

## **Ending the Silence: Representing Women's Reproductive Lives in Irish Chick Lit.**

By Mary Ryan

'Courtship and marriage, servants and children, these are the great objects of a woman's thoughts, and they necessarily form the stable topics of their writings and their conversation. We have no right to expect anything else in a woman's book' (*New York Times* extract, Fern: 1857, 1748). This statement from the 1800s sums up the difficulties which women writers have experienced in terms of gaining respect and recognition for their work. Women's writing has long been considered unimportant and inferior to "male" literature. Women's novels were ridiculed or ignored; women's issues were silenced.

Chick lit is the latest genre of women's writing to be ridiculed and criticised. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not much has changed in terms of the reception of women's novels; many of the same criticisms are used today regarding chick lit as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in relation to female writers. The phrase "chick lit" is often viewed as a derogatory term to dismiss any possible literary worth in a genre which many – mistakenly – believe deals with nothing more than shoe-shopping and finding Mr. Right. However, defenders of the genre insist that a 'serious consideration of chick lit brings into focus many of the issues facing contemporary women and contemporary culture' (Ferriss: 2006, 2-3). If chick lit is aiming to be placed as a positive, potentially feminist, form of contemporary fiction, it must discuss all aspects of women's lives. So, as well as romantic relationships, which many claim are the central focus of much chick lit, the novels must also include issues concerning career, family, friends, and the body. Related to this issue of the body, this paper will specifically examine the genre's discussion of women's reproductive lives – from female sexual freedom to menstruation to childbirth. Using examples from the novels of Irish chick lit authors, including Marian Keyes, Kate Thompson and Colette Caddle, this paper will explore how these novels tackle issues that many genres shy away from as they are considered 'taboo' by societal standards.

Some theorists would argue issues of body and image are *really* the main focus of the chick lit novel:

chick lit might seem at first to be a category of novels primarily concerned with finding a mate [...] And although this is a controlling feature of the genre, I maintain that in many of the books this quest for a partner is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit's heroines are engaging with themselves – particularly with regard to weight. (Umminger: 2006, 240)

It has been said that 'it's difficult for a woman to tell her story without reference to her experience of the body' (Freitas: 2005, 38). The woman's body – 'what we eat, how we

dress, the rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture’ (Bordo: 1993, 2362). Some feminist theorists have found there to be ‘an essential connection between the woman’s body, whose sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression, and women’s writing’ (Peterson: 1992, 332). Other theorists have similarly observed several recurring themes to be found in women’s writing, such as clothing and the body (Peterson: 1992, 333). These trends in specifically *women’s* writing are evident because fashion and body image have long been concerns and issues typically associated with women:

As women, we care about our bodies, care about beauty, and often use fashion to express who we are in the moment, transforming ourselves from one image to another by putting on an outfit, much as if we are putting on a new self. (Freitas: 2005, 48)

It is decidedly ironic that, while the image of “bra-burning” has long been firmly connected to feminism, the image of the naked breast, on the other hand, is firmly placed in men’s territory, such as “lad’s mags” and pornography; women, strangely, have long felt uncomfortable at the sight of another naked female form:

It appears that only the pneumatically uplifted breast is an object fit to be looked at, whereas the glimpse of a naked breast underlines how uncomfortable we remain with the ‘naturalness’ of nudity, as well as showing how far removed we are from the contours of the real female form. Naked breasts proliferate in tabloid newspapers, lad mags and soft porn, yet the breast of, for example, a prince’s consort can unleash the wrath of a nation, seen as it is to symbolically compromise her virtue. (Whelehan: 2000, 3)

Because of this, while men feel free to view the female breast ‘as plaything and chief erotic curiosity, women will continue to have a faintly bewildered relationship to their breasts and, as a result, their body as a whole’ (Whelehan: 2000, 2). Partly because of this, the issue of women’s image thus continues to be a focus of feminist theory simply because women’s preoccupation with their image has not waned.

