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# **REPRESENTING POSTFEMINIST FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIASCAPE: THE DISCURSIVE FUNCTION OF IRONY**

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*Addressing the interdisciplinary area of language & gender as applied to television and media studies, this article summarises the detailed analysis of some extremely popular contemporary TV series and media. With all their specificities, these significant cultural products share a reinvention of the codes of romance, by representing an up-to-date, somehow fashionable version of the traditional, and traditionally female, genre of romance geared to postfeminist consumer culture. The femininities and sexualities enacted in these cultural narratives may appear to be unsparingly and humorously critical of conventionally female linguistic and cultural stereotypes, and could therefore be regarded as radical feminist embodiments. Nevertheless, by means of an ironic and hyperbolic approach, they are in fact not only romantic and mainstream, but also ideologically biased, preserving a normative heterosexual white middle-class status quo, and restoring a patriarchal value system. A close critical scrutiny thus shows the stylistic and discursive strategies by which feminism has switched to postfeminist romance, and has thereby yielded to postfeminist backlash.*

**KEY WORDS:** *backlash, contemporary television and media, female characters, irony, language & gender; postfeminism.*

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## **1. Data, Aim and Methodologies**

In this article, I present and summarise the results of my research project in the interdisciplinary field of language & gender combined with television and media studies (Virdis 2012). I also introduce relevant research and findings in gender & the media studies, which can be helpful as a theoretical framework for further analysis.

In my research project I examined two very well-known, therefore socially influential, cultural products, namely the film *When Harry Met Sally ...* (Reiner 2008 [1989]) and the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding 2010 [1996]), and four equally well-known and influential TV series: *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), *The Simpsons* (1989–present), *Nip/Tuck* (2003–2010). Apart from *The Simpsons*, which is still produced, the other texts were first released a few years ago. Nevertheless, they are

still relevant and worth analysing today for at least three reasons: 1. They have established new genres or updated old ones now typifying the postmodern mediascape (see below); 2. They were sold and distributed worldwide and have had a large number of TV reruns, DVD releases and reprints since they first appeared; 3. Their audiences are global and belong to a wide age and social class range.

The aim of my project was to study the linguistic and discursive representation of post-feminist female characters and sexualities in the contemporary media and in contemporary romances, more precisely in the popular film, novel and TV series mentioned above. In order to achieve my aim, I took into account the research in and the results attained by gender & the media studies described in Section 2 (gender, the media and romance, along with postfeminism and backlash) and in Section 3 (the discursive function of irony).

Although comparatively different, these film, novel and TV series all share a remarkable feature: the reinvention of the norms of romance. They have actually tailored the conventional, and conventionally female, genre of romance to postfeminist consumer culture; as a result, they can be considered a new, modern, even stylish form of romance. As such, they extensively cover predictable issues like love, friendship, family, sex and sexual intercourse. They are contemporary, though, in their rather uncommon treatment of them, viz. love, friendship and family prosaically and humorously, and sex and sexual intercourse plainly and unequivocally.

On these grounds, both the audiences and the critics of these six texts reckon them to be forward-looking cultural products in the postmodern and postfeminist mediascape. In fact, they have set up new genres or revised old ones, first and foremost the various forms and adaptations of romance. For instance, *When Harry Met Sally ...* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* were among the initiators of the contemporary romantic comedy and the chick-lit novel respectively; *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* served as a model for dramedy; *The Simpsons* affected animated sitcoms targeted at adults; *Nip/Tuck* gave rise to several reality shows dealing with plastic surgery.

When these texts are first watched or read, the femininities constructed in their cultural narratives also seem to be ground-breaking: apparently, they are strong and complex women comically and mercilessly rejecting female linguistic and cultural clichés, as well as conservative values and value systems. In a word, they make seemingly innovative and progressive, even deeply feminist role models for their female audiences. However, my research hypothesis was that the depiction of these femininities, which is humorous and parodistic, is a political and cultural realisation of backlash. In fact, the female figures in these postfeminist media are sentimental and traditional: they are ideologically value-laden, maintain the normative status quo of the heterosexual white middle-class, and reinstate a patriarchal worldview. In short, feminism has turned into postfeminist romance, thus giving in to postfeminist backlash.

