to postfeminism's individual person. Chick lit uses humour as a medium to deal with various matters concerning individual characters as well as groups of people. Accordingly, chick lit is associated with postfeminist features and maintains a relationship with feminism.

Chick lit is connected to feminism through femininity and girl power. According to Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (2009: 76), in the 1990s the British band called the Spice Girls propagated girl power that re-appraises femininity and in popular culture is often seen as synonymous to chick lit. Moreover, Dole (2008: 59) notes that third-wave feminism's "girlie" strand is consistent with the return of femininity evident in chick lit. Thus, the concept of girl power plays an important role when considering chick lit. Genz and Brabon (2009: 78) state that

[t]he central tenet of Girl Power is that femininity is powerful and empowering, providing women/girls with the agency to negotiate the possibilities of their gender role. In this sense, women are encouraged to use their femininity to complement and even further the qualities of independence and emancipation fostered by the feminist movement.

In other words, women and girls are invited to celebrate their femininity and claim their independence as individuals. Femininity is seen as empowering and linked to agency required to review gender roles. According to Naila Kabeer (1999: 438), the notion of

agency can be explained as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them”. She (1999: 438) continues that “[a]gency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring their activity, their *sense* of agency, or ‘the power within’”. In other words, agency includes planning and reasoning in addition to action. Genz (2010: 106) states that “[t]he feminist message of female agency and independence is restyled by the Girlie stance that conceptualizes a new woman who is self-assured and comfortable with her femininity and her sexual difference”. Chick lit heroines are characterised in these terms.

Connecting femininity with challenges of contemporary society creates new possibilities. Genz (2010: 105) explains that girlie feminism promotes femininity as the path to female empowerment, and continues that “[g]irlie feminism optimistically proclaims that women can “have it all” and embrace a wholeness that harmonizes feminism and femininity, career and home.” In other words, embracing femininity can be seen as a positive resource creating empowerment and leading to a balanced life. Dole (2008: 59–60) argues that in addition to effectively balancing family and career, modern women want to achieve goals of girlie feminisms. Chick lit heroines pursue the goals of girlie feminism along with balanced life. Genz and Brabon (2009: 77–78) explain further that

their [girlies’s] empowerment and assertiveness are seen to be directly linked to their feminine identities and their ability to redefine the meanings of and objects related to femininity. Insisting that they are not trapped by their femininity, Girlies want to gain control by using their insider position within consumer culture. Girl Power thus combines cultural confidence with feminist awareness, emphasising that the traditional/patriarchal connotations of girliness can be interrupted by alternative modes of production/consumption.

Girlies celebrate everything relating to femininity. They are not afraid or against consumerism and media-driven popular culture but use it to their advantage instead. In addition to femininity, chick lit promotes consumerism and popular culture. Moreover, chick lit heroines use them to their advantage.

Empowerment is highlighted concerning girl power, femininity and therefore chick lit. *The Onion* interviews Barbara Klein in 2003 about her study on female empowerment, and Klein argues that

[a]s recently as 15 years ago, a woman could only feel empowered by advancing in a male-dominated work world, asserting her own sexual wants and needs, or pushing for a stronger voice in politics. Today, a woman can empower herself through actions as seemingly inconsequential as driving her children to soccer practice or watching the Oxygen network.

Empowerment and feminism have developed with time to meet the challenges and changes of society. According to Klein (2003), “a new strain of feminism has emerged in which mundane activities are championed as proud, bold assertions of independence from oppressive patriarchal hegemony.” In other words, empowerment can be created also through everyday tasks. Kabeer (1999: 436) explains that there is no specific definition for the concept of empowerment and states that “[f]or many feminists, the value of the concept lies precisely in its ‘fuzziness’”. However, Kabeer (1999: 437) continues that “empowerment entails a *process of change*”. In other words, empowerment includes a power shift towards the recipient. Furthermore, Kabeer (2005: 15) notes that “[e]mpowerment is rooted in how people see themselves – their sense of self-worth. This in turn is critically bound up with how they are seen by those around them and by society”. Thus, empowerment can be seen as a mental process that is connected to self-awareness and perceived by individual’s social environment. *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* include a great deal of potential to study empowerment and the way it is created.

### 3 GENDER, IDENTITY AND CHOICE IN POPULAR REPRESENTATION

From the standpoint of popular representation, the development of feminism provides new possibilities to explore gender, identity and choice. Genz and Brabon (2009: 9) discuss postfeminism's contradictory content and conclude that "[t]he 'post-ing' of feminism thus posits a challenge to cultural critics to investigate the inescapable levels of contradiction and diverse points of identification and agency we are confronted with in late modern Western societies". Contemporary society includes possibilities and contradictions that require new approaches and practices. Individuals develop their actions and attitudes according to changes in their environment. Genz and Brabon (2009: 89) state that

[i]n these complicated times, women seem to have lost their sense of direction as they are in the process of experimenting with new set of identities, simultaneously revolving around feminist notions of empowerment and agency as well as patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty and heterosexual coupledness.

In other words, there is an overload of qualifications, expectations and choice for modern women, which leads to development of female identity. Chick lit heroines navigate between conflicting demands of contemporary society and they develop as characters and engage in actions concurrently.

Changes to notions of feminism, empowerment and agency are important when considering the qualifications and expectations of contemporary society and increasing possibilities of choice. Genz and Brabon (2009: 168) argue that "[a]gency and emancipation were conceived along these lines with the explicit aims of liberating women (both as individuals and as a group) from patriarchal forms of constraint and empowering them to participate on an equal footing with men in areas of social activity". Time has changed and society has more to offer nowadays. Barker (2008: 95) states that "[p]ostfeminism's adaptation of feminism focuses on individual economic and sexual freedom, often ignoring collective political action and systemic gender inequality." Due to social change the finances of an individual woman are no longer

reliant on her family or husband. As a result, the contemporary woman in Western societies is free to choose how to manage her finances as well as make decisions regarding her social life. However, Genz and Brabon (2009: 170) argue that “[i]ndividualisation thus operates as a social process that, instead of severing the self from a collective, increases the capacity for agency while also accommodating a rethinking of the individual as an active agent”. In other words, feminism’s collective agenda can be supported by individual active agents. Chick lit heroines as individual active agents negotiate expectations, qualification, choice, identity and gender boundaries continually.

### 3.1 License to Renegotiate Gender and Identity

There are many ways to consider gender and identity. Jennifer Coates (1986: 160) states that “society constructs male and female roles as different and *unequal*”. In other words, girls and boys are raised differently. Lois P. Frankel (2010: xvi) states that

[f]rom early childhood, girls are taught that their well-being and ultimate success is contingent upon acting in certain stereotypical ways such as being polite, soft-spoken, compliant and relationship-oriented. Throughout their lifetimes, this is reinforced through media, family, and social messages.

Society’s views and values influence individual’s behaviour and attitudes. Frankel (2010: 2) argues that “[b]eing a girl is certainly easier than being a woman. Girls don’t have to take responsibility for their destiny. Their choices are limited by a narrowly defined scope of expectations. [...] All in all, it’s easier to behave in socially acceptable ways.” Women should forget about the easy way and to claim their equal position with men and, above all, be aware of the different expectations. Chick lit heroines encounter a great deal of society’s expectations and demands. Judith Butler (1990: 185) argues that

the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to variety of different demands all at once.

Thus, society's expectation, for example to be a good mother, is intact with femininity. In *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* motherhood, sexual desirability and to be a fit worker are important themes and influenced by society's views.

When it comes to gender and identity, Butler (1990: 33) argues that gender is identity and states that "gender is always a doing". She (1990: 33) continues that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results". Thus, gender identity is performative. Similarly, Harriet Bradley (2007: 21) argues that

one very important contribution of recent thinking about gender is the recognition of how individual women and men are actively involved in 'doing gender'. Our identities as gendered and sexual beings are not simply imposed on us, but are something which we are constantly engaged in creating and recreating, even at quite a basic physical level.

Individuals themselves are also responsible for their behaviour, actions and opinions. A person can be seen as an active agent instead of a passive object. This provides a great deal of possibilities. Individual agents can choose the ways in which they do their gender identity, at least to a certain degree. Chick lit heroines do their gender identities and have multiple possibilities accordingly.

However, society's views must be considered and they are challenging to change. Bradley (2007: 23–24) argues that

[w]hile some of the old insights from socialization are useful in showing where ideas of normality come from and in revealing the pressures we are under as individuals to be 'normal', the more active idea of gendering allows us to explore how individuals develop as agents in interaction with their environment.

Even though society's expectations and pressures seem to be deeply built, individuals can renegotiate their positions and content. Bradley (2007: 23–25) explains that the concept of gendering can be defined as a process of doing gender and it can be seen to



operate at three levels: individual actions, institutional rules and broader social structures. In other words, when considering gender issues, a comprehensive approach is required. Chick lit heroines develop their actions and attitudes in interaction with their environment, thus creating possibilities to explore various themes also from wider perspectives.

### 3.2 Chick Lit Heroine and Re-articulating Identity

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that when one part of your life starts going okay, another falls spectacularly to pieces”, declares Bridget Jones in the movie version of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001). Bridget’s statement depicts today’s hectic lifestyle of modern women who have so much to deal with that it seems impossible to stay on top of everything at the same time. Typically, a chick lit heroine has a great deal of matters to attend to. Genz and Brabon (2009: 169) argue that the category of the ‘postfeminist’ – personified, for example, by the ‘chick’, the ‘do-me feminist’ and the ‘new feminist’ – can be comprehended as a complex subject position of multiply engaged individuals. Individuals are multidimensional and balancing between various areas of life. In addition to aiming to achieve satisfaction in professional life, relationships with friends and family as well as other areas of personal life, for example appearance, a postfeminist individual may desire to find a romantic relationship with a partner who has the right qualities. The representations of women in chick lit are like this. For example Genz and Brabon (2009: 92) define the do-me feminist as follows:

The do-me feminist consciously employs her physical appearance and sexuality in order to achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over her life. She expresses her individual agency not by politicising her relationships with men and her status as a sexual object but primarily through the re-articulation of her feminine/sexual identity.

Even though the chick lit heroine celebrates her femininity and sexuality, she has other objectives as well. Moreover, she combines different qualities and areas of life, such as wearing lipstick as a means of gaining confidence in the working life.

Accordingly, the chick lit heroine expresses her individual agency through the re-articulation of her feminine/sexual identity. Genz and Brabon (2009: 92) note that “[t]his ‘new’ kind of woman is both feminine and feminist at the same time, merging notions of personal empowerment with the visual display of sexuality”. Sexuality plays an important role in chick lit. Protagonists are no longer waiting for Mr. Right, but are free to experiment with multiple partners and enjoy their sexuality.

### 3.3 Choiseoisie and the Dilemma of Having It All

In popular representation choice is seen as optimistic. Genz and Brabon (2009: 37) discuss choices and choosing and state that

[t]he popular press provides the most explicit portrayal of this postfeminist utopia in which women can do whatever they please, provided they have sufficient will and enthusiasm. According to this optimistic formulation, women choose the life they want and inhabit a world centered in what Elspeth Probyn calls *choiseoisie*, which envisions all major life decisions as individual options rather than culturally determined or directed necessities. This postfeminist version of the American dream (with its celebration of individualism) is seen to be entirely available to those who work hard enough. ‘Being empowered’ becomes synonymous with ‘making the most of oneself’ and ‘pleasing oneself’ and in this way, the second wave’s challenging collective programme of equal opportunity is transformed into atomized acts and matters of personal choice.

The notion of choiseoisie places a great deal of responsibility on the individual. This seems rational, because everybody ultimately makes their own decisions. Moreover, there seems to be always options available, if one has enough patience and courage to see or find them. It could be possible to break down the unwritten rules of society and norms set for different gender roles. Happiness can be created through one’s own choices and not by leaning on the comfort, protection or social power of others.