In much feminist theory, it has been demonstrated how men’s values and interests are recognised as worthwhile, while women’s interests are dismissed as meaningless. As Virginia Woolf observed:

But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’. (Woolf: 2000, 74)

Feminists have urged women to refuse to allow their interests, of which fashion and image are very much a part, to be belittled, and that the way to do this is by writing about them and expressing them. Feminism’s early focus on images of women was based around ‘a description of the stereotypical representations of women and how these stereotypes limited women’s options and possibilities in the “real world”’ (Walters: 1995, 42). This largely stems

from the fact that, while women's images may indeed be *represented*, women themselves rarely have any say in how these representations are formed. This means that, more often than not, these images of women 'that stare at us from the glossy pages of the women's magazines or from the glowing eye of the television screen are not of our own creation. They are, in more senses than one, truly "man-made"' (Walters: 1995, 22-23). Feminist theory expressed concern that these, largely male-constructed, representations of women would become 'stereotypes which damage women's self-perceptions and limit their social roles' (Thornham: 1998, 213). In such media representations, feminists observed how:

women's bodies are often fragmented, shown as discrete body parts that are meant to represent the whole woman. Women are urged to think of their bodies as 'things' that need to be molded, shaped, and remade into a male conception of female perfection. The fragmentation of the female body into parts that should be 'improved' or 'worked on' often results in women having a self-hating relationship with their bodies. (Walters: 1995, 56)

The media has virtually *brainwashed* women that the images they portray are society's "ideal", to the point where "real" women are now 'often apologetic about their bodies, considered in relation to that plastic object of desire whose image is radiated throughout the media' (Greer: 2006, 292). The fact that these images are constructed as male fantasy, rather than "real women", appears forgotten as more and more women strive to conform to these non-existent ideals.

The way that women relate to these cultural ideals, and the reason that so many women continually strive to obtain 'a match to the "perfect" standard of an image' (Weissman: 1999, 35), stems from the notion of The Stereotype. The stereotype 'is the dominant image of femininity which rules our culture and to which all women aspire' (Greer: 2006, 18). Additionally, 'men welcome the stereotype because it directs their taste into the commonly recognized areas of value' (Greer: 2006, 67). Nevertheless, the notion of the female stereotype has been criticised by feminist theorists due to the demands it is seen to place upon women 'to contour their bodies in order to please the eyes of others' (Greer: 2006, 40).

Directly related to the stereotype is the idea of The Beauty Myth, made famous by Naomi Wolf's 1991 book of the same name, which has since become one of the most well-known critiques of the beauty industry. The beauty myth is centred around how any 'woman who desires to be beautiful is trapped in the confines of the structured definition of what beauty should comprise' (Weissman: 1999, 24). It comes into action as the 'facade between the outward visual presence and the inner destruction that is created and reinforced by the

culture and the media' (Weissman: 1999, 24). Naomi Wolf describes how the beauty myth works in the following extract:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless.

None of this is true. (Wolf: 1991, 12)

Wolf is critical of a society that, because of the influence of the beauty myth, feels 'the need to defend itself by evading the fact of real women, our faces and voices and bodies, and reducing the meaning of women to these formulaic and endlessly reproduced "beautiful" images' (Wolf: 1991, 18). She views the modern woman's preoccupation with beauty as merely a new way of oppressing women. The emphasis on women's beauty, she believes, is simply saying that what 'women look like is considered important because what we say is not' (Wolf: 1991, 106). Wolf argues that, since the sexual revolution provided women with more freedom than ever before, patriarchal society needed to find another way to "control" women. An emphasis on beauty and image filled this need:

Sex within marriage, for procreation, was acceptable, while sex for pleasure was a sin; women make the same distinction today between eating to sustain life and eating for pleasure. The double standard that gave men and not women sexual license has become a double standard in which men have greater oral license. (Wolf: 1991, 97-98)

The further implications of such an emphasis on maintaining an "ideal" image should be clear. Women's self-image and, thus, their confidence, are drastically affected, as women become more and more critical of their own appearance. At best, this results in women constantly trying to adapt their natural appearance in the attempt of meeting the, largely unattainable, cultural ideal:

It is a commonplace observation that women are forever trying to straighten their hair if it is curly and curl it if it is straight, bind their breasts if they are large and pad them if they are small, darken their hair if it is light and lighten it if it is dark. Not all these measures are dictated by the phantom of fashion. They all reflect dissatisfaction with the body as it is, and an insistent desire that it be otherwise, not natural but controlled, fabricated. Many of the devices adopted by women are not cosmetic or ornamental, but disguise of the actual, arising from fear and distaste. (Greer: 2006, 293)

A strong emphasis on outward appearance can also be a lot more dangerous than encouraging women to colour their hair, or wear padded bras. Feminist theorists who focus on the beauty industry have expressed concerns at 'the way the slimming and beauty industry have caused

women to do acts of violence to their own bodies' (Whelehan: 1995, 217). In the opening pages of *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf comments on how, 'inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret "underlife" poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control' (Wolf: 1991, 10). Wolf refers particularly to dieting and 'fashionable thinness' as having an extremely debilitating and harmful effect on women (Wolf: 1991, 196). In discussing the potential risks of a weight obsession, she claims that, at 'a certain point inside the cult of "beauty", dieting becomes anorexia or compulsive eating or bulimia' (Wolf: 1991, 127). Wolf continues on to describe how, in such an instance, the beauty myth works at oppressing women and, thus, sustaining patriarchy:

The anorexic may begin her journey defiant, but from the point of view of a male-dominated society, she ends up as the perfect woman. She is weak, sexless, and voiceless, and can only with difficulty focus on a world beyond her plate. The woman has been killed off in her. (Wolf: 1991, 197)

The beauty myth is detrimental to women's well-being in that it controls women and sustains patriarchal values. One way it does this is by encouraging women to remain silent about certain aspects of their body – their pleasure and desire for sexual experiences, menstruation, and childbirth, for instance. All of these aspects are specifically related to the female body; men's sexual pleasure was always allowed while women were supposed to remain silent on the subject, while women are the only gender to experience menstruation and childbirth and, as such, it is only women's bodies which fall under the control of a patriarchal society and are shamed into silence. Theorists such as Naomi Wolf are concerned that women will continue to damage their bodies and destroy their self-confidence until 'our culture tells young girls that they are welcome in any shape – that women are valuable to it with or without the excuse of "beauty"' (Wolf: 1991, 205). This paper will demonstrate how Irish chick lit novels are aiming to show women that their bodies are valuable *in their entirety*, and not just as a fantasy for men, by openly discussing the issues which women are so often encouraged to remain silent about.

### **Mr Right – For a Night! Sexuality and Sexual Experience in Chick Lit**

Historically, women's sexual desire has been denied or ignored by a society 'that tells them they should leave the topic of sex for men to discuss' (Goodrich: 2001, <http://www.msu.edu/~goodri32/eng310/eng310paper.htm>, par. 3). Not only was the topic of sex left for men to discuss, but sex scenes in novels – even those by and about women – were

described from a solely male viewpoint. *Mary Lavelle* (1936), a novel by Irish writer Kate O'Brien, received criticism for this very occurrence:

[...] the passage describing Mary and Juanito's lovemaking is not focalised through Mary, which is what a reading of the book as a rehearsal of feminine self-liberation might lead one to expect, but is narrated from Juanito's perspective; and the description dwells in an undeniably sado-masochistic way on images of Mary's specifically feminine vulnerability and pain *as themselves erotic* and constitutive of Juanito's pleasure. (Coughlan: 1993, 69)

Similarly, 'female sexuality has been masked and deformed [...] Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity' (Greer: 2006, 17). This notion of 'passivity' has long been linked to the prototype of the ideal woman, and, from it, evolved the double standard which said that sex 'was edifying for a man, immoral for a woman' (Levy: 2005, 59). Traditionally, women could only be categorized in two distinct ways – as angels or as monsters. The so-called "angelic" women were those who abided by this idea of passivity, and, without question, allowed themselves to be treated as objects by men. All others were "monsters" and, as such, had to be punished for refusing to conform to societal expectations. For Irish women, in particular, this confirmed 'the impossibility of escaping the Irish puritan morality that pervades everything' (Barros del Río: 2000, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/perspectives/i1-2/EdnaO'Brien.html>!, par. 19).