In my language & gender research project, I drew from the gender & the media findings summarised in Sections 2 and 3, particularly Gill's (2007) results about the two TV series *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and about the discursive strat-

egy of irony in the postfeminist mediascape. The focus for my language & gender analysis was provided by the six texts mentioned above (*When Harry Met Sally ...*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *The Simpsons*, *Nip/Tuck*). With regard to *Sex and the City*, I elaborated Gill's gender & the media findings and complemented them with linguistic evidence from the conversations between its four fictional women.

Consequently, the approach of my research project to gender, femininities and sexualities in the six texts under investigation was mainly a feminist linguistic approach, which falls within the wider interdisciplinary scope of language & gender research. The theoretical frameworks and analytical methodologies applied to the data were feminist stylistics, feminist pragmatics, feminist conversation analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis (for essential reference, see Virdis 2012). Since my scrutiny was not a sociolinguistic one, I did not adopt the sociological model of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge 2016), which could be the framework for future examination. Nevertheless, in my research I investigated the socioeconomic and cultural variables of class and age by means of two case studies of non-middle-class and non-adult femininities; this article does not cover them for space reasons. For the same reasons, here I do not apply the language & gender paradigms just mentioned to the six texts, but I present the final results of the detailed application carried out in my research project from the perspective of feminist television and media studies (Brunsdon *et al.* 1997; Gill 2007; Johnson 2007; Kearney 2011; see also Jones 2010 [2003]).

## 2. Gender, the Media and Romance: An Overview

In Gill's (2007) volume about the social constructions and cultural representations of gender identities in the contemporary media, one of the author's research purposes is to describe and scrutinise the hegemonic cultural narrative of postfeminist romance. In her own words, she analyses "Western culture obsession with heterosexual romance as a discourse. Romance is one of the key narratives by which we are interpellated or inscribed as subjects. It seems to have shown remarkable resilience in the face of significant cultural and demographic changes" (Gill 2007, p. 218).

The old codes of boy-meets-girl romance (a woman meeting a man, falling in love with him at first sight and marrying him after a series of events) have continued to win the wholehearted approval of female consumers and audiences for centuries. This has been the case in spite of the cultural, social and economic changes that have characterised Western society and culture at least since the 1960s, and that have profoundly altered women's everyday lives and traditional gender roles and relations. Moreover, in the quotation above, Gill points out that, in the dissimilar forms taken by the modern versions of romance, this dominant discourse not only still fascinates Western women; this fascination also offers noteworthy details about their mind-sets and worldviews, thereby positioning them ideologically.

Gill (2007, p. 241) also identifies the principal social and personality traits of the female characters of postfeminist romance; more precisely, she focuses on the *dramatis personae* in the two prominent TV series *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Most of these traits, if not

all, are also common to those of the female protagonists examined in my research project. These fictional women are animated by social and legal equality of opportunity and by the achievements of second-wave feminism (Whelehan 1995; Nicholson 1997; Krollokke & Scott Sorensen 2006). They are constructed as energetic, independent, taking for granted their right to a career and their devotion and rightful claim to equal opportunities in personal and sexual relationships, in the workplace and in society at large. They are also indirectly depicted as being acquainted with several feminist discourses and ideas now generally approved in Western cultures. Their stance, or their authors' stance, to those discourses, yet, is sometimes inconsistent, thus allowing backlash issues to come to the surface.

