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Postfeminist Identity And Choice In The Devil Wears Prada And Normal People

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Abstract

This paper explores the contradictions within postfeminist culture in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) by Lauren Weisberger and *Normal People* (2018) by Sally Rooney. Postfeminist discourse often presents the contemporary woman as autonomous and capable of combining professional success with romantic fulfillment and personal authenticity. But these novels complicate such narratives by showing emotional strain and identity fragmentation under shadow of apparent freedom. Using a postfeminist cultural theoretical framework and especially drawing on the works of Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, and through close textual analysis the study argues that both texts depict female agency as negotiated and conditional rather than absolute. Professional ambition and sexual autonomy do not result in a coherent sense of self but create tensions between independence and intimacy. By situating Andrea Sachs and Marianne Sheridan within environments that reward ambition and self expression, the novels expose the emotional and psychological costs associated with contemporary expectations of empowerment. Finally, the narratives suggest that the promise of having it all is unresolved and empowerment is an ongoing process characterized by ambivalence and not closure.

Keywords: postfeminism, female agency, identity, ambition, intimacy, contemporary fiction

Introduction

In the context of contemporary culture, the image of the successful woman is often depicted as autonomous, professionally successful and emotionally independent. Such stories encourage personal choice, confidence and self improvement reinforcing the idea that the barriers to women's equality have been successfully addressed. In this context happiness and fulfillment are within reach driven by ambition and emotional intelligence. While postfeminism as a cultural aesthetic does not overtly reject feminism it assumes the success of the feminist movement and reconfigures empowerment as an individualistic pursuit.

But literature has the power to subvert this optimistic narrative while engaging with the inner lives and complexities that are obscured by the dominant cultural narrative. Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* are both works that, while different in their settings explore the world of contemporary womanhood. While Andrea Sachs navigates the high pressure world of fashion journalism in New York, Marianne Sheridan navigates the world of intellectual and romantic relationships within the context of the Irish academic world. Both women are beneficiaries of the successful feminist movement but their stories indicate that autonomy does not necessarily mean invulnerability.

This paper discusses how the novels under study subvert the simplistic postfeminist discourse by showing the instability of empowerment and the emotional cost of such empowerment. Ambition and sexual autonomy are the sources of possibility in the novels, but they are also the sources of fragmentation and uncertainty. Therefore, the discussion of the novels would reveal the inherent contradiction in the construction of female success in contemporary society.

Literature review

Literature on postfeminism has focused on its complex and contradictory relationship with feminist politics. Angela McRobbie (2009) suggests that contemporary culture is characterized by the inclusion of feminist successes making feminist critique redundant. This implies that women have equal opportunities and, if inequality persists, it is a result of personal failure. Rosalind Gill (2007) suggests that certain characteristics of the postfeminist subject include self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-responsibility. Empowerment is no longer a collective process, but rather one of self-management.

Other researchers have also looked at the concept of postfeminism as depicted in popular culture and literature. Women's fiction, for instance, has been studied with regards to how women's fiction today often deals with the idea of finding a balance between one's profession and romance, and how this is often depicted as a conscious decision. Yet, as some critics point out, such works also reveal some underlying concerns with regard to issues of authenticity and emotional work, and how professional success is often associated with relationship issues.

Earlier studies on *The Devil Wears Prada* has largely been concerned with the representation of corporate culture and the commercialization of femininity. The character of Miranda Priestly has been identified as a multifaceted role that shows feminist progress and authoritarianism while the character of Andrea represents the theme of ambition and moral compromise. On the other hand *Normal People* has been subject to several analytical discussions with the themes of class, communication and vulnerability being prominent. Rooney's representation of Marianne and Connell has been subject to several discussions with the themes of contemporary intimacy and vulnerability being key.

Although both novels offer valuable insights into the representation of postfeminist contradictions, there is a lack of research comparing the representation of both novels in relation to their respective settings. The corporate culture of the fashion industry and the academic culture of the university setting may seem to be vastly different, but both offer similar contradictions in relation to self and desire. This paper will contribute to the overall discussions of how both novels offer insights into the representation of empowerment and feminist contradictions.

Research Gap

Although existing research recognizes the presence of postfeminism, it has been seen that there is still a tendency to view professional aspiration and emotional vulnerability as two separate entities. Research on corporate culture has been dominated by issues related to work and commodification, whereas research on relationships has been dominated by issues related to emotional relationships. What has been least explored is how these two areas relate to each other through the experiences of the female protagonists.