Opinions differ regarding who is to blame for this ignorance and refusal of female sexuality. Some blame men's apparent fear of female sexuality for their attempts to hide its existence altogether. Adrienne Rich discusses this perception in her 1980 text, 'Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence':

It seems more probable that men really fear not that they will have women's sexual appetites forced on them or that women will want to smother and devour them, but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional – therefore economic – access to women *only* on women's terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix. (Rich: 1980, 1770)

Surprisingly, feminism itself has also been blamed for the rejection of a female sexuality. It has been argued that, for all its good intentions, feminism's aim to stop women being objectified unfortunately seemed to mean that 'talking about sex in feminist terms meant talking about anything but the dread act itself; simply to address the "problem" of sex might risk reaffirming the status of women in Western society as primarily "sex objects", defined by lack of a penis/power' (Whelehan: 1995, 164-165). For many women, feminism was viewed, in this sense, as spoiling women's fun.

From a specifically Irish context, Irish writer Nuala O’Faolain has described Irish communities as being ‘savagely punitive’ and, for many years, ‘was fully in the grip of an institutionalized fear of women; that is, of sexuality’ (O’Faolain: 2006, 294). How, then, would such a community react to the publication of material which contains content not deemed ‘suitable’? Up until relatively recently, Ireland’s answer was for the material to be banned by the Irish Censorship Board. Edna O’Brien was one such writer whose ‘early work was banned by the Irish government and vilified by her local community’ (Moloney and Thompson: 2003, 197). In particular, all three books in her *Country Girls* trilogy were banned – the third book, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, was banned specifically because of an apparently explicit sex scene, which today’s readers would probably find decidedly tame! (Imhof: 2002, 73) One would wonder whether Ireland was ready for any amount of openness regarding sexuality.

Chick lit did not wait for Ireland to be ready. Chick lit burst onto the scene with its ‘girly gab about shoes, shagging, and shedding pounds’ (Rogers, in Freitas: 2005, i) and, in doing so, it has worked wonders towards positively voicing issues of female sexuality and sexual desire. Instead of ‘presenting their protagonists as subordinate to male advances, chick-lit authors present women as sexual agents’ (Ferriss: 2006, 10). As another sign of positive development in terms of representations of female desire, ‘contemporary [and, in this case, Irish] chick lit often presents the heroine in sexual relationships with men other than the narratives’ intended hero, but without “punishing” her or questioning her actions’ (Mabry: 2006, 201).

Chick lit is successful in portraying how society is radically changing in terms of women’s new-found sexual freedom. Until very recently, ‘the rule was that you had to hold off sleeping with a man for as long as possible. But now the rule seemed to be that if you wanted to hold on to him you’d better deliver the goods asap’ (Keyes: 2007, 228). Indeed, waiting until the wedding night has become such a rarity that women tend to wonder if something is drastically wrong if a man tries to be a gentleman and does not expect them to sleep with him straight away. As Anna, in *Anybody Out There?*, recalls:

At this stage I’d seen Aidan about seven or eight times and not once had he tried to jump me. Every date we’d gone on, we’d had just one kiss. It had improved from quick and firm, to slower and more tender, but one kiss was as good as it got.

Had I wanted more? Yes. Was I curious about his restraint? Yes. But I kept it all under control and something had held me back from getting Jacqui in a headlock every time I came home from an unjumped-on night out and tearfully agonizing: What’s his problem? Doesn’t he fancy me? Is he gay? Christian? One of those True Love Waits gobshites? (Keyes: 2006, 108-109)

Unusually for popular fiction, chick lit may be celebrated for its recognition of the risks – as well as the freedoms – brought about by the Sexual Revolution, most notably the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It brings our awareness to such a topic without preaching or using scare tactics, but also reminds us that the risks are very real and, contrary to what was once popular opinion, we can all be affected by it if precautions are not taken, instead of solely linking the disease to homosexuality.