In *Ally McBeal*, feminism is portrayed as having forced women to try to accomplish impossible goals, i.e. to have too great expectations of their personal, sexual, professional and social lives. Although the TV series does not explicitly refuse feminism, it presents postfeminism as a get-out from the 'binding' duties and 'unjust' pressures of feminism. The postfeminist figure of Ally is hence sketched as self-reliant and career-oriented, but also, and more frequently, as miserably single and more than eager to get married and have children. In *Sex and the City*, as Gill observes (2007, p. 242), "the elements of backlash discourses are more complex. What is most striking is the way that the bold, sophisticated and knowing voices of the protagonists mask their very ordinary, traditionally feminine, desires", to sum up, their hunt for Mr Right. In the two TV series, as well as in the film, novel and TV series studied in my research project, feminist concepts are first taken for granted, then intermingled with anti-feminist ideas, eventually corroded and rebuffed. For instance, the fictional women are furnished with feminist empowerment, free will and self-determination, but these feminist accomplishments are often deployed only to re-embrace old, normative, status-quo-preserving femininity, in accordance with Probyn's (1997) ideas of "choiceoisie" and "new traditionalism".

Therefore, *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* and the texts in my research project can all be typified as postfeminist: this is because of the conversational and personal aspects of their female dramatis personae; the topoi, motifs and social constructions they deal with; and the value systems they more or less openly praise. Gill (2007, pp. 249–254) gave three primary definitions of postfeminism: an epistemological shift, a historical transformation and a backlash against feminism. Of these definitions, the most pertinent to the texts under investigation is the last, since they convey normative and political backlash against feminist aims and accomplishments. As a result, postfeminism and postfeminist backlash are the exact opposite to feminism.

As argued in the study *Backlash* (1992) by Faludi, one of the principal scholars of this feeling, these reactionary attitudes and negative opinions first became evident in the 1920s and arose from female social and political activism in the first decades of the twentieth century. Triggered by the media in general and the press in particular, this violent reaction rose to a new high in the 1980s and 1990s, in the very years when *When Harry Met Sally ...* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* appeared, and when the first seasons of *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* and *The Simpsons* were released. Since those years, backlash discourses have been

typified by the rising cultural urge to prevent women from obtaining empowerment and equality, even to reverse the process. These discourses feature heterogeneous and contrasting elements, because they incorporate opposing voices. Actually, they effectively maintain and disseminate incompatible considerations and clichés about feminism. A few examples are as follows: women have achieved equal rights, but these rights have disappointed them; all feminist battles have been won, consequently feminism is no longer necessary; women must have it all – accomplishments in family and personal relations, the workplace and society – but indeed they cannot. In a word, second-wave feminism, together with the public discussions it gave rise to, has been included in, trivialised and lastly depoliticised by postfeminist backlash.

### 3. Results: The Discursive Function of Irony

In her book about the depiction of gender in the postfeminist mediascape, Gill also scrutinises lad mags and advertising; in particular, she analyses the discursive function of irony in those text-types and in the discourses they simultaneously reflect and produce (Gill 2007, pp. 39–40; 110–111; 212–215; 266–268). As this researcher asserts (Gill 2007, p. 39), “For some [authors], irony offers some space, some ‘room to move’, ‘room to breathe’, a space of playfulness and openness” (see, for example, Gauntlett 2008 [2002]). However, drawing from work by Stevenson *et al.* (2000) and Whelehan (2004), Gill (2007: 40) claims that irony is in actual fact a heterogeneous and distancing practice, given that it “allows someone to express ‘an unpalatable truth in a disguised form, while claiming it is not what they actually meant’”. Accordingly, in postfeminist consumer culture and in a large number of refined media texts, irony is used to present sexist and insulting verbal and visual contents as inoffensive and deliberate postmodern jokes. Such contents are thus put in humorous inverted commas, hence possible disagreement with or complaint about them is prevented and made inefficient. Those finding fault with these ‘jokes’ are labelled at best as lacking sense of humour, at worst as rigidly orthodox feminists: readers might have realised that this is a misogynous and backlash ideological strategy.

Whilst Gill scrutinises the discursive function of irony from a gender & the media perspective specifically in postfeminist lad mags and advertising, in my research project I examined irony from a language & gender perspective in the fictional texts of *When Harry Met Sally ...* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and in the scripted discourses of the four TV series, whose romantic plots and sequences were implicitly impacted by the two former texts. Linguistic and discursive scrutiny of the fictional women in these postfeminist film, novel and TV series also revealed the linguistic and discursive practices utilised to portray feminism and to approach gender-related and feminist topics. As mentioned in Section 1, at first the female protagonists seem to be animated by the cultural, social and economic principles of second-wave feminism, and to be characterised by the appropriate personality traits. The discourses of hegemonic romance and political backlash, though, are hidden in the background and are not immediately discernible. The female figures’ innovative, sometimes feminist and empowering actions and pursuits are only apparently so, as was

disclosed by the critical investigation of their language and conversational styles, and by the discursive scrutiny of the strategies deployed to shape and position them in their texts.