An increased variety of opportunities creates more choice. Genz and Brabon (2009: 37) state that “women are presented as having freedom of choice to pursue their ambitions actively and take up the opportunities that a postfeminist *choiseoisie* puts at their

disposal". Choiceoisie prioritises the individual's own decisions and places less value on the expectations of one's environment. However, Bradley (2007: 24) states that "[a]s individual agents, we are at least relatively free to choose our course of action, while at the same time being constrained by the structures and cultures which are our contexts". Individuals and society cannot exist separately, and consideration must be reserved for society's views and attitudes but also for changing them. Moreover, Harzewski (2011: 75) argues that "the genre [chick lit] complicates liberal feminism's advocacy of personal choice, which presents a mixed blessing. Protagonists have the right to choose, but now the problem is too many choices". Excessive choice can be seen from different points of view and situation-specific features cannot be ignored.

The chick lit heroine aims to achieve various goals, even though combining them might seem challenging. Genz (2010: 116) states that "[f]or the twenty-first-century woman, 'having it all' is a distinct possibility and reality but, simultaneously, an unavoidable dilemma that the PFW [postfeminist woman] has to confront and struggle with." The chick lit heroine has this problem. It is challenging to divide attention and time between career, family and relationships as well as make room for celebrating femininity. Men do not ask themselves if they can have it all, why should women? Negra (2009: 5) comments on the having it all dilemma and states that "[a]cross the range of the female lifecycle, girls and women of every age are now invited to celebrate their empowerment in a culture that sometimes seems dedicated to gratifying their every desire." In reality different kinds of choices and possibilities might be limited. Negra (2009: 5) continues that "[p]opular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact and achieved self." In other words, having it all seems to depend on one's own dedication and actions.

Even though chick lit promotes the idea that now it is possible for women to have it all, this all does not seem to be easily achieved. The state of female independence and power coexisting with an embrace of femininity cannot be taken for granted. Dole (2008: 75) argues that at the moment, there is not complete cultural consensus on whether women can have it all and continues that

[i]n spite of the popularity of attitudes that have been articulated by third-wave feminists, in spite of the recent embrace of femininity in fashion and marketing, there are still some doubts about how fully and how widely femininity is accepted as coexisting comfortably with female power.

Popular culture, including chick lit, presents examples through which analyses can be drawn whether femininity can be seen as an asset. Society's values and appreciations are difficult to change, and changes demand time. However, it is not impossible. Examples of successfully combining celebration of femininity and female power promote the change in values and appreciations. These examples can be fictional or real, such as the movie called *Legally Blonde* (2001), directed by Robert Luketic, which features a successful female lawyer called Elle who prefers to wear pink clothes, or the band called The Spice Girls whose members combine success and popularity with their own personal styles. They empower and encourage women to celebrate femininity and reach for success.

#### 4 COLLECTIVITY IN WORKING LIFE AND IN PRIVATE

Chick lit depicts challenges of contemporary career world variously. Ferriss and Young (2006: 7) explain that “[a]lthough most chick fiction tends to present work as a background and means to the more important concern of shopping – whether for shoes or mates – these novels treat professional world as the ultimate chick challenge”. Work has an important role in both *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story*. The novels present challenges and problems of professional world that concern especially women. Frankel (2010: xvii) argues that “when it comes to being women in the workplace, we can choose to behave in ways consistent with what others want and expect or we can choose another course – empowerment.” Women’s challenges in the workplace are partly related to the fact that the professional world has traditionally been seen as male-oriented. Due to social change women have entered the educational and professional scene determinately. However, changes in work culture and attitudes concerning equality in the career world require a great deal of time and effort.

Chick lit heroines have different ambitions, possibilities as well as expectations in contemporary society. Women have entered the world of education and career life facing the challenge of balancing between the professional and domestic expectations. Bradley (2007: 181) states that “[e]ven in the wealthiest societies of the West, women have not achieved economic equality and have as yet only dented the structures of power which hold men in dominant positions”. Despite evident progress in women’s career development and possibilities, there is still a great deal of work to do in order to achieve genuine equality between men and women in the workplace. There are different aspects to consider when it comes to equality. For example the atmosphere of the contemporary workplace is seen as hectic and stressful. Bradley (2007: 178–179) argues that a long-hours culture is unhealthy and causes stress to working mothers. Motherhood among other feminine matters might be overlooked in the working life, because significantly fewer women than men actually seem to have careers. Moreover, the long-hours culture ignores parenting and domestic aspirations.

In addition to parenting and domestic aspirations, chick lit depicts challenges relating to friendship, sisterhood and romantic relationships in the career world. Webb Johnson (2006: 151) notes that chick lit novels acknowledge female solidarity and the idea of socially constructed family from which the heroine can draw her strength. Female solidarity and friendships are important in the working life; however, they cannot be taken for granted. When considering balancing between romantic relationships and the career world, the chick lit heroine aims to excel in both. Harzewski (2011: 31) notes that “[i]n its greater integration of the professional sphere into the romance plot, chick lit offers less romance than its predecessor [romance literature] but greater realism, and in its attempts at synthesis of work and love it shows the challenges of straddling both realms”. Thus, chick lit considers the heroine’s different objectives comprehensively. The protagonists of *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* face different challenges and situations in the working life while trying to balance between various aspects of life.

#### 4.1 Personal versus Professional

In today’s demanding career world there is marginally room for personal crises. In order to be successful and advance in one’s career one has to be able to control and manage important matters continually. In *The Other Side of the Story* Gemma works as an event organizer in Dublin and dreams of becoming a writer. Gemma’s new personal situation, taking care of her mother after her father left the family, occupies her emotions and thoughts expansively, and it is difficult for Gemma to concentrate on work or even arrive at the workplace. Gemma feels the need to do what is expected of her as an only child and as a woman. She tries to be emotionally available for her mother in order to get her mother through a difficult time, while trying to manage her professional life as well as personal challenges. Gemma is dealing with the break-up of her own romantic relationship and trying to find a new relationship. At the moment of crisis Gemma places her own needs aside and takes the role of her father. Gemma’s mother is a sixty-two-year-old housewife who is completely dependent on her husband; she cannot drive

a car and has no independent income. Alison Stone (2007: 20) discusses the care perspective, referring to Carol Gilligan's writings in 1982, and explains that contrary to men, women have a special responsibility to care for their family members and therefore approach moral problems from the care perspective. Stone (2007: 20) continues that in addition to being focused on particular situations, concerned with meeting needs and maintaining relationships of the particular individuals involved, the care perspective considers emotions as an important part of moral thinking. The relationships with both of her parents are important to Gemma and she is used to having her family conditions secure. Her father leaving the family is a serious matter: almost as if he had died. Gemma does her best to understand and manage the situation.

The relationship between Gemma and her mother turns upside down at the moment when Gemma's father leaves their family home: now Gemma has to take care of her mother as if she was the parent and not the other way around. According to Webb Johnson (2006: 151), the shortcomings of parents such as lack of understanding or being overly caught up in their own issues, is a common theme in chick lit. Gemma's mother does not understand her daughter's situation and responsibilities because she is in the middle of her own personal crisis. Felski (2003: 117) discusses mother-daughter plots explaining that in literature in general, the mother's dreams, desires and yearnings are often forgotten because she is simply seen only as a mother. There is a mother-daughter plot visible in *The Other Side of the Story*. Gemma takes into consideration her mother's emotions, hopes and dreams and she sees her as a woman in addition to a mother. Therefore, Gemma's relationship with her mother helps Gemma to grow as a person. Felski (2003: 118) argues that "[t]he story of female self-development does not follow a purposeful path away from the mother, but constantly circles back to her in an avowal affiliation and indebtedness". Thus, the relationship between mother and daughter is beneficial considering female self-development. In this novel the connection between Gemma and her mother is not very profound. However, caring for her mother is beneficial to Gemma, because their relationship develops and Gemma has a chance to consider her own life objectives and priorities as a result of a lower workload in the career world.

The mother-daughter plot between Gemma and her mother is enlightening and full of emotions. Felski (2003: 117) continues further that “[t]he love between mothers and daughters is the great unwritten story: unwritten in part because it diminishes men’s importance by relegating them to the sidelines”. By taking care of her mother, Gemma fulfils her responsibility as a daughter and plays out the traditional role of woman as a caretaker. However, her actions can also be seen as admirable, and there are a great deal of emotions and contradictions to consider because Gemma will not disregard her own life in the process. Felski (2003: 117) argues that the mother-daughter bond “is an intense yet uneasy affinity braided out of many conflicting emotions: guilt, love, recognition, hatred, rage”. Considering Gemma’s actions and thoughts there are at least guilt and love visible in the relationship between Gemma and her mother.

The following example shows Gemma’s thought process that includes feelings of anger, insecurity and obligated responsibility:

- (1) You picked a fine time to leave us, Noel Hogan [Gemma’s father], you prick. [...] I [Gemma] couldn’t help thinking, What if he never comes home? What if it’s always like this? How will I cope if Mam starts to hyperventilate every time I leave her house? How will I hold my job? How will I have a life? (Keyes 2005: 55)

Although Gemma’s emotions toward her mother are caring, she feels guilty because she cannot ignore her own life completely. For example when Gemma is leaving for work, the following conversation takes place:

- (2) So on Sunday night, feeling guilty and defensive, I pressed ‘mute’ on the telly and said, ‘Now, Mam, I absolutely *must* go to work tomorrow.’ She didn’t answer, just sat staring at the silent images, like she hadn’t heard me. (Keyes 2005: 56)



On one hand, taking care of her mother and responsibility towards her parents are important to Gemma; on the other hand, Gemma has the need to keep her own life in balance and meet the responsibilities of her profession. Belinda A. Stillion Southard (2008: 158) discusses Kathleen Hall Jamieson's (1995) notion of the double bind and states that the femininity/competence double bind is in question when a woman is expected to be feminine but offered a concept of femininity which ensures that she cannot be mature or decisive as well as feminine simultaneously. Gemma resolves the double bind by finding a compromise to manage her professional responsibilities for the most part and attend to her mother's most important needs satisfactorily.

Personal and professional lives are sometimes difficult to keep separate. There are personal choices that affect professional decisions and vice versa. Another protagonist in *The Other Side of the Story*, literary agent Jojo Harvey, has an affair with a married man, Mark Avery, who is a partner at the publishing agency, Lipman Haigh, in which they both work. Jojo's career is flourishing; she has proficient clients and a promising future in publishing. However, forthcoming change to a partnership at Lipman Haigh creates contradictions between Jojo and Mark both professionally and personally. Mark tries to influence Jojo's decisions about her career. His motives are personal; if they get married he expects Jojo to stay at home. The following example sheds light on Jojo's thought process:

- (3) She left, sunk deep in crisis of the soul. Was Mark right? Was she too ambitious? But that description was never applied to men – in the same way it was impossible for a woman to be too thin, it was impossible for a man to be too ambitious. A man would never have to choose between his ambition and his emotional life. (Keyes 2005: 559)

A romantic relationship with Mark is important to Jojo and the possibility of losing him in order to advance on her career has to be considered carefully. However, Jojo realises the unfairness of the situation; why should she have to choose between love and career. Jojo trusts Mark and assumes that he is willing to advance Jojo's career rather than

hinder it. There are a great deal of emotions involved in the situation. Stone (2007: 109) argues that the philosophy of emotion questions essence of emotions, their rationality and relation to other mental capacities, for example perception. She (2007: 109) continues that “[f]eminist’s accounts of sexuality are relevant here because they suggest that sexual feelings are always bound up with complex judgments about and emotional responses to other people – responses of trust, vulnerability, hostility”. The romantic relationship between Mark and Jojo is affecting the decisions made in professional life. Jojo’s career is not progressing logically but influenced by strong emotions.