*Forever FM* tackles the topic in the form of a guest speaker on the radio talk show that the novel revolves around. The speaker, a young woman, describes how she contracted HIV as a child when she pierced her skin on a needle belonging to her drug-addict mother. She discusses the potential implications of this accident that she now faces every day, such as rejections by her friends, and the need to always ensure proper precautions are used when sleeping with her boyfriend (see Caddle: 2002, 282-292). Keyes' *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, alternatively, presents a kind of utopian visions for HIV-awareness, in the form of it being so embedded in people's minds that proper care is automatically exercised by sexually-active adults, without the need for discussion:

We hadn't mentioned birth control, but when the time came we were both responsible adults living in the HIV positive nineties. (Keyes: 2003a, 731).

While women may indeed have more sexual freedom nowadays, it is still not without its problems, and these problems are also discussed in chick lit. A large part of this problem is that, now that women have been allowed more sexual freedom than ever before, it is now taken for granted that *every* woman wants wild and inventive sex, and that they are ready and willing to go to bed with whoever is convenient. Ariel Levy describes this situation best in saying:

Because we have determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual, and because the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognize is a direct allusion to red-light entertainment, we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a *Penthouse* shoot throughout our entire culture [...] We skipped over the part where we just accept and respect that *some* women like to seem exhibitionist and lickerish, and decided instead that *everyone* who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars. (Levy: 2005, 26-27)

Far from wanting to partake in sexual gymnastics every night of the week, Claire Walsh in *Watermelon* could well be speaking for the Everywoman when she makes this “shocking” revelation:

While we're on the subject of sexual shenanigans I've got a confession to make.  
Wait for it.  
Here it comes.  
I enjoy the missionary position.



There! I've said it.  
I'm made to feel so *ashamed* of myself for feeling that way.  
As if I'm terribly boring and repressed.  
But I'm not. Honestly.  
I'm not saying that it's the *only* position that I like.  
But, really, I have no objection to it whatsoever. (Keyes: 2003b, 363)

Equally shocking is that many women, given the option, would probably quite happily cherish an element of innocence in their relationships:

We sat quietly and still, Chris's arm tight around me. I closed my eyes and, for a few moments, let myself pretend it was a perfect world and he was my boyfriend.  
It reminded me of an earlier, more innocent age, when the most a boyfriend did was put his arm around you and – if your luck was in – kissed you. The enforced decorum demanded by the Cloisters was sweet and romantic. It touched, rather than frustrated me. (Keyes: 1998, 358)

As many women have realised, the problem is no longer about winning the right to sexual freedom. As feminists spent so long fighting for women to have the same sexual rights as men, many women now feel a sense of hypocrisy when they would prefer to choose to say “no” to sexual advances – the freedom to choose being, ironically, what feminism was fighting for all along. The title character of *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* identifies with these feelings:

In theory, I knew that it was my right not to go to bed with anyone I didn't want to and to change my mind at any stage in the proceedings, but the reality was that I would be far too embarrassed to say no. (Keyes: 2003a, 187)

One thing that chick lit does – and does well – is describe its sex scenes from the woman's perspective. In Kate Thompson's novel, *Sex, Lies and Fairytales* (2006), one of the characters is a chick lit writer who cheekily declares that her “sex scenes should be prescribed reading for men” (Thompson: 2006, 402), alluding to the idea that sex has traditionally been on men's terms and to men's preferences, and so men now need to be “taught” how to please a woman.

Sex scenes are not always easy to write – or to read, for that matter. I again turn to Claire Walsh in *Watermelon* to explain it clearly:

It's very difficult to discuss having sex without being so crude that I sound like a pornographic book or without being so discreet that I sound like a repressed, uptight Victorian novelist who suffers regularly from Vaginismus and still calls her husband Mr Clements after twenty-seven years of marriage. (Keyes: 2003b, 378)

Chick lit strikes the ideal balance here. Its sex scenes – far from being overly graphic, crude, or erotic past the point of believable – are realistic, witty, matter-of-fact, and – above all – easy for every modern woman to identify with.