Also, postfeminism has been dominated by issues related to media representation, whereas literary comparison has been limited. The intersection of ambition, desire, and identity, as related to two very different social contexts, has been least explored in relation to these two novels. This study, through its analysis of *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Normal People*, will explore how these novels reveal the instability of empowerment through the intersection of these areas.

Research methodology

The research method for this study is qualitative textual analysis, with a focus on close reading. This study does not look at the novels as sociological case studies as it is more focused on the narrative structure, characterization and themes of the novels. Much attention is also paid to transformation, silence and conflict as they reveal underlying tensions in the texts.

The comparative method also enables the study to look at how similar themes emerge in different environments. Andrea's corporate environment and Marianne's academic environment are both similar and

distinct, as they are both environments of evaluation for the women in the novels. By comparing both environments, the study is able to identify similar patterns of negotiation and ambivalence.

The methodology also includes the study of the theoretical aspects of postfeminism, as it relates to the themes of the novels. Unlike other research, this study does not impose theory on the texts, as it is more focused on how literary moments relate to the broader cultural discussions of agency and responsibility.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this research are embedded in the concept of postfeminist cultural studies. McRobbie (2009) argues that, in contemporary culture, women are depicted as being equal, and this is achieved by moving away from structural issues. Empowerment is individualized, and women are encouraged to take responsibility for their successes and failures. Gill (2007) also argues that postfeminism is characterized by self-monitoring and the commercialization of self-identity.

Within this context, success is no longer about achieving and accomplishing, but rather about being emotionally and aesthetically successful. Women are expected to be equally successful in their careers, bodies, and relationships. This is, however, a source of pressure rather than empowerment and fictional texts offer us a glimpse into how such pressures affect women's subjectivity.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea's workplace environment is a reflection of the need for self optimization. Her adjustment to Miranda's demands is a reflection of the internalization of institutional culture. *Normal People*, on the other hand, reflects how emotional life is a source of self assessment and evaluation because Marianne's vulnerability is a reflection of how personal relationships are sites of self assessment.

The theoretical lens of postfeminism thus illuminates the contradictions in both texts. Empowerment is present yet it is accompanied by surveillance, comparison and doubt.

Analysis

The journey of the protagonist Andrea Sachs, in *The Devil Wears Prada* is an example of the allure and the price of aspiration in the workplace. Her transformation from someone who did not respect the culture of fashion to someone who conformed to the culture is evident from her physical transformation, increased efficiency and emotional unavailability. Her transformation is also evident from the fact that she becomes efficient at her work, but at the same time, she also becomes distant from her friends and her boyfriend.

Miranda Priestly is an example of female power gained through discipline and sacrifice. Her success is a challenge to the simple narrative of feminism because she has gained power in a highly competitive field, but at the same time, she is also someone whose personal life is fragmented. The observation made by the protagonist, Andrea, about Miranda is a metaphor for the disillusionment that awaits the protagonist in the novel itself.

In *Normal People* the academic success of Marianne is juxtaposed with her relational insecurity. While at university, Marianne receives intellectual respect. But her relationship with Connell demonstrates her relational insecurity because of the miscommunication and unspoken fears that affect their relationship. Marianne's willingness to receive unequal treatment does not imply a lack of agency.

The narrative style employed by Rooney brings out the interiority of the characters. Changes in point of view illustrate the miscommunication between the two. Intimacy is also shown to be fragile, as it is affected by silence as much as speech. Sexual autonomy does not equate to emotional stability. Rather, it is coupled with fear of rejection.

In both novels, the construction of identity is shown to be fluid. Andrea's professional identity is at odds with her previous construction of identity. Marianne's sense of confidence is context-dependent. Empowerment does not equate to the construction of coherence.

Conclusion

The novels *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Normal People* highlight the contradictions that are present in postfeminist culture. Although postfeminist culture prides itself on its support for independence and aspiration these novels highlight the complexities that are present in such culture. Although success in one's career can open up more avenues, it can also bring feelings of alienation. Although sexual freedom can bring empowerment, it can also bring more feelings of vulnerability.

In analyzing the novels in relation to the concept of ambition and intimacy, this study aims to prove that empowerment is not an illusion or an absolute concept. Even though Andrea and Marianne are able to make their own choices, their experiences are not free from compromise and in showing the complexities of the human experience these novels are able to challenge the reader to think more critically about the concept of womanhood in contemporary culture.

As these novels indicate, empowerment is not a final goal that solves a tension. Rather it is a process that happens through desire, aspiration, uncertainty and revision. These novels make significant contributions to the ongoing discussion about gender, identity and the precarious possibility of having it all.

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