This examination proved that the practice of irony, founded principally on humour, comedy and grotesque characters, is skilfully employed in these film, novel and TV series. The use of the strategy of irony is outstanding in the linguistic and cultural portrayals of the female protagonists and in how they are positioned in their fictional communities of practice. Following Gill's model, humour, comedy and the grotesque are the linguistic tools and discursive devices bringing readers and viewers, feminists included, to adopt a more accommodating stance on gender matters and constructions. The audience is therefore led to drop their ideological and critical guard, in a mechanism realising another conspicuous example of backlash.

These postfeminist consumer products are, undeniably, extremely entertaining cultural items, even for many hard-to-please readers and viewers. They either wholly consist of such episodes and scenes (*The Simpsons* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*) or feature a large number of comic episodes and enjoyable scenes (see *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *When Harry Met Sally ...* and several sequences from *Nip/Tuck*). For instance, all the episodes of *Sex and the City* contain many conversations sparkling with wit, humour and innuendo. Every episode comprises at least one such conversation which involves the four female protagonists discussing a topic from their varied and contrasting viewpoints: from whether women can have sex without feelings in the pilot show, to Carrie Bradshaw's relationships with her former and new partners and Samantha Jones's chemotherapy and early menopause in their final dialogue. The main personality trait of *Desperate Housewives'* Susan Mayer is clumsiness in words and actions: to take a random example from the pilot show, she accidentally sets fire to her neighbour's house, which burns to the ground. The two eponymous characters of *When Harry Met Sally ...* comically come head to head before, and sometimes after, becoming best friends. In order to contradict Harry Burns' statements about his lovers, in the best-known scene of the film set at a delicatessen, Sally Albright loudly performs a theatrical imitation of an orgasm and its ecstatic convulsions, which elicits surprise, amusement and embarrassment from the other customers. In *Nip/Tuck*, laughter often arises from cynicism and scepticism, relying on taboo topics. At the end of the pilot show, plastic surgeons Sean McNamara and Christian Troy need to get rid of a patient's dead body; they hence tie a few hams around the body, drag it to the water's edge and wait for alligators to pull it into the water as their friendship grotesquely revives. However, like in lad mags and advertising, comedy and enjoyment usually originate from skewed, abnormal and larger-than-life representations of fictional figures, femininities and sexualities.

Lad mags and advertising offensively feature women as mere sexual objects, while feigning that the sexist texts and discourses depicting them as such are consciously funny. By adopting a similar practice based on irony and comedy, these film, novel and TV series constantly represent most of their female characters, together with the tenets and ideologies they incarnate, as extreme and foolish: to mention just a few, see *Bridget Jones* (from

the eponymous novel), Samantha Jones (*Sex and the City*), Bree Van de Kamp (*Desperate Housewives*), Marge Simpson (*The Simpsons*). This exaggerated description appears to be justified by the text-types under investigation: humorous characteristics and parodistic sequences are formally needed in comic novels, romantic comedies, dramedies and satirical sitcoms. This depiction, yet, is unfavourable and partial.

How do this backlash practice work in postfeminist romance? In *When Harry Met Sally ...*, Sally Albright unconventionally has a male best friend, but conventionally marries him in the happy ending of the romantic comedy: their non-normative female-male friendship evolves into a normative marriage. Sally's relationship with Harry Burns is depicted as a subversive and even dangerous attack on the conventions of romantic love in ironic comparison with six brief documentary footage scenes of as many elderly couples reporting how they met, fell in love and married; the six hyperbolically romantic reports portray the heterosexual relationship between a woman and a man as the only possible and socially desirable association between the two sexes.