Managing finances is a basic requirement of thriving in contemporary society. In order to lead a balanced life, it is important to remain able to work, have a source of income and foresight to manage expenses. In other words, personal and professional lives are closely connected. Lily Wright, one of Jojo’s clients, acquires a contract that includes the publication of Lily’s first book as well as the two following ones. Lily and Anthony have just had a baby girl, Ema, and they move to a new city without any friends or family connections. These life changes require financial means that the couple does not have at hand. Anton is working on a creative business project that currently turns no profit and therefore Lily’s book contract is the only source of income for the family at that moment. In addition, Lily is dealing with the guilt of having stolen Anton, her best friend’s boyfriend. Lily feels that she is constantly under pressure to write another book both by her employer as well as her family. That reflects on her relationship, creativity and therefore career as well as her self-image. Traditionally, the male partner has been seen as the head of the family and the provider of the income of the household. In *The Other Side of the Story* the tables have turned and suddenly the female protagonist has to take care of the family financially. This creates tension between Lily and Anton:

- (4) I [Lily] bitterly resented Anton’s recklessness with money. I was obsessed with the house we had lost and felt like it was all his fault. He had persuaded me to buy it – I kept remembering my many and varied objections – and if we had never bought it, we could not have lost it. [...] And, although Anton did not articulate it, I knew he blamed me for not writing another hit book. Briefly, we had been on the crest of the wave

and it was difficult to adjust to all that excitement and hope being whipped away. (Keyes 2005: 543–544)

Lily feels responsible for the financial state of the whole family and the pressure breaks her relationship with Anton for a while, at which point Lily realises that her priority is to take care of herself and her baby. In a way the situation, where Lily and Anton lose their house and break up their relationship, creates a crisis. This crisis results in empowering Lily to take responsibility, first of all of herself and her baby, as well as to see herself as a separate individual and not only through her relationship with Anton.

Even though the demands of today's hectic career world seem to leave no room for private life, it is important to take care of oneself. There is a risk to burn out if emotions and changes are left unprocessed. In *Sushi for Beginners*, Lisa moves to Dublin due to a career opportunity. She will be working as an editor for a new women's magazine called Colleen. Lisa is in the middle of divorce with her husband, Oliver, who stays in London. Lisa is determent to focus on her career and disregard her failed marriage. Lisa discusses her new situation on the phone with her mother:

- (5) 'Did he [Oliver] meet someone else?'  
 'No.'  
 'But he might, Lisa love. A nice-looking boy like him.'  
 'Fine by me.' If she said it often enough, it would eventually become true.  
 'Won't you be lonely, love?'  
 'I won't have time to be lonely,' Lisa snapped. 'I have a career to think of.'  
 'I don't know why you need a career. I didn't have one and it didn't do me any harm.'  
 'Oh yeah?' Lisa said fiercely. 'You could have done with one after Dad hurt his back and we had to live on his disability.'  
 'But money isn't everything. We were ever so happy.'  
 'I wasn't.' (Keyes 2001: 54–55)

Lisa is free to concentrate on her career without the need to consider family members or a partner. She occupies herself with work and has no time to worry about her personal life or deal with feelings of loneliness and sorrow. However, the arrival of her divorce petition causes her to break down mentally and face her emotions of loss, failure and self-pity. After a week spent in the bedroom mentally collapsed and unable to get out of bed, Lisa braces herself, calls to work and decides she has been gone long enough:

- (6) *En route* to the bathroom for a much-needed shower, Lisa passed her bedroom and was shocked at the state of it. What had she been thinking of? She just wasn't the kind of person who lost it. Other people did, and good luck to them. But not Lisa – like it or not she was a survivor. Not that she didn't feel raw and wretched. She did. But nervous breakdowns were like coloured contact lenses – fine for other people, but they weren't really her. (Keyes 2001: 478)

Time and reasoning help Lisa to overcome her nervous breakdown. She realises that she is a survivor and that hiding under the duvet does not resolve her problems.

#### 4.2 Glass Ceilings – Hardship as Empowerment

The career world has traditionally been seen as male-oriented. Although there are nowadays many successful woman directors and entrepreneurs, women tend to face problems and unequal treatment. Glass ceilings exist and cause difficulties for women to advance in their careers. These invisible barriers are built by attitudes and practices that favour men. The work culture of a male-oriented branch might not include prefabricated social manners as to have women and men at the workplace working at the same level. In *The Other Side of the Story* there are traditional as well as modern expectations directed at women when considering the working life. At Jojo's workplace women are expected to behave in a feminine manner. However, in order to advance in one's career, behaving in a masculine manner is preferable. The following example shows the difference of attitude towards women and men.

- (7) Olga was in her late forties, single, wore pearls and elegantly draped scarves and because she negotiated good terms for her authors she was known as a ballbreaker. If she were a man, Jojo thought scornfully, they'd simply call her 'a great agent'. (Keyes 2005: 143)

Olga's questionable nickname, ballbreaker, suggests an aggressive and intense manner of negotiation that provides profitable results. The aggressive and successful negotiation tactic is seen as typical behavior for a male agent but for a woman it is considered unusual. Attitudes, expectations and treatment should be equal towards men and women at the workplace. However, this seems to be challenging to achieve, especially in a male-oriented branch. The manly work culture can be built systematically and therefore changes require a great deal of time and effort because the practices and attitudes of the culture support the existing norms.

At the literary agency, Lipman Haigh, there is a partnership open. Jojo and her male colleague, Richie Gant, are both candidates for promotion. However, Jojo learns that the decision process includes aspects she cannot control.

- (8) After loitering for fifteen minutes by the photocopier, Manoj [Jojo's assistant] reported back. 'Last night they all went out.'  
 'Who?'  
 'Brent, Tyler, Jim and Richie.'  
 'So why didn't they ask me [Jojo]?'  
 'Could've been embarrassing.'  
 'I wouldn't have been embarrassed.'  
 'But *they* might have been. Duh.'  
 A lap-dancing club! Richie Gant, the little *fuck*. He'd done it again: lunch in the Caprice was nothing compared to a night boozing and bonding over naked women. She was burning up, feeling horribly patronized that Brent and Tyler had taken her for lunch when they had a proper good time – the *real* one – planned for later. All the time they'd been simply humouring her. (Keyes 2005: 411–412)

Richie has taken an opportunity to spend time with the deciding male partners of the firm, Brent and Tyler. The choice of the venue, a lap-dancing club, excludes Jojo's participation because she is a woman. Bradley (2007: 103) states that

[v]arious kinds of male bonding continue to facilitate the marginalisation of women colleagues: discussion of sport, socializing in pubs, weekend golfing trips, visits with clients to lap-dancing clubs are commonly reported. Research on women in professional and managerial work highlights the way in which older men in powerful positions sponsor and mentor young men, helping them to get promoted earlier than women.

Richie has the opportunity to bond with other males who are in a powerful position. Bonding allows the decision makers to know Richie's character and therefore he has the upper hand as a candidate for the promotion. Professionally Jojo's performance at Lipman Haigh outweighs Richie's accomplishments and in general Jojo expects to be treated equally to her colleagues. However, she is faced with prejudice concerning the female gender role as well as the personal, romantic agenda when she discovers that she has been voted against by her lover, Mark.

Jojo hits the glass ceiling when the partnership is given to her less deserving male colleague. The following example shows Jojo's thought process after the new partnership announcement:

- (9) Then Jojo got it and surprise, more than anything, made her blurt, 'It's because I'm a woman!' She'd heard about this but never thought it would happen to her. 'It's the glass ceiling!'  
Right up to this minute, she wasn't even sure she'd believed in the existence of glass ceilings. If she'd thought about it at all she'd suspected it was something lame-duck female employees used to salve their pride when their more deserving male colleagues got promoted over them. She'd never felt part of the sisterhood: it was up to each woman to do it for herself. She'd always thought she was as good as men and she'd be treated on her own merits. But guess what? She was wrong. (Keyes 2005: 548)

Jojo makes it clear that she is aware of the glass ceiling. She has adopted a modern view of the contemporary career world with equal opportunities for everybody regarding feminism as needless and outdated. The fact that being a woman, instead of professional merits and skills, influences advancing in one's career seems unfair to Jojo.

Jojo decides to break free from Lipman Haigh after a thorough consideration that is affected by losing the promotion and her romantic relationship with one of the firm's partners. Elizabeth Hale (2006: 103) discusses the agenda of a special branch of Chick Lit, called "underling lit" or "assistant lit", which concentrates on young women's entrance into the career world, and states that the suffering of the heroine of these novels is rewarded in the end by removing her from the bad workplace and finding her a better career. This relates to the bildungsroman mentioned in section 1.2. Jojo is a competent professional who learns from her experience. She is represented as the suffering heroine, rewarded in the end by removing her from the unsatisfactory workplace and finding her new possibilities in the working life.

Jojo decides to leave Lipman Haigh regardless of a better offer made for her as well as Mark's feelings and opinions. Jojo's actions show empowerment and courage to act against the structures of the patriarchal social order. For example the following conversation between Jojo and her cousin Becky after a new offer reveals Jojo's awareness of the situation.

- (10) Becky said over and over, 'Why don't you go back? You could just go back into your job as a partner. A *partner*, Jojo.'  
 'I will not collude in that patriarchal system.' [...] 'Now that I know what I know, it would be too soul-destroying.'  
 But it was way, way tempting. (Keyes 2005: 586)

Jojo realises the impact of patriarchy in the culture of Lipman Haigh, which creates frustration and ultimately the feeling of empowerment that contributes to Jojo's decision to resign. Hale (2006: 116) argues that even though underling lit does not allow the

heroine to take revenge on an unrewarding or exploitative employer, it at least gives the writer a chance to make some sharp points. She (2006: 116) further continues: “[i]ndeed, such novels may cause a number of employers some uncomfortable moments, and may even go some way to encouraging the reform of an abusive industry”. When considering *The Other Side of the Story*, Keyes’s agenda could include a message to readers to defend themselves and to see the positive in new situations. Moreover, this is typical for chick lit: after a loss, something better appears.

Jojo’s decision to leave Lipman Haigh and become a self-employed agent is not straightforward. As a self-employed agent she has to manage without colleagues, their support and the social work environment. Moreover, most of the authors represented by Jojo prefer to continue their collaboration with Lipman Haigh rather than change their representation to a self-employed agent. In addition, Jojo’s romantic relationship with Mark ends due to the partnership process. Fundamental life changes occurring simultaneously are difficult to manage:

- (11) But, like an out-of-body experience, she [Jojo] saw herself, sitting in her apartment on a bleak Wednesday morning in February, with her best friend [Mark] gone and her career in ruins.

At that Jojo cried so hard and for so long she barely recognized herself in the mirror. When she stuck her face in a sink of cold water to calm the red swelling she found herself considering just staying there and letting herself drown. For the first time in her thirty-three years she could understand the urge to take her own life.

For about half a second.

Then she got it together. Colleagues? Who needs ‘em? Authors? Hey, plenty more where they come from. And another Mark? Plenty of them too, if she could be arsed. (Keyes 2005: 588)

Under a great deal of distress Jojo breaks down momentarily but braces herself and rationalises that life continues even though there are changes, and that there are always new possibilities to choose from if one is willing to invest time and effort to achieve one’s goals. Jojo receives a great deal of support from her cousin, Becky, and Becky’s husband during the difficult time. Jojo’s career development offers an example of



women's challenging position in the working life that is conventionally managed by men. As a character Jojo acts as an agent promoting justice and fair conditions for women in the workplace.

Glass ceilings are formed through cultures and traditional practices; therefore they are hard to detect. Contemporary work culture highlights commitment and devotion. The employee is expected to excel in the hectic and changing career world. Maintaining a successful image is seen as essential in order to appear important and powerful. In *Sushi for Beginners* the contemporary work culture appears challenging. In the following example, Lisa's superiors at Randolph Media's London office are practicing their golf swings behind closed doors. They indicate their importance by making Lisa wait outside the boardroom.