## Nothing to Hide: Chick Lit as Fully Representative of the Female Body

An analysis of the female body is not limited to only fashion and image. To be fully complete, it must also include *all* aspects related to the female body, particularly areas that have traditionally been repressed.

Many feminist theorists have commented on how patriarchal society does not like ‘the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them.’ (Cixous: 1975, 348). Thus, when it comes to any question of specifically female experience, particularly in relation to the body:

men are unable to penetrate her special experience through any working of sympathy: they are condemned to ignorance of the quality of woman’s erotic pleasure, the discomfort of menstruation, and the pains of childbirth. (de Beauvoir: 1949, 1409)

Naturally, this resulted in the repression of specifically female experiences. In terms of the body, this included the silencing of, for example, the female genital organs, menstruation, and even childbirth, all deemed to be of ‘less importance’ because they directly affected only women.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf discusses how real and complete representations of the female body are in fact heavily censored, despite the variety of female images we regularly witness:

Because we see many versions of the naked Iron Maiden, we are asked to believe that our culture promotes the display of female sexuality. It actually shows almost none. It censors representations of women’s bodies, so that only the official versions are visible [...] In the United States and Great Britain, which have no tradition of public nakedness, women rarely – and almost never outside a competitive context – see what other *women* look like naked; we see only identical humanoid products based loosely on women’s bodies. (Wolf: 1991, 135-136)

As a shocking example of this situation, Wolf continues on to describe how a woman’s magazine names ‘*Spare Rib* was banned in Ireland because it showed women how to examine their breasts’ (Wolf: 1991, 138). As a result, women felt ashamed of their own bodies, as they were ‘shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty’ (Cixous: 1975, 355).

This silencing of women’s issues has been frequently targeted in feminist theory. Feminists, such as H el ene Cixous, for example, have encouraged women to ‘break out of the snare of silence’ (Cixous: 1975, 351). Feminists have argued that one of the best ways for women to begin to fully represent themselves is to begin with discussions of the female body:

if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men. (Jones: 1981, 374)

Traditional chick lit has been criticised for inadvertently helping to continue the repression of certain aspects of women's existence, by keeping silent on specifically female issues:

it is more surprising that one thing women in chick lit novels never do is menstruate. While pregnancy scares (and now more frequently pregnancies) abound, periods, like bad sex, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases, remain absent. (Whelehan: 2005, 219)

This paper argues, however, that Irish chick lit not only recognises that certain aspects of the female body have been ignored or censored, but it also gives a voice to these aspects by discussing them in their novels. Take, for example, the 'marked revulsion for menstruation, principally evinced by our efforts to keep it secret' (Greer: 2006, 56). Feminists have long expressed outrage that both 'the Victorian and the modern medical systems reclassify aspects of healthy femaleness into grotesque abnormality' (Wolf: 1991, 222). Nowhere is this revulsion for an aspect of 'healthy femaleness' seen more clearly than regarding menstruation:

The contradiction in the attitude that regards menstruation as divinely ordained and yet unmentionable leads to the intensification of the female revolt against it, which can be traced in all the common words for it, like the *curse*, and male disgust expressed in terms like *having the rags on*. (Greer: 2006, 58)

While it has been noted that there 'have been some moves to bring menstruation out into the open in an unprejudiced way' (Greer: 2006, 58), these attempts have still been controlled and censored. A clear example of this is shown in Marian Keyes' *Last Chance Saloon* (1999), in which one of the main characters, Katherine, explains the 'rules' of creating an advertisement for tampons:

Two hard and fast rules existed for tampon ads: the product is only ever referred to euphemistically; and the colour red must *never* appear. (Keyes: 1999, 59)

Irish chick lit not only *acknowledges* the censorship of menstruation, but also refers directly to it:

The flash of red caught me by surprise. Blood. My period. (Keyes: 2006, 300)

Despite the simplicity of the reference, the very fact of its inclusion in a chick lit novel is startling, but also a positive indicator of how Irish chick lit is helping to provide an outlet for the discussion of women's experiences.