Bridget Jones struggles to build a career as a journalist and *Nip/Tuck*'s Kimber Henry as a model; however, their professional aspirations are backgrounded in their texts, the former is humorously represented as clumsy, the latter as powerless, both as romantic women whose primary objective is not career but love. In two sequences from *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the woman pictures two future pursuits and events in her life to an ideal state of perfection, where romance and emotions are emphasised, that is to say a mini-break with her current partner Daniel Cleaver (Fielding 2010 [1996], p. 121) and a dinner party for her prospective partner Mark Darcy (Fielding 2010 [1996], p. 223). She subsequently provides the prosaic accounts of what has actually occurred in her life (Fielding 2010 [1996], pp. 136–137; 235–237): unsentimental and commonplace activities, which render the contrast with the former descriptions grotesque and parodistic and the woman a “disastrous failure” (p. 237).

In the pilot show of *Nip/Tuck*, at Christian Troy's house after they have had sex, Kimber Henry requests her lover-surgeon list her blemishes, which he does while marking them with her lipstick. The model's quick and willing turning from lover into patient identifies her as an opportunist who, regardless of principle, seizes every chance to improve her professional life as soon as one comes her way. Kimber, yet, ironically emerges from the verbal and non-verbal interaction with Christian as a postfeminist sentimental woman who believes in romance tenets and backlash principles, an excessively insecure person who is emotionally dependent on others and their judgement, whose temporary jobs cause her socioeconomic problems, who assumed she was overwhelmingly beautiful and who discovers that she is not.

*Sex and the City*'s Carrie Bradshaw is an unusually open-minded and eager-to-learn dramatis persona who, when in love, becomes a sentimental and passive woman, thereby personifying the mainstream female role model in patriarchal society. To be more exact, on the one hand, the text of the entire TV series, from the first season to the last, portrays the writer as a character who is usually rational and sometimes even critical, and who has

a witty sense of humour worded through noteworthy linguistic skills. On the other hand, as soon as she falls in love or has love problems, she forgets her logical characteristics and turns excessively sentimental and emotional, supine and powerless against her active and domineering partners who have power over their relationship; in other words, she is represented as a stereotypically weak woman interacting with even more clichéd strong men.

In the pilot show of *Desperate Housewives*, Susan Mayer is encouraged by her teenage daughter Julie to ask Mike Delfino, a handsome plumber she feels attracted to, out to dinner. The woman pays him a visit and is at a loss for the right words when Edie Britt, her rival in love, appears at the door behind him; on the spur of the moment, Susan invents the excuse that there is a clogged-up pipe in her kitchen sink. As a result, Susan and Julie are comically compelled to stuff up the sink with the sticks the girl had been using to make a model of the Trojan horse as a school project.

Most of these fictional women have jobs they have freely chosen and consider satisfying, homemakers Bree Van de Kamp and Marge Simpson included; nevertheless, the two women are described as slightly and grotesquely discontented. One of Bree Van de Kamp's conversational objectives in the pilot show of *Desperate Housewives*, if not the main one, is not trying to cement her relations with her family and neighbours and to base them on solidarity and closeness; she rather attempts to arouse her addressees' admiration for her supposedly ideal qualities and domestic skill. Therefore, the interactional strategies she uses not only ironically produce an effect of distance from the other, i.e., the exact opposite of her aim; they also lay bare her traditional ideology and the exaggerated mainstream female role model she struggles to incarnate – a woman who always appears elegant, well-groomed and smiling, who has refined and exquisite taste and skills, who behaves properly and respectably in all circumstances, who believes in patriarchal family values, who cooks excellent meals and cakes for her family and neighbours.

In the pilot show of *The Simpsons*, Marge writes a Christmas letter to the family friends. The woman linguistically builds up a stereotypical construction of her identity as a mainstream model woman and homemaker, and discursively represents herself and her household as characterised by a romantic view of family life and relations, that is to say, idealised and sentimental. However, thanks to the striking contrast between Marge's words and the visual images accompanying them, the audience understands that such words parodistically clash with the actual qualities of her husband, children and even pets, thereby constituting a source of comedy.