- (12) Lisa was kept waiting outside the boardroom for twenty-five minutes. After all, Barry and Calvin were very important men.  
 'Should we let her in yet?' Barry asked Calvin, when he felt they'd killed enough time.  
 'It's only twenty minutes since we called her,' Calvin pointed out, huffily. Obviously Barry Hollingsworth didn't realize just *how* important, he, Calvin Carter, was.  
 'Sorry, I thought it was later. Perhaps you'd show me again how to improve my swing!  
 'Sure. Now, head down and hold still. Hold *still!* Feet steady, left arm straight, and swing!' (Keyes 2001: 3–4)

Not only is it important to seem powerful and busy, but individuals have to be prepared to commit to work and make compromises in their personal lives. Advancing on one's career demands sacrifices and personal obligations are frowned upon.

- (13) 'Well, as you know here at Randolph Media we reward hard work.'  
 Lisa twinkled prettily at this patent lie. Like many companies in the Western world, Randolph Media rewarded hard work with poor pay, increasing workloads, demotions and on-a-second's-notice redundancies.

But Lisa was different. She'd paid her dues at *Femme*, and made sacrifices that even *she'd* never intended to make: starting at seven-thirty most mornings, doing twelve, thirteen, fourteen-hour days, then going to evening press dos when she finally switched off her computer. Often she came to work on Saturdays, Sundays, even bank-holiday Mondays. (Keyes 2001: 5)

Working long hours, weekends and holidays are challenging to manage. Lisa has been working hard to advance on her career and is expecting to be promoted.

Moreover, globalisation creates challenges in the contemporary working life. Lisa's promotion involves a change of location:

- (14) 'We have a vacancy at Randolph Media,' Calvin said importantly. 'It would be a wonderful challenge, Lisa.'  
*I know*, she thought irritably. *Just cut to the chase*.  
 'It will involve moving overseas, which can sometimes be a problem for one's partner.'  
 'I'm single' Lisa was brusque. (Keyes 2001: 5)

Lisa's personal situation is suitable for the offered career opportunity. However, leaving to work in another country is a demanding requirement that is not an easy option to anyone. For instance Clodagh Kelly, mother of two, would have to make extensive adjustments in the same situation. Clodagh intends to return to professional life after maternity leaves and staying at home for over five years. One of the requirements of the contemporary career world is to realize and accept changes in different branches, such as introduction of new technical equipment. Moreover, it is expected to improve and develop one's skills accordingly. Returning to work can be very challenging after having children and staying at home. Professional life moves rapidly forward and absence from work can cause problems because one's professional skills are no longer up to date. When returning from maternity leave, women have a great deal to catch up. They have to invest time and effort to meet current requirements and in addition they

will have to balance the changes in their professional life and at home. In the following example Clodagh has had a meeting at the employment agency.

- (15) Out on the street, in her [Clodagh's] hateful, ridiculous, expensive suit, she walked slowly to her car. Her confidence was shattered. This morning had been a terrifying lesson in how old and useless she was. She'd hung all her hopes on a job but, manifestly, the world of work was a too-fast place which she didn't have the skills to belong to any more. Now what was she going to do? (Keyes 2001: 296)

The fast pace of the world of work distresses Clodagh and having outdated professional skills becomes as a surprise to her. Returning to work is going to be more challenging than she had expected.

#### 4.3 Career and Friendship

Friendships have an important role in chick lit. Typically, friendships are an essential part of chick lit protagonist's everyday life. In the career world friendships can be beneficial but also considered a disadvantage. Good friendships provide comfort and support valued in hectic and stressful modern-day circumstances. On the other hand, friendship problems or lack of female solidarity cause hindrance and damage to career development. In chick lit friendships sometimes even overshadow romantic relationships and family relations. Ferriss and Young (2006: 10) conclude that

[s]he [Mabry], along with Harzewski and others, argues that contemporary literature and films deemphasize a central romance and highlight the female protagonist's non-romantic relationship with her close community of mostly female friends, thus suggesting that contemporary women can express their desires outside the frame of patriarchally defined heterosexual monogamy.

In other words, highlighting friendships suggests that in addition to marriage and marital bliss women have other important goals in their lives and that they are free to pursue them outside of marriage. In *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story*

there is less focus on romance, because in addition to romantic relationships with friends have an important position. For example in *Sushi for Beginners*, Ashling has a close relationship with her single friends, as mentioned in section 1.2. Ashling, Joy and Ted function like an urban family; they support each other and are always available, especially in a case of an emotional crisis. The following example of Ted about to begin his stand-up performance depicts the relationship between Ashling, Joy and Ted.

- (16) Then it was Ted's turn. Ashling and Joy clasped hands, like proud but justifiably anxious parents. (Keyes 2001: 41)

Ashling and Joy are genuinely excited and nervous about Ted's performance and they are hoping that he succeeds. Thus, Ashling and Joy support Ted's career full-heartedly. Similarly, Jojo in *The Other Side of the Story* has an important relationship with her cousin Becky and Becky's husband. Becky and her husband provide mental support and strength to Jojo. For instance Jojo confides to Becky in the example (10) about her career issues and listens to her opinions.

However, friendships are not always straightforward and simple. There are problems and challenges that friends have to deal with and decide if their friendship is worth the effort. When it comes to female friendships, Montoro (2012: 72) argues that chick lit seems to exploit stereotypical versions of women as scheming and manipulative, especially in a case of a romantic rivalry. She (2012: 72) continues that this restrictive presentation of women might cause some readers to evaluate chick lit heroines negatively; however, it is also typical for chick lit to view stereotypes in a new light or allow the readers to decide themselves how to evaluate the characters. In *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* there are friendships broken because of romantic rivalry and even though negative characteristics of the heroines are revealed, there are always two sides to the story. Friendship problems have a connection to mental well-being and therefore influence other areas of life as well. In *Sushi for*

*Beginners* Ashling and Clodagh have been best friends since childhood. Nevertheless, their friendship did not prevent Clodagh from stealing Ashling's first boyfriend:

- (17) When Dylan and Clodagh exchanged that fatal eye-meet, Ashling was actually on a date with Dylan – her first and, as it transpired, her last. With that one look she was toast. Not that she held it against either of them. They were meant to be together, she might as well be a good sport about it. (Keyes 2001: 30)

Ashling was willing to forget her chance of happiness with Dylan for her friend. Even though in matters of love, there is not always a choice. Second time, however, is too much for Ashling and breaks the friendship between Clodagh and Ashling:

- (18) 'No,' Ashling broke the tense silence. 'I forgive you [Clodagh], but I don't trust you. To lose one boyfriend is misfortunate, but to lose two is careless.' (Keyes 2001: 558)

Even though Clodagh is married to Dylan, she steals Ashling's boyfriend again. Losing another boyfriend to Clodagh is unbearable to Ashling and opens her eyes about their friendship. In addition, this is one of the triggers for Ashling's depression. In the name of friendship Ashling forgives Clodagh, even though she loses her trust in Clodagh. Without trust the friendship is unfunctional.

Similarly, in *The Other Side of the Story* stealing a boyfriend breaks up a friendship between two women. As a result, in addition to a great deal of heartache, a whole group of friends falls apart and an important support system is lost. Both Gemma and Lily suffer from the friendship break-up. The following example shows Gemma's thought process after reading about Lily's life with Anton and their baby from the appendix of Lily's book:

- (19) The bitter injustice. She'd [Lily] stolen him [Anton], but instead of treating her like a common criminal she was, everyone was slapping her on the back congratulating her, 'Well done, that's a lovely partner you've got there. Good girl yourself.' No mention of the fact that she was thinning on top, of course. Not even a hint that she'd look a damn sight better if she got herself a Burt Reynolds-style hair-follicle transplant – and that's not just me [Gemma] being bitchy, she often said it herself. But no, projecting only a positive spin, everything was lovely and hirsute. (Keyes 2005: 27)

By listing Lily's negative features Gemma is trying to remedy the fact that she feels hurt, bitter and angry about the relationship between Lily and Anton. Moreover, Gemma is mortified by Lily's success and that it is public knowledge. From Lily's perspective the friendship break-up with Gemma is difficult to deal with:

- (20) I [Lily] had almost no one to talk to. Since Anton and I had taken the hideous step of going to Dublin and telling Gemma about us, all the Irish girls I knew in London – Gemma's and my mutual friends, the Mick Chicks – had severed contact abruptly. (Keyes 2005: 241)

Friendships are complex. When a friendship falls apart, the mutual acquaintances of the two friends sometimes choose sides. The sudden loss of contact with friends and their support is especially difficult for Lily because she has just moved to a new city, while her family remains in another country. Moreover, she has recently become a mother for the first time.

In the working life female solidarity is important. As mentioned in 3.2 Bradley states that young men are mentored and sponsored by older men in powerful positions. She (2007: 103) continues that "[w]hile women have begun to retaliate by setting up their own networks and mentoring schemes, they are disadvantaged by not holding the most powerful decision-making positions". When considering the career world, heroines in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* appear to have adopted the idea that

an individual woman is responsible for her own professional success rather than help each other develop their careers. Clodagh, in *Sushi for Beginners*, is trying to get employed after being a housewife and taking care of her children for a while. Yvonne, a female employee at the unemployment office, is not supportive or understanding to Clodagh's situation:

- (21) 'OK.' Yvonne exhaled long-sufferingly, licked a finger and used it to smooth down a ragged corner of the CV. 'Tell me what you read.'  
 'How do you mean?'  
 There was a pause, so tiny it barely existed, but Yvonne had created it to convey what a hopeless idiot she thought Clodagh was.  
 'FT? Time?' Yvonne prompted. She didn't exactly sigh, but she might as well have. Then she added cruelly, '*Bella? Hello!?*'  
 All Clodagh read were interior magazines. And Cat in the Hat books. And occasional blockbusters about women who set up their own businesses and who didn't have to sit through humiliating interviews such as this one when they wanted a job. (Keyes 2001: 293–294)

After the two maternity leaves and taking care of her children at home Clodagh is understandably lacking current knowledge of professional life. A humiliating interview at the employment office does not increase her motivation to return to a career life. Yvonne's behaviour towards Clodagh; the unnecessary exhales and her negative attitude, suggests that Yvonne is not genuinely interested in helping Clodagh. This is unacceptable considering female solidarity, because Yvonne should preferably support and guide Clodagh's return to the working life and not hinder it. The following example shows Clodagh's thoughts about the interview:

- (22) And, as far as she [Clodagh] remembered, she'd always been interviewed by men before, and they'd been a damn sight nicer than this little cow. [...]  
 Clodagh decided she hated her, this powerful, merciless child. Calling her 'dear' when she was half her age. (Keyes 2001: 295)

In Clodagh's opinion even men behave better than Yvonne. In the background there is the idea that women should understand their own gender better than men. Clodagh is also upset about the interviewer's powerful position at such a young age. She regards Yvonne's behaviour as condescending. Clodagh tries to feel better about the situation by deciding to hate the interviewer and classifying Yvonne as a child without mercy.