A further area which has traditionally resulted in the repression of the female body is seen in 'the taboo of the pregnant woman' (Cixous: 1975, 359). It has been noted how 'accounts of women giving birth are rare until the twentieth century and are usually depicted

from the spectator's point of view rather than the mother's, perhaps from the father's or someone in attendance' (Joannou: 2000, 45). Feminists have argued that:

all too often the story has been taken away from the mother and that childbirth needs to be made visible from a woman's point of view. The experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, on which the fictional representations depend, are, of course, the *only* major areas in which women have exclusive first-hand knowledge which is not available to men. (Joannou: 2000, 45)

Irish chick lit novels, such as Keyes' *Watermelon*, not only describe pregnancy and childbirth from the *woman's* point of view, but also present a no-holds-barred account of the affects that they have on the female body:

In fact, it was only a week since I started wearing normal knickers again.

Let me explain.

Maybe you don't know it but you don't return to normal living and, more importantly, normal clothes the moment you give birth.

No indeed!

It's a long time before certain bodily processes stop. I don't want to sound unnecessarily gory here but can I just say that I could have given Lady Macbeth a run for her money.

Don't talk to *me* about blood being everywhere, Missus! (Keyes: 2003b, 276-277)

Excluding aspects solely related to the female body, such as menstruation and childbirth, 'pinpoints the extent to which a mode of writing which has been claimed as universal has historically functioned as an expression of men's descriptions of men's lives' (Joannou: 2000, 45). Irish chick lit's open references to such aspects shows how chick lit is gaining strength as being fully representative of female existence.

### **Towards the End of the Beauty Myth?**

Despite the difficulties historically faced by women writers, today's chick lit writers are beginning to develop new forms of writing in which the female body is finally honestly represented. The chick lit heroine, in her aim to become a positive role model for women, is one who real women can easily relate to:

She is Everywoman, with quirks and problems that are believable yet larger than life. She's confident yet insecure. Smart but naive. Lovable yet flawed. (Mlynowski: 2006, 64)

In being 'lovable yet flawed', the chick lit heroine can become a positive, healthier role model for contemporary women. She tells women that it is okay if they are not 'perfect', as this ideal level of perfection does not actually exist. The beauty myth had fooled us all, but chick lit heroines are here to tell the truth.

Naomi Wolf described her vision of what a society free of the beauty myth will look like:

Women will be able thoughtlessly to adorn ourselves with pretty objects when there is no question that *we* are not objects. Women will be free of the beauty myth when we can choose to use our faces and clothes and bodies as simply one form of self-expression out of a full range of others. We can dress up for our pleasure, but we must speak up for our rights. (Wolf: 1991, 273-274)

When chick lit breaks patriarchal tradition by repressing and discussing *all* aspects of the female body, even those experiences which have typically been censored, we are freeing ourselves from the beauty myth.

A generation ago, Germaine Greer wondered about women: 'What *will* you do?' What women did brought about a quarter century of cataclysmic social revolution. The next phase of our movement forward as individual women, as women together, and as tenants of our bodies and this planet, depends now on what we decide to see when we look in the mirror. What *will* we see? (Wolf: 1991, 291)

If Irish chick lit is any indication, we will see a future in which women's bodies will finally be represented as they should be.

## **Bibliography**

Barros del Río, María Amor, 2000. 'Edna O'Brien's Girls: The Challenge of Growing up in De Valera's Ireland'.

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/perspectives/i1-2/EdnaO'Brien.html>! Accessed 13/03/05.

Baym, Nina, et al, Eds., 2003. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* Volume B Sixth Edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Bordo, Susan, 1993. From 'Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body' pp2362-2376 in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2001. Vincent B. Leitch et al, eds. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Caddle, Colette, 2002. *Forever FM*. Dublin: Poolbeg Press.

Cixous, Hélène, 1975. 'The Laugh of the Medusa' pp347-362 in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1997. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price-Herndl, eds. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Coughlan, Patricia, 1993. 'Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role' pp 59-84 in Eibhear Walshe (Ed.). *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, 1993. Cork University Press.