Many of these fictional women have a fair number of sexual partners, some a hyperbolic number, even *Sex and the City's* sentimental Charlotte York; this is, though, her tactic to find true love or, in the value system epitomised by her role model, a husband. More precisely, Charlotte humorously separates from her first husband due to his sexual impotence and marries the second also thanks to his sexual potency. Nevertheless, in the TV series final dialogue with her friends, she emerges as glad to forgive a man, unfeeling and unsympathetic though he may be, as long as he declares he is contrite and in love. This reinforces her excessively idealistic worldview as already evoked in the pilot show, as well



as her traditionally meek and patient female role model subject to an equally traditionally authoritative male.

As a result, either at the micro-level of the single sequence or at the macro-level of the whole cultural narrative, humour and the grotesque subvert the nature of these superficially ground-breaking female characters, as well as the reliability of their forward-looking values and mind-sets. That is to say, what these film, novel and TV series seemingly maintain and the women's rights they assert are ideologically denied by their fictional female protagonists as they emerge from their constructed interaction with a patriarchal social system. This postfeminist opposition in fictional texts hampers their female audience's freedom and empowerment in real life.

#### 4. Conclusions

In my research project on the representation of postfeminist female characters in the contemporary media, I examined the traditional genre of romance in six postfeminist texts and the fictional femininities and sexualities in the six texts. This investigation showed that both the texts and their femininities are constructed by means of the distancing and heterogeneous strategies of irony and humour. It also demonstrated that these strategies, in Gill's (2007) words, unavoidably express "an unpalatable truth in a disguised form", far from offering "a space of playfulness and openness".

Critical study of the six texts, which are discursively complex and refined, uncovered that they implicitly extol and preserve a heterosexual white middle-class status quo and, most of all, celebrate romance and idealised gender relations. Their female figures are actively engaged in activities of various kinds in a society which, in actual fact, is still conservative. Consequently, although they are shown working, meeting friends or having sex, their ultimate goal is romantic heterosexual love, namely a backward-looking and nostalgic aim. These fictional women accordingly signal dominant backlash against feminist objectives, achievements and empowerment, together with the social and political attempt to block and reverse second-wave feminism. In short, these novel, film and TV series turned out to be deeply normative texts mirroring, preserving and disseminating a patriarchal ideology based on hegemonic codes, where female and male roles in culture and society are conservative, and gender and power relations unbalanced.

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### **Summary**

This article presents the results of the author's research in the interdisciplinary area of language & gender as applied to television and media studies. More precisely, the results summarised here are based on a language-&-gender analysis of several extremely popular, hence socially significant, contemporary TV series – *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *The Simpsons*, *Nip/Tuck* – and two equally popular and significant cultural products, namely, the film *When Harry Met Sally ...* and the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*. What these relatively different TV series, film and novel have in common is that they have reinvented the codes of romance, that is to say, they represent a contemporary, up-to-date, even fashionable version of the traditional, and traditionally female, genre

of romance geared to postfeminist consumer culture. The main research purpose of this article is to provide a critical description of the different postfeminist femininities and sexualities depicted in a number of the most popular contemporary TV series and media, as embodied by their most famous protagonists. At a first viewing and reading, almost all these femininities and sexualities, along with the cultural narratives of their TV series, film or novel, appear to be unsparingly and humorously critical of conventionally female linguistic and cultural stereotypes, and of traditional worldviews and values, if not to be ground-breaking and forward-looking, even radically feminist. Nevertheless, because of hegemonic and political backlash, it is hypothesised that, despite the ironic and hyperbolic approach or, rather, by means of such an approach, most femininities in these post-feminist texts are in actual fact not only romantic and mainstream, but also ideologically biased, preserving a normative heterosexual white middle-class status quo, and restoring a patriarchal value system. Closer critical scrutiny through several theoretical frameworks and methodologies contributed to demonstrating this research hypothesis and to revealing through what textual and discursive strategies feminism has switched to postfeminist romance and has thereby yielded to postfeminist backlash.

KEY WORDS: backlash, contemporary television and media, female characters, irony, language & gender, postfeminism.

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