In *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* envy and jealousy appears between women in their thoughts. Heroines seem to see each other negatively and use offending language about each other. For example Clodagh and Joy are jealous of Ashling's friendship and that affects their appreciation of each other:

- (23) Clodagh and Joy didn't really like each other. Joy thought Clodagh was too spoilt and Clodagh resented Joy for her closeness with Ashling. (Keyes 2001: 152)

Joy is bothered by Clodagh's life, because Clodagh appears to get everything she wants and moreover she seems happy. Clodagh, on the other hand, is upset about Joy and Ashling as having such a close friendship, which Clodagh herself does not necessarily have or is not even capable of having. Ashling, in turn, has antipathy towards her superior and comments on her behavior:

- (24) 'She's [Lisa] a slave-driving bitch,' Ashling wailed that night over dinner in Mao with Marcus. 'The biggest bully I've ever met in my whole life.' (Keyes 2001: 342)

Competitive and the success-oriented atmosphere of the working life does not agree with everyone. Sometimes women seem to diminish instead of mentoring and supporting each other. Often appearances seem better than reality. For example in *The Other Side of the Story*, Gemma is jealous of Jojo's independent but insecure position:



- (25) 'I [Jojo] have decided, she sounded excited, 'to set up my own and I'd like to take you with me.'  
 The lucky cow. I'd [Gemma] love to do that, set up my own agency. But I enjoyed my facial features in their current configuration. (Keyes 2005: 567)

Gemma reacts to Jojo's news about starting her own agency by calling Jojo a lucky cow in her mind. Gemma is envious of Jojo's career opportunity because it is desirable also for Gemma. Nevertheless, setting up an agency of her own requires courage and a great deal of effort. It is not for everybody. Gemma reveals her thoughts about female entrepreneurship in the example (25); it causes wrinkles. This suggests that Gemma considers female entrepreneurship to be very stressful and to require a great deal of work. However, this could be Gemma's defense mechanism to explain to herself why she does not set up an agency herself.

#### 4.4 Work and Domesticity

Combining domesticity and a career seems challenging. As mentioned in section 2.3, women are presented as having the choice to have it all. However, having it all requires a great deal of effort. Benstock (2006: 254) concludes:

As chick lit routinely reminds us, women now struggle to balance professional and personal satisfaction. Traditional expectations about women's roles as wives and mothers have proven remarkably persistent and even the most confident and self-assured women must negotiate conventional expectations.

Traditional expectations about wives and mothers can have an effect on decisions made in professional life. In *The Other Side of the Story* Jojo's promotion possibility is affected by the fact that there is a chance she will be having children and give up work:

- (26) And after you [Jojo] had the pregnancy scare, it made me [Mark] realize that you might be planning to give up work anyway. (Keyes 2005: 559)

Mark justifies his decision to vote against Jojo by assuming that in case Jojo had a child she would automatically give up her career. Mark's assumption is made without knowledge of Jojo's opinion about having children. Jojo is appalled by Mark's behaviour and decides to pursue other career opportunities and romantic relationships.

In *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa negotiates the expectations of a contemporary career woman. Even though Lisa and Oliver had decided together to have a baby, Lisa has doubts:

- (27) Secretly she [Lisa] began taking the Pill again. No way was she destroying her precious career.  
 Ah yes, Lisa's career. Oliver had objected to that too, hadn't he?  
 'You're a workaholic,' he accused, over and over, with mounting frustration and anger.  
 'Men always say that about successful women.' (Keyes 2001: 384)

In Lisa's opinion having a baby would destroy her career. Lisa justifies her decision to continue birth control by thinking that Oliver disrespects her career and that men stereotypically deem successful women as workaholics. Lisa faces also another expectation about successful women; they do not have time for domestic chores:

- (28) 'Tell me now, what would you [Lisa] want with a kitchen? You career women don't have time for cooking,' the seal-plump landlord had flattered. 'Too busy running the world.' (Keyes 2001: 81)

Women should be able to enjoy femininity, domesticity and motherhood without jeopardizing their careers.

Contemporary work culture seems sometimes inflexible when considering combining motherhood, domestic aspirations and career objectives. Clodagh, in *Sushi for Beginners*, has to defend her choices in an interview at the employment agency:

- (29) ‘You’ve been out of the workplace for a long time?’ Yvonne said. ‘It’s ... how many ... over *five* years.’  
 ‘I had a baby. I never intended to stay away so long, but then I had another child, and the time never seemed right until now.’ Clodagh defended herself in a rush.  
 ‘I ... seeeeeeee ...’ (Keyes 2001: 292)

Yvonne’s behaviour indicates that motherhood is not seen as an asset when applying for a job. Nevertheless, motherhood should be appreciated rather than diminished. Bradley (2007: 178–179) highlights effective motherhood, which requires mothers to perform well in terms of continuing the species as well as in raising children who make positive contributions to society. Bradley (2007: 179) further argues that

[e]ffective motherhood benefits us all. We should give support to those who perform this vital social task, whether it be in terms of enabling them to stay at home with their children without jeopardizing their chances of labour market success when they return, or ensuring that the conditions of labour make it possible for mothers to continue working.

In other words, effective motherhood should be seen as an advantage in contemporary work culture. Despite the unsupportive treatment at the employment agency, Clodagh adjusts to her new circumstances and considers them a learning experience.

## 5 NEGOTIATING APPEARANCE

*Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* depict various appearance-related issues. Montoro (2012: 64) highlights the importance of appearance in chick lit and argues that “the way people *look* is an aspect influencing our assessment of other individuals so it does have a place in the social evaluation of others”. However, everything is not always the way it looks. Appearance can deceive and looks can be altered to a certain point. Alison Umminger (2006: 240) discusses negotiating body image in chick lit and states that “[l]ooks are a form of currency that aid not only one’s search for a mate but also one’s ability to secure that promotion, get that next job, and become a fully realized human being”. Thus, it seems to be very important how one looks.

Ideals change continually. Negra (2009: 119) explains that “[o]ne of the most distinctive features of the postfeminist era has been the spectacular emerge of the underfed, overexercised female body, and this ideal has drifted into middle age (and beyond)”. The underfed and overexercised female body seems an unhealthy objective. Negra (2009: 119) continues that “[n]otably, contemporary beautification discourses place strong stress on the achieved self”. In other words, one’s own choices and actions are important when considering appearance. In addition to the ideal female body image, an ideal of femininity has developed. Negra (2009: 119) argues that “[o]ver roughly the last ten years, a growing frankness about sexuality and the body have accompanied an ever more specific sense of what ideal femininity should look like”. However, it is challenging to get it right. Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris (2005: 158) state that

[w]omen are encouraged to overindulge themselves simultaneously as they are told to restrict themselves; to diet as well as to enjoy consumption; to stop smoking as well as to drink alcohol; to feel good about one’s body as it is, as well as to try to modify it through exercise and so on.

There seems to be a great deal of conflicting demands when considering ideal femininity and female body.

Chick lit deals with appearance variously; depicting challenges as well as triumphs. Montoro (2012: 77) explains that

[b]ut inasmuch as this genre [chick lit] attempts a faithful representation of current social concerns, inclusive of the career, relationship and even appearance pressures women are under, the connection of these novels feminism is atypical but, still, similarly valid. For instance, their characters' obsession with looks might be viewed not as failure to cater for feminist concerns but as empowering. Chick Lit authors seem to endowed their fashion interests or weight worries. If this is the case, a characterization of twenty-first-century femininity does not conflict with, but is instead fully endorsed by, an extensive treatment of appearance schemas that simply reflect the type of external contextual pressures that a Cosmopolitan-reading generation of women seems to be under.

Negotiating appearance appears important when considering empowerment. Genz and Brabon (2009: 76) list the stereotypical symbols of feminine enculturation such as make-up, fashion magazines and Barbie dolls as means of female empowerment and agency. Furthermore, they (2009: 77) argue that

[r]eclaiming elements of femininity and girliness in fashion and style, Girl Power discards the notions that feminism is necessarily anti-feminine and anti-popular and that femininity is always sexist and oppressive. Instead, Girlies are convinced that feminist and feminine characteristics can be blended in a new, improved mix.

By changing the way in which femininity and girliness are seen, they can be appreciated in a new manner. It becomes possible for women to genuinely enjoy their femininity. In *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* appearance is considered a cause of celebration as well as concern. Juliette Wells (2006: 59) states that “[w]ith beauty, chick-lit writers must toe a fine line. If the heroine is too stunning, readers may resent her; if she is too ordinary looking (let alone unattractive), she gives nothing to admire”. Appearance seems to be capricious; beauty and flaws can be advantageous as well as damaging.

### 5.1 Appearance and Power

In contemporary society appearance is highlighted and therefore connected also to power. When discussing power Stone (2007: 60) states that

[o]ften, institutions keep women subjugated with little need for men to exert any direct control or authority over women. Sandra Bartky (1990: ch.5) discusses how the images used in beauty and cosmetics advertising establish norms for what counts as an attractive feminine appearance. Women can hardly avoid measuring and regulating themselves against these norms. Thus, these images exercise disciplinary power: they produce self-regulating, self-punishing, feminine individuals. This trend reinforces masculine power, by leading women, for instance, to develop more constricted postures and ways of moving than men do.

In other words, self-regulating and self-punishing feminine individuals are the result of women trying to achieve the norms for attractive female appearance. Furthermore, these norms are based on the images from advertising and therefore lack basis in reality. In *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa's profession is closely connected with fashion and beauty. Thus, she has adopted the beauty norms thoroughly. For example in a quest for results in body sculpting Lisa combines Pilates with a strict diet:

(30) Lisa prided herself on never going to the gym, especially not in Dublin. It was wildly passé, all that stair-mastering and cross-country rowing. The Irish fitness industry was so behind the times they still thought spinning was a novel idea! No, Lisa was more interested in the less violent and more fashionable forms of body sculpting. Pilates, power-yoga, isometrics. Preferably one-on-one with a body doctor who included Elizabeth Hurley and Jemina Khan among his clients.

The only problem with something like Pilates was that, as it didn't actually raise your metabolism, best results were achieved when combined with a starvation diet. Which was where the devices like the letter-'A' diet came in. Surprisingly few foods started with letter 'A'. If it had been 'B', things would have been very different. Bacon, Bounties, Bacardi, brie, bread, biscuits ... And if she really needed to streamline down to bone, she'd spend a week doing 'Y'. Yams, that was about it.

And yellow peppers, at a stretch. Oh, and Yorkies, she'd forgotten about them. Perhaps 'Z' would be safer. (Keyes 2001: 268)

Lisa regulates her weight and fitness with diet and exercise. In addition, a starvation diet seems like a form of self-punishing as well as an unhealthy choice. However, although the goal of Lisa's starvation diet is to gain as few calories as possible, the rules of the letter diet allow, for example chocolate bars. There is a conflict between restricting one's nourishment choices and indulging oneself simultaneously. Obsession about looks is causing Lisa to regulate herself and commercial products such as chocolate, are alluring her to indulge herself.

Power relations are affected by behavior and vice versa. The power of cultural norms that regulate women's bodies is reinforced by trying to hide femininity. For instance in *The Other Side of the Story*, Jojo's clothing choices are restricted:

- (31) Her [Jojo's] pinstriped suit held her like a safety harness and, without it, she felt way too busty. Released from the confines of the jacket her body's behaviour made her think of a spilt mug of coffee – so much comes out it was impossible to believe that once upon a time, it had all fitted in. (Keyes 2005: 97)

Without her suit Jojo feels inappropriate. Women might prefer not to look overly feminine in the workplace, because that would seem unconventional or unprofessional. Appearance and femininity are often an issue in career world. Negra (2009: 90) argues that

[t]he position of women in the workplace has been disproportionately affected by a renewed social conservatism which sometimes translates into discriminatory policies with anecdotal reports of female dress codes, required makeup, and a generalized sense of appearance-based discrimination proliferating.

In other words, appearance pressures have entered the contemporary career world and can be used as a means to affect power relations. Jojo is expected to wear red lipstick to work:

- (32) She snapped open her compact and reapplied her trademark vamp-red lipstick. She wished it wasn't her trademark; she'd love to wear pale pink lipgloss and great neutral taupes. But the one time she'd come to work in 'Crushed sorbet', people looked at her oddly. Mark Avery told her she was looking 'a little peaky' and Richie Gant had accused her of having a hangover. (Keyes 2005: 95)

On one hand, Jojo's choice of lipstick shade is restricted by the opinions of her colleagues, who prefer vamp-red, although Jojo should be allowed to choose any shade. On the other hand, Jojo's trademark lipstick provides her power and confidence.