De Beauvoir, Simone, 1949. From 'The Second Sex' pp1406-1414 in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2001. Vincent B. Leitch et al, eds. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Fern, Fanny (Sarah Willis Parton), 1857. 'Male Criticism on Ladies' Books.' Originally published in New York *Ledger*, May 23 1857, p. 1748 in Nina Baym et al (eds.). *The*

- Norton Anthology of American Literature* Volume B Sixth Edition, 2003. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young, eds., 2006. *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Freitas, Donna, 2005. *Becoming a Goddess of Inner Poise*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goodrich, Maggie, 2001. 'Ní Dhomhnaill, Devlin, and Edna O'Brien: Bringing Irish Women's Issues into Focus.'  
<http://www.msu.edu/~goodri32/eng310/eng310paper.htm> Accessed 28/07/05.
- Greer, Germaine, 2006. *The Female Eunuch*. Originally published in 1970. London: Harper Perennial.
- Imhof, Rüdiger, 2002. *The Modern Irish Novel*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press.
- Joannou, Maroula, 2000. *Contemporary Women's Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple*. Manchester University Press.
- Jones, Ann Rosalind, 1981. 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'écriture féminine' pp370-383 in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1997. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price-Herndl, eds. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Keyes, Marian, 1998. *Rachel's Holiday*. Dublin: Poolbeg.
- Keyes, Marian, 1999. *Last Chance Saloon*. Dublin: Poolbeg.
- Keyes, Marian, 2003a. *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*. Originally published in 1996. Dublin: Poolbeg.
- Keyes, Marian, 2003b. *Watermelon*. Originally published in 1995. Dublin: Poolbeg.
- Keyes, Marian, 2006. *Anybody Out There?* Dublin: Poolbeg.
- Keyes, Marian, 2007. *Sushi For Beginners*. Originally published in 2000. London: Penguin Books.
- Lehrman, Karen, 1997. *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex and Power in the Real World*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Leitch, Vincent B., et al (eds), 2001. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Levy, Ariel, 2005. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press.

- Mabry, A. Rochelle, 2006. 'About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary "Chick" Culture' pp 191-206 in Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, Eds. *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 2006. London: Routledge.
- Mlynowski, Sarah, and Farrin Jacobs, 2006. *See Jane Write: A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books
- Moloney, Caitriona, and Helen Thompson, 2003. Interview with Edna O'Brien, in *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices From The Field*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- O'Faolain, Nuala, 2006. *The Story of Chicago May*. London: Penguin Books.
- Peterson, Linda H., 1992. 'Feminist Criticism and *Wuthering Heights*' pp330-341 in *Wuthering Heights*, 1992. Emily Brontë. Originally published in 1847. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press.
- Rich, Adrienne, 1980. From 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' pp 1762-1780 in Vincent B. Leitch et al, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2001. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Thompson, Kate, 2006. *Sex, Lies and Fairytales*. Originally published in 2005. London: Bantam Books.
- Thornham, Sue, 1998. 'Feminist Media and Film Theory' pp213-231 in *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, 1998. Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones, eds. Edinburgh University Press.
- Umminger, Alison, 2006. 'Supersizing Bridget Jones: What's Really Eating the Women in Chick Lit' pp239-252 in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 2006. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Walshe, Eibhear, Ed., 1993. *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*. Cork University Press.
- Walters, Suzanna Danuta, 1995. *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*. University of California Press.
- Warhol, Robyn R., and Diane Price-Herndl, eds., 1997. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Weissman, Kristin Noelle, 1999. *Barbie: The Icon, The Image, The Ideal*. Universal Publishers.
- Whelehan, Imelda, 1995. *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Whelehan, Imelda, 2000. *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism*. London: The Women's Press.

Whelehan, Imelda, 2005. *The Feminist Bestseller*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wolf, Naomi, 1991. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. London: Vintage Books.

Woolf, Virginia, 2000. *A Room of One's Own*. Originally published in 1928. London: Penguin Books.