Physical attractiveness, sexuality and power seem to be closely connected. People that are blessed with good looks seem to have more power and therefore more possibilities than those less fortunate. However, the characters of chick lit present also a different view, namely that it is possible for women to be successful and happy in contemporary society by being themselves, with their own faults, desires and other characteristics. For example Jojo overcomes appearance-related pressures at a photo shoot for Book News:

- (33) 'Let's do something a bit different,' he [a photographer called Keith] suggested. 'Instead of the usual shot of the desk and you sat behind it like Winston Churchill, let's sex it up a bit.'
- Jojo stared stonily at Manoj. 'What have you been saying to him? For the last time, read my lips. I am NOT taking my top off.'
- Keith lit up. 'Would you be prepared to do that? It would be very discreet. Two carefully placed thumbs and –'
- A look from Jojo silenced him abruptly and when he spoke again he was a little less buoyant. 'This is a great desk you have here, Jojo. What about lying on it, on your side, giving a big wink?'
- 'I'm a literary agent. Have a little respect!' And she was too tall; she'd spill over the ends. (Keyes 2005: 96–97)



The photographer suggests Jojo to pose in a sexy photograph for Book News, which seems inappropriate for a professional publication. Jojo refuses Keith's suggestion by appealing to the fact that a literary agent deserves respect. In addition, Jojo is concerned about her height when considering posing on her desk. Even though Jojo refuses to model for a sexy photograph on professional grounds, she does not deem the idea as impossible. Perhaps she would have done it if she was shorter. In Jojo's point of view it is allowed to enjoy sexuality and use it as an advantage. Moreover, she regards the matter humorously. Benstock (2006: 253) concludes:

It [scholarly attention to chick lit] gives younger scholars, in particular, a chance to consider issues that relate directly to their lives: particularly the post feminist issue of whether a woman can be sexy and taken seriously at the same time – without taking herself too seriously.

In the career world being sexy and serious at the same time can be challenging. Chick lit provides examples that manage to combine sexiness and power while preserving a light tone.

## 5.2 Ideal Body Challenge

Heroines of *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* create their own ways to manage challenges related to ideal body image. Bradley (2007: 155) discusses gendered bodies and explains that the media provides considerable pressure on women's bodies by presenting glamorous, sexy and thin ideals. In pursuit of these ideals women are bound to fail. Bradley (2007: 156) argues that “[m]isery is blamed on the self, its inability to resist the temptations of food, its weakness in sticking to regimes, and attention is drawn away from the social arrangements which act to disadvantage and demoralize women”. In other words, blaming oneself for failing the pursuit of ideal body, consumes important resources that could be directed to improve women's position in society. Bradley (2007: 156) continues that “[a]ll this is reflected in the obsession with dieting and with the range of beauty products and services designed to

alter bodies and improve appearance”. These obsessions cause challenges. For instance Jojo encounters prejudice about dieting at a dinner table:

- (34) ‘Good Christ,’ said the man beside her [Jojo]. Ambrose was his name – some guy from Brandon’s work. ‘You can really put it away.’  
 ‘It’s food’ Jojo said. ‘What am I supposed to do with it? Weave baskets?’  
 The man watched another mouthful of food disappear into Jojo’s mouth and breathed, ‘Blimey,’ loud enough for everyone to hear.  
 Jojo hunched lower over her plate. What a prince. Some men just took exception to her – her appetite? her height? – something anyway. But knowing they were assholes didn’t mean it didn’t get to her.  
 ‘Jojo never diets,’ Shayna said proudly. (Keyes 2005: 141–142)

Jojo has to defend her eating, even though in Jojo’s opinion eating should be seen as a natural act. Having her appetite criticized offends Jojo and causes Shayna to defend her friend by proudly declaring that Jojo never diets. This reveals that in Shayna’s opinion Jojo is brave to fight against the obsession of dieting.

Pursuing the ideal body causes problems, because the means of achievement are not necessarily healthy. The following example reveals Jojo’s thought process about problems with dieting:

- (35) Unabashed, Ambrose nodded at Skeletor. ‘Look at Cecily. She eats nothing and she’s well fit.’  
 One way of putting it, Jojo thought, wondering when Skeletor had last had a period. (Keyes 2005: 142)

Naturalness and healthiness would seem sensible priorities when pursuing an ideal body. However, the ideal body image created by media and culture seems to have no room for sensibility. Ambrose comments on Cecily’s eating habits and declares her as “well fit” suggesting perhaps that Cecily has the ideal body image according to

Ambrose's opinion, whereas Jojo considers Cecily resembling a skeleton who might not consume enough calories to menstruate. Cecily herself sees the situation like this:

- (36) Jojo was a big girl – bigger than Cecily could imagine being in her worst Maltesers-filled nightmares – but she was gorgeous. Luscious and ripe in those fabulous black trousers and clingy burgundy top, her décolletage and shoulders satin-smooth and luminous. (Actually thanks to pearlescent body lotion, Jojo would have happily told her if she'd asked.)

But it was the way Jojo seemed so comfortable in her own skin that most entranced Cecily. To the point where she'd wondered tentatively about cancelling her gym membership. Even – dammit! – eating whatever she wanted. If it worked for this Jojo, couldn't it work for her?

Occasionally this happened to women around Jojo. While they were with her, they saw through the advertising industry's lies and believed that size didn't matter, that it was intangibles like *joie de vivre* and confidence that counted. But then they went home and discovered, to their great disappointment, that they weren't Jojo Harvey and couldn't understand why they'd felt what they'd felt at the time. (Keyes 2005: 142–143)

Even though women are aware of false images of advertising industry, it requires strong mental capacity to reject pursuing them.

Food is an important theme when considering the challenges connected to achieving the ideal body. Montoro (2012: 94–95) argues that although chick lit heroines might deny themselves culinary satisfaction, they still discuss food. Discussing food can also be seen as a culinary satisfaction, which shows that chick lit heroines do not follow their own rules of denial literally when it comes to indulgence. In *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa discusses chocolate when she is upset:

- (37) The chocolate called her [Lisa] from the drawer, but she resisted it. Just because she felt she was in hell was no excuse to go over fifteen hundred calories a day. (Keyes 2001: 35)

Lisa perceives chocolate as comfort food in a mentally stressful situation. Even though Lisa tries to reason with herself and remember her diet, eventually she consumes her whole chocolate stash. Montoro (2012: 95) continues that “[a]dmitting that food is not something to fear but something to enjoy could be seen as a sign of weakness in relation to their obsessive concerns with appearance, for their ideal weight can hardly be combined with gastronomic indulgence”. Thus, chick lit characters are aware of ways to pursue the ideal body and they consider a fit figure a goal; however, they enjoy delicacies as well. In the following example Lisa combines two healthy habits:

- (38) she’d [Lisa] made herself walk home. She’d started doing that to counteract all the dinners Kathy made her eat. (Keyes 2001: 559)

Lisa feels she has to take a counteraction for eating a proper homemade dinner. Taking a little walk in the brisk air is not only healthy, but serves to soothe her guilty conscience after the dinner.

### 5.3 Changing the Way You Look

Appearance can partly be affected by one’s own choices and actions. Changing the way one looks has become an important feature in contemporary society and therefore it also generates business. The process of creating intentionally achieved and upheld appearance seems to require patience, sacrifice and suffering. In *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa invests a great deal of time and effort in improving and maintaining her appearance:

- (39) Lisa was clear-eyed about her looks. In her natural state – not that she’d been in that for a very long time – she was a pretty enough girl. But with huge amounts of effort she knew she’d upgraded herself from attractive to fabulous. As well as the usual attention to hair, nails, skin, make-up and clothes, she popped huge amounts of vitamins, drank sixteen glasses of water a day, only snorted cocaine on special occasions and every six

months had a botulism injection in her forehead – it paralysed the muscles and gave a lovely wrinkle-free appearance. For the past ten years she'd been constantly hungry. So hungry that she barely noticed it now. (Keyes 2000: 95)

In addition to various beauty products and treatments, carefully selected outfits, attention to vitamins, water and substance consumption as well as a strict diet, Lisa exploits means of cosmetic surgery by taking a botulism injection regularly in her forehead. Genz and Brabon (2009: 151) discuss cosmetic surgery and argue that “[t]his is one of the contradictions of the rhetoric of choice that the postfeminist woman grapples with: what looks like individual empowerment, agency and self-determination can also signal conformity and docility”. In other words, cosmetic surgery can be seen as an empowering choice by an individual as well as following the social norms of women’s appearance depending on the point of view.

Changing the way one looks is a popular theme in chick lit. Ferris (2008: 55) states that

[n]otably, *Party Girl* and *The Devil Wears Prada* make the female protagonist more of an agent in her own transformation. As such, they signal a further transformation in ideas about fashion, moving away from the clichéd notion of the industry as oppressing women. Instead, external transformation through clothing and cosmetics appears as a means of performing identity, of trying on roles, cognizant that, despite naïve expectations to the contrary, there is no way of living outside of contemporary consumer culture. Instead, its tools are harnessed as a means of self-fashioning.

Similarly, in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* the heroines are agents of their own transformation and they use fashion, clothing and beauty products as a means to perform identity. Contemporary consumer culture and fashion industry can be seen as having a positive effect on women’s lives. Empowerment can be achieved through products, services and body fitness. In *The Other Side of the Story* Gemma is trying on the role of a writer by means of clothing:

- (40) I [Gemma] caught the 6.35 a.m. from Dublin and went straight from Heathrow into Lipman Haigh. I wore my new black suit. By Donna Karan. No, Prada. Either way it made me look tiny-waisted and chic. (Keyes 2005: 574)

Wearing carefully selected clothes from a high fashion brand gives Gemma confidence when attending an important meeting. Harzewski (2011: 184) argues that sometimes in chick lit beauty is defined in material terms as well as associated with values of high fashion such as exclusivity and expense. Here Gemma gets strength from those qualities.

Beauty products, clothes and other ways of changing the appearance can have an effect on femininity and sexuality. Moreover, self-esteem is connected to appearance, femininity and sexuality. Genz and Brabon (2009: 93) argue that “[s]exuality/femininity thus undergoes a process of resignification whereby it comes to be associated with feminist ideas of female emancipation and self-determination rather than its previous connotations of patriarchal oppression and subjugation.” In other words, sexuality and femininity can be seen as positive means of empowerment. In *Sushi for Beginners* carefully considered and executed appearance provides Lisa confidence to handle a difficult matter:

- (41) On Saturday morning, when Liam picked Lisa up in his taxi to drive her to the airport, his admiration was blatant.  
 ‘God above, Lisa,’ he exclaimed paternally. ‘But you’re looking fantastic!’  
*Scamtastic*, actually. ‘I should do, Liam. I’ve been preparing since seven.’  
 She had to admit that she’d pulled it off. Everything was perfect: her hair, skin, eyebrows, nails. And clothes. On Wednesday and Thursday couriers had delivered some of the most magnificent garments on the planet, she’d cherry-picked the choicest pieces and was now wearing them.  
 On the drive, Lisa explained a little of what was happening, which upset Liam.  
 ‘Getting divorced,’ he muttered. ‘Your man must be mad. And blind.’  
 (Keyes 2001: 494)

By focusing on her appearance Lisa feels better prepared to encounter emotionally challenging situation of discussing divorce with her husband. Attention from the taxi driver confirms Lisa's efforts. Similarly, in the following example Clodagh is empowered through appearance:

(42) Sad and lonely and still burdened with the fruits of her [Clodagh's] destruction, she wondered if she'd ever be able to fix all that she had broken. Would anything ever be normal again?

As she passed Hogan's crowd of boys noticed her and began whistling and shouting compliments. At first she ignored them, then on a whim tossed her hair and gave a dazzling over-the-shoulder smile which elicited whoops of wild appreciation from them. All at once her heart lifted.

Hey, life goes on. (Keyes 2001: 559)

After meeting with Ashling and admitting her failures, Clodagh feels distressed. Unexpected admiration from a crowd of boys lifts Clodagh's spirits and helps her to realize that there are always possibilities in life despite hardship. However, the attention that Lisa receives from the taxi driver as well as the admiration towards Clodagh from a crowd of boys are not very serious confirmations. Lisa and Clodagh gain their feeling of empowerment through celebrating their femininity as well as recognizing their power within. The bystanders only help Lisa and Clodagh to discover this.

Appearance decisions are connected to empowerment. Although there are appearance related guidelines, norms and ideals, individuals can choose their own style. Dole (2008: 64) argues that "[l]ike fashion itself, which attempts to balance a personal style with that year's trends, a young woman's life is often focused on balancing individuality with conformity to appropriate norms". Thus, individuals can make their own choices and feel empowered by them. In the following example Ashling admires Lisa's choices:

- (43) Her [Lisa's] trainers were pink Nike ones that Ashling had seen in a magazine, but that you couldn't get in Ireland yet. Her pink parachute-silk rucksack matched the pink gel in the heel of the trainers. And her hair was lovely – shiny and swingy, thick and glossy – in the way that you could never achieve yourself.

In fascination Ashling checked out the contents of the woman's basket. Seven cans of strawberry Slimfast, seven baking potatoes, seven apples and four...five...six...*seven* individually wrapped little squares of chocolate from the pick'n'mix. (Keyes 2001: 31)

Lisa chooses to use the colour pink as a part of her style, even though it might be associated with little girls' wardrobes. Dole (2008: 76) discusses femininity in chick flicks and concludes that “[t]he extremes to which these films [chick flicks] go suggest that most women can now feel that they have many legitimate and non-exclusive choices, and that one of those choices is to be free to be... pink”. Thus, chick culture encourages women to enjoy femininity and everything related to it despite of different opinions.



## 6 PERSUADING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND HAVING CHILDREN

Romance leads to marriage and children, perhaps. Normally the story ends when ‘they’ get together. Romance has a central position in *Sushi for Beginners* as well as in *The Other side of the Story*. Harzewski (2006: 31) defines romance as “a term that has been used at different times to a variety of fictional works involving some combination of the following: high adventure, thwarted love, mysterious circumstances, arduous quests and improbable triumphs”. Even though chick lit introduces various themes, romance plays an important role in chick lit heroines’ lives. Harzewski (2011: 180) states that “chick lit as a temper of postfeminism seems to express the fact that feminism’s gains in the professional arena have not abated the desire for romance.” Thus, chick lit heroines aim to succeed in diverse areas of life. Marriage and having children appear as the ultimate goal for young women. On the other hand, chick lit underlines the image of single woman and the possibility to choose in contemporary society. Harzewski (2006: 39) argues that

[a]s the novels [chick lit novels] do not necessarily culminate in marriage, the books present a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring, in varying degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals or exposing those ideals as unmet, sometimes unrealistic, expectations.

Today’s society and literature has acknowledged the presence of single women and that it is not always so easy to find a companion. A single woman can be as successful and a perfectly happy member of the society as every other character. However, the appreciation of a single woman’s position cannot be taken for granted, even though attitudes have changed.

There are a great deal of expectations and assumptions concerning marriage and having children because women and motherhood are strongly connected. Bradley (2007: 125) explores discourses of motherhood explaining that in their core there are usually the following propositions:

[A]ll women are designed to be mothers; women who do not become mothers will be unhappy and unfulfilled; those who do become mothers are compelled, either by biological instinct or by moral pressure, to put the well-being of their child(ren) before anything else.

Thus, it might be difficult to see motherhood differently. *Sushi for Beginners* as well as *The Other side of the Story* shed light on the challenges of parenting and becoming a mother. There are different kinds of relationships and life situations that must be taken into account when considering procreation.

### 6.1 Romantic Ideals

Functioning romantic relationships can be seen as goals of life and a means to happiness. Negra (2009: 61) argues that “[i]n postfeminist culture the single woman stands as the most conspicuously time-beset example of contemporary femininity, her singlehood encoded as a particularly temporal failure and a drifting off course from the normative stages of the female lifecycle”. In other words, a single woman should find a partner relatively fast. The following example in *Sushi for Beginners* reveals Ashling’s thoughts about being single:

(44) Once awake she [Ashling] was suddenly seized with an urgency about her age, the ticking of her biological clock and all the usual thirty-something, single-woman angst. The fuck!-I’m-thirty-one-and-not-married! syndrome. (Keyes 2001: 325–326)

Pressure about marriage and procreation is not healthy for anyone. Ashling sees marriage as the purpose of life. Lisa A. Guerrero (2006: 88) discusses marriage as the ultimate goal of chick lit and argues that although many chick lit protagonists do not get married, marriage has an idealized place in their minds. She (2006: 89) highlights the paradoxical existence of chick lit protagonists, who are successful and independent in a society that has absurd expectations for them. The heroines of *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* aim to achieve satisfaction in professional life as well as in

different areas of personal life, such as relationships with friends and appearance. Moreover, they desire to form romantic relationships with partners who have the right qualities.

Romantic ideals usually lack a basis in reality. Ashling idealizes marriage and is convinced that a married woman is happy with her husband, even though she might say otherwise. For instance when Clodagh tells Ashling about her problems, Ashling dismisses them:

- (45) ‘And above all, you [Clodagh] have Dylan.’  
 ‘Ah now, marriage isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.’  
 Ashling wasn’t convinced. ‘I know you have to say that. It’s the rule, I’ve seen it in action. Married women simply aren’t allowed to say that they are mad about their husbands, unless they’re *just* married. Get a group of married women together and they compete to see who can diss their husband the most. “My one leaves his dirty socks on the floor,” “Well my one never noticed that I got my hair cut.” I think you’re all just embarrassed by your good fortune!’ (Keyes 2001: 152)

Marriages are bound to have problems because they are formed by two different people with their own opinions. Therefore, marriage should not be assumed to be only filled with happiness. Clodagh, on the other hand, sees single life as enviable:

- (46) [‘]But I really envy you!’ She [Clodagh] suddenly exploded. ‘Single, starting a new job, all that excitement.’  
 Ashling was speechless. To her, Clodagh’s life was the Holy Grail. The good-looking, devoted husband with the thriving business; the tasteful, Edwardian red-brick house in the chi-chi village of Donnybrook. Nothing to do all day long except microwave Barney pasta, make plans to redecorate already perfect rooms and wait for Dylan to come home.  
 ‘And I bet you were out clubbing last night,’ Clodagh almost accused. (Keyes 2001: 29)

Clodagh is convinced that leading a single life is full of excitement and clubbing. Naturally, Clodagh's opinion is one-sided. Harzewski (2011: 29) states that “[w]hile many narratives are truncated by marriage plot conventions, others depict a comfortable but static suburban telos as a potential crisis, with heroines vacillating between the more secure status of marriage and open-ended possibilities of the single state”. Thus, both married and single lives have their advantages as well as disadvantages.

Marriage as a romantic ideal and the ultimate goal of life may have lost some of its appeal, because there are complicated marriages around chick lit heroines. In *The Other Side of the Story* Gemma is critical about her mother's opinion about marriage:

- (47) ‘And you [Gemma's mother] forgive him?’  
 ‘He's my husband. I took my marriage vows in a *church*.’ She said it in a non-negotiable way, my [Gemma's] hand itched for a stray hammer to beat some sense into her.  
 Thank God I'm an atheist, is what I say.  
 If something like this happened to me, I didn't think the relationship would ever recover and I doubted I'd ever be able to forgive. As it was, I didn't think I'd ever be able to stop despising Dad. I suppose it was Mam's denial which made it possible for her. Thinking herself as a dutiful wife, instead of a woman with feelings and rights, meant that Dad was able to slot right back into the life that she'd kept warm for him. It infuriated me beyond belief. (Keyes 2005: 528)

Gemma's mother forgives her husband in the name of marriage, even though he left her for another woman. In Gemma's opinion a dutiful wife is a different person from a woman with feelings and rights. Similarly, Lily is skeptical about marriage, which is revealed in an interview about status of her relationship with Anton:

- (48) ‘And how did you [Lily] meet your husband, Anton?’  
 ‘We're not married yet.’ [...]  
 ‘So how did you meet your *fiancé*, Anton?’  
 ‘Partner,’ I said, just in case she asked me to produce a ring.  
 Martha looked at me sharply. ‘But you will marry?’

I made vaguely positive noises but in truth it made little difference to me whether or not we did. My parents, by contrast, are great believers in the institution of marriage. They love it so much that they keep on doing it; Mum has been married twice and Dad three times.’ (Keyes 2005: 219)

The interviewer seems to value marriage and almost press Lily into marrying Anton. Lily’s parents have been married several times and therefore she does not consider the institution of marriage as everlasting or essential.

Romantic ideals sometimes cause disappointments that are challenging to encounter. Harzewski (2011: 180) states that “[c]hick lit does not critique marriage per se but shows skepticism toward the traditional HEA [happily ever after]”. In *The Other Side of the Story* Jojo is having an affair with a married man. Jojo loves Mark and has romantic ideals about their relationship. However, she is constantly disappointed because Mark is not single:

- (49) ‘Jojo?’ he [Mark] whispered. ‘I’m very sorry. I can’t make it today.’  
 She said nothing. Too disappointed to make it easy for him.  
 ‘Sam’s in a bit of trouble.’ Sam was his son. ‘We got a call last night. He went drinking with his mates – told us he was watching videos – and got so bad he ended up in hospital.’  
 ‘Is he OK?’  
 ‘He is now But we’ve all had a bit of a fright and I ought to stay close.’  
 What could she say? Sam was a thirteen-year-old boy. This was serious stuff. ‘Where are you?’  
 ‘In the shed.’  
 In the shed. Surrounded by weed killer, slug repellent and spider’s webs. She nearly laughed – the glamour of an affair.  
 ‘Well, take care of yourself, and him and er, the others.’ *Your wife, your daughter.*  
 ‘I’m sorry, Jojo, you know I am. But there’s a chance that tomorrow I could –’  
 ‘Tomorrow, I’ve got plans. I hope Sam will be OK. See you Monday.’  
 She disconnected and pulled her comforter up to her chin, having a moment. She wasn’t going to kvetch. Right from the get-go she’d known what she was getting herself into and that was the deal she’d made with herself. (Keyes 2005: 130)

Jojo is a realist about her relationship with Mark and understands the position she is in. However, she is not satisfied with her role as another woman and has higher expectations for a romantic relationship in the long run. Nevertheless, their relationship is filled with romantic scenes despite the occasional disappointments. Mabry (2006: 200) discusses chick lit heroines' romantic partners and notes that "sex becomes a way for the woman to explore her own identity and express her own desires". Jojo explores her identity with Mark, expressing her own desires freely. Eventually, their relationship ends and Jojo discusses the break-up with her cousin:

- (50) 'So what? I'll get over him, hey, I'm nearly there already.  
And if I want, I'll meet someone else sometime. I mean, look at me – I run my own business, I've got all my own teeth and hair, I can fix bikes –  
'  
'You look like Jessica Rabbit.'  
'I'm a cryptic crossword ninja.'  
'You do a brilliant Donald Duck impersonation.'  
'Exactly. I'm *fabulous*.' (Keyes 2005: 642)

Jojo and Becky list Jojo's positive qualities to convince themselves that Jojo will survive the break-up. These positive features make Jojo feel fabulous and enhance her self-esteem.

The dissolution of romantic ideals can be seen as opportunities to learn. In *Sushi for Beginners* Lisa's marriage has problems and she is headed for a divorce:

- (51) This pain has changed me [Lisa], she admitted. This pain that is not going to go away for a very long time has made me a nicer person. Even if I don't want to be, she acknowledged wryly. Even if I consider it a fate worse than death, I am softer, kinder, better.  
And I'm *glad* I was married to Oliver, she thought defiantly. I'm sorry and sad and pissed *off* that I messed it up, but I'll learn from it and I'll make certain it won't happen again.  
And that was the best she could do.

She sighed heavily, picked up her bag, then left for work like the survivor she was. (Keyes 2001: 554–555)

Lisa acknowledges the effects of the pain caused by her broken relationship and considers herself changed as a person. This learning experience relates to bildungsroman mentioned in section 1.2. Lisa is able to develop her personality into a softer, kinder and better person as a result of the break-up of her relationship break-up. As a means of keeping her sadness at bay Lisa lists positive features in her life:

(52) As she [Lisa] walked along she worked hard at keeping the sadness at bay. *I am fabulous. I have fabulous mum and dad. I have a fabulous new job as a media consultant. I have fabulous shoes.* (Keyes 2001: 559)

Lisa gains strength through thinking about her personality, appearance, family, career and shoes. In other words, empowerment achieved through matters that are personally significant to Lisa.

## 6.2 Exploring Motherhood

Motherhood can be seen as an ultimatum issued by society as well as an individual choice. Negra (2009: 139) states that “[i]f marriage is the unquestioned goal for all women in the advice books on dating, motherhood is a deep and abiding quest in the body of panic literature directed to professional women that emerge in the early 2000s”. In *Sushi for Beginners* fertility and finding a man is connected with temporal panic:

(53) Joy leant over to the pack of tarot cards, ‘- till I see what they say. The Empress? What does that mean?’  
 ‘Fertility. Mind you [Ashling] keep taking your pill.’  
 ‘Cripes. How did *you* get on last night? Meet anyone nice?’  
 ‘No.’

‘You’ll just have to try harder. You’re thirty-one, all the good men will be gone soon.’ (Keyes 2001: 50)

In Joy’s opinion thirty-one seems a critical age to find a partner and start considering starting a family. On the other hand, Becky in *The Other Side of the Story* declares that there is never a right time to procreate:

- (54) Becky chose her words carefully. ‘Is there a chance he [Mark] might not be happy?’  
 Jojo considered. ‘Sure.’ She half-laughed. ‘But he might be psyched. But what about me? Am I happy?’  
 ‘Are you?’  
 ‘It’s not the right time to have a baby.’  
 ‘But it’s never the right time – for anyone, not just you. By the time it’s the right time, it’s often too late.’  
 ‘You’re right. A baby isn’t the end of the world. (Keyes 2005: 491)

Having a baby brings changes to everyday life and it is challenging to arrange various life areas according to a different focus point. For instance in *Sushi for Beginners*, Lisa considers having a baby as overly challenging:

- (55) She [Lisa] didn’t want a baby, they destroyed your life. It was easy for models and Spice Girls. They had teams of nannies to ensure you got your sleep, personal trainers to insist you regained your figure, private hairdressers to comb your hair when you hadn’t the energy to. (Keyes 2001: 383–384)

There are many reasons why having a baby can be seen as destructive when considering different life aspects. For example Lisa might be concerned about changes in her appearance, career opportunities and social relationships. On the other hand, there are many positive effects connected to procreation as well.



Planning procreation is challenging and therefore it is difficult to prepare for the future.

In *The Other Side of the Story* Lily's pregnancy is unplanned:

- (56) Like everything else about Anton and me, the pregnancy had not been planned. We were horribly poor, I was making a small amount of money but as yet Anton was making none, and we had no idea how we would afford a baby. But it did not seem to matter. I had never been so happy. Or so ashamed. (Keyes 2005: 235)

Lily feels happy and ashamed simultaneously. Happiness does not always follow society's rules, norms and opinions. Having an unplanned pregnancy seems frowned upon and therefore Lily feels ashamed in addition to falling in love with her best friend's boyfriend. Bradley (2007: 126) explains that authentic experiences of becoming a mother challenge dominant discourses of ideal motherhood. The following example shows Lily's thoughts about becoming a mother for the first time:

- (57) I [Lily] had never loved anyone the way I loved her [Ema] and no one had ever loved me as much as she did; not even my own mother. [...]  
 Everyone thinks their baby is the most gorgeous who ever lived, but Ema really was a beauty. [...]  
 She was a big smiler, sometimes she giggled in her sleep and she was the squeeziest creature ever. The creases in her thighs were irresistible. She smelt adorable, she felt adorable, she looked adorable and she sounded adorable.  
 That was the plus side.  
 On the minus ... I could not recover from the shock of being a mother. Simply nothing had prepared me and I wouldn't mind but, usually for me, I had attended pre-natal and mothering classes in an attempt to be properly geared up. I may as well not have bothered, the impact was uncushionable.  
 To be entirely responsible for this tiny powerful bundle of life scared me to death and I had never worked so hard or relentlessly. What I found most difficult was that there was no time off. Ever. Anton, at least, had a job in the outside world and got to leave the flat each day but for me, being a parent was twenty-four-seven. (Keyes 2005: 248)

Lily acknowledges her feelings of love and happiness but also of shock and scare. Becoming a mother changes her as a person and she learns from it. Lily for instance has to learn to manage her finances, because she is now also responsible for her baby.

The expectations of motherhood and parenting are powerful. Negra (2009: 68) argues that motherhood is highlighted in popular culture and introduces “new bravura mothering in which postfeminist motherhood is equated with ultimate clarity and the will to achieve or endure”. However, this can be contested. For example in *Sushi for Beginners*, Ashling is aware of the expectations of ideal contemporary motherhood, namely the role of a super-woman:

- (58) Ashling knew Clodagh was vaguely defensive that she wasn't one of those super-women who did a full-time job as well as rearing children. (Keyes 2001: 150)

Clodagh is struggling with parenting and the expectations of traditional motherhood. Ashling is confused about those expectations:

- (59) Ashling considered in confusion. But maybe Clodagh was right. Everyone just expects mothers to sublimate all of their own wants and needs for the good of their children. Perhaps that wasn't fair.  
 ‘Sometimes,’ Clodagh sighed, heavily, ‘I just wonder, what's the point? My day is filled with ferrying Craig to school, Molly to playgroup, Molly home from playgroup, Craig to his origami lessons ... I'm a slave.’  
 ‘But bringing up kids is the most important job anyone can do,’ Ashling protested. (Keyes 2001: 151)

In Ashling's opinion, raising children is valuable. However, she questions society's expectations for mothers to disregard their own wants and needs for the sake of their offspring.

Motherhood and parenting are demanding because there is a great deal to consider. Clodagh is overwhelmed with her life as a housewife. In the following example Clodagh evaluates her life:

- (60) Clodagh woke early. Nothing new there. Clodagh always woke early. That's what having children did to you. If they weren't roaring to be fed, they were squashing into the bed between you and your husband and if they weren't doing that, they were in the kitchen at six-thirty on a Saturday morning, clattering saucepans ominously. (Keyes 2001: 24)

It seems that Clodagh is overlooking her own desires and needs and concentrating only on her children. For example Saturday morning could be a time to sleep a few extra hours but instead the children are dominating the scene. Moreover, Clodagh's marriage takes its toll because her children occupy every area of her life:

- (61) 'We used to talk about more than the kids.' Dylan sounded weird.  
 'Like what?' Clodagh asked defensively.  
 'Don't know. Nothing ... anything. Music, films, people ...'  
 'Well, what do you expect?' she said angrily. 'The kids are the only people I see, I can't help it. (Keyes 2001: 337)

Marriage and having children might be seen as living a dream. However, living a dream does not necessarily mean that there are no problems. The following example reveals Clodagh's thoughts about her situation:

- (62) She felt trapped, painted into a corner, blocked. As though she was locked in a small dark airless box, which was getting ever tighter – she couldn't understand it. She'd always been happy with her lot. Her life had been exactly as it should and its progress had been ever forward to. A horrible thought wormed in – was it going to be like this for ever? (Keyes 2001: 336)

It is incomprehensible for Clodagh that she feels trapped, because she is of the opinion that her life had so far proceeded according to an ideal pattern. Eventually, Clodagh divorces her husband and becomes a single mother:

- (63) ‘We’ve [Clodagh and Dylan] sold the house in Donnybrook and me and the kids are living in Greystones now. Miles out, but it was all we could afford. I’m a single mother now since Dylan decided he couldn’t cope with custody. It’s a steep learning curve – ‘ (Keyes 2001: 557)

Clodagh acknowledges that there is a great deal of learning to do in her new life situation. For instance she has to lower her standards of home location, because of the changes in her financial circumstances. There are different ways to manage motherhood. In the ideal world everybody chooses their own style.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have studied feminist/postfeminist empowerment and female agency through actions and choices of heroines in Marian Keyes's chick lit novels, *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story*. Moreover, I have explored women's position in contemporary society depicted in these novels concentrating on challenges and expectations concerning career world, returning to working life after maternity leave, managing a young family with an uncertain income, caring and nurturing in a mother-daughter relationship, appearance pressures, romantic relationships and mental health issues. The image of an ideal woman as well as expectations of the society cause challenges, pressures and conflicts to the lives of women. It is demanding to balance between various aspects of life. This becomes visible through the representations and actions of heroines in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story*. The two novels include themes that shed light on women's position in contemporary society. Chick lit introduces new aspects of the woman's place in the world and in relationships in addition to viewpoints of romance literature. Furthermore, chick lit brings the protagonist closer to the reader with its straightforward narrative style and shows that it is more common to have single women also as heroines in literature nowadays.

The development of feminism creates new possibilities for women to perform and explore different identities and challenge gender boundaries. Feminism is visible in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story*; protagonists can be seen as active individuals who celebrate their femininity and are empowered through it, which provides their agency. Considering gender identity as performative introduces new possibilities for these women to encounter challenges and expectations of society. Narratives of heroines can be seen as development stories or bildungsroman in which these heroines learn from their experiences and grow as persons. Moreover, these stories provide new examples for navigating through contemporary society. By taking advantage of these new examples and possibilities protagonists, renegotiate the dilemma

of having it all. Heroines can decide for themselves whether to choose traditional or modern ways of living or combining them.

Collectivity in working life is challenging. First, there are many different aspects to consider when balancing between personal and professional life; there are circumstances, such as Gemma's family concerns that are emotionally challenging as well as demand a great deal of attention and therefore might even disrupt career development. Secondly, even though the working life seems more equal nowadays, glass ceilings still exist. However, there are different options to deal with unequal treatment at the workplace, such as Jojo's decision to leave the service of a disappointing employer and start her own literary agency. Thirdly, women should help each other; promote, sponsor and encourage when considering career opportunities and avoid diminishing each other's accomplishments. Furthermore, combining work and domestic life should be more straightforward and unnecessary expectations should be disentangled.

There are various appearance pressures in society. The image of ideal body and ideal femininity seem unrealistic to accomplish. Appearance is connected to power and it seems that flawless looks are the currency to gain everything nowadays; however, perhaps it is attitude and personality that matter in the end. Aiming to achieve ideal body image has both challenges and possibilities. It is important to acknowledge that ideal body is created through media images as well as popular culture and it might not be achievable. Nevertheless, there are ways to change one's appearance. Beauty products, exercising, carefully selected clothes and even plastic surgery can be seen as sources of empowerment; such as Gemma's designer clothes that provide her confidence.

Romance and romantic relationships are desirable for chick lit protagonists. Depictions of marriage in *Sushi for Beginners* and *The Other Side of the Story* are not very encouraging. Moreover, staying single can also provide happiness. When considering chick lit, marriage as an institution may have lost some of its standing but finding a suitable companion has not. Romantic relationships are an interesting part of life and

can be seen as learning experiences regardless of the outcome. There are strong expectations concerning motherhood and having children in contemporary society. Chick lit heroines challenge those expectations by shedding light to different ways of approaching motherhood. One can learn a great deal from motherhood and parenting, such as responsibility and love. Moreover, motherhood, parenting as well as choosing not to have children can be seen as sources of empowerment.

All in all, these narratives have an effect on social and political atmosphere in contemporary society, because they include empowerment and the readers are able to relate to the protagonists and their experiences.

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