

COMMODIFICATION AND IDENTITY IN CHICK LIT

ANEMONA ALB

University of Oradea,

1, Universităţii St,

Oradea, Romania

email: anemona1002000@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper looks at the parochial facets of femininity versus their globalized avatars as apparent in two chick lit novels, Helen Fielding's "Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason" 1999 and one of the novels in Sophie Kinsella's The Shopaholic series, "Shopaholic Abroad" 2001. The paradigm I am operating within is that of consumerism and commodification as the new forms of globalization. More specifically, the paper sets out to investigate the extent to which global and local facets of (feminine) identity overlap, thus engendering what I label 'glocal' femininities, and the role of the commodification thereof.

Key words: commodification; global / local persona; femininity.

Introduction

As stated above, it is the assumption of this paper that there is paradigmatic oscillation in terms of two questions: where exactly is the new archetypal heroine of chick lit situated on the global vs. local continuum, and what part does commodification—as the new form of globalization—play in this kind of identity equation?

Global versus Local Facets of Femininity

First, a rundown of the main tenets of globalization would be in order. There are three types of globalization:

- (a) Globalization as cultural relativism;
- (b) Globalization in the aftermath of colonialism;
- (c) Globalization as the leveller of time and space;

Globalization is also about "hegemony", ideological depredation and dominance:

“From 1939 to the present, leading theorists and policy-makers have continued to view the world through realist lenses (real politik). The prescriptions it offered were particularly well suited to America’s rise to become the global ‘hegemon’ (or leader.)” (Baylis and Smith 110)

I argue that consumerism is the new type of globalization, as there are invasive and pervasive strategies, that the postmodern cornucopia/horn-of-plenty promulgates, that the ubiquity of brand alongside uniformization (see “jeanification”) indeed purports to be. All this is redolent of the hegemonic strategies that are indeed appropriating the world. With a difference: this new breed of globalization is de-centred, dissipated, disparate, and its placeless-ness is apparent in the dispersion of excess.

Indeed in this post-industrial, post-Fordist day and age, the operational framework as regards strategies of “seduction” has shifted from what political scientists call “the capability of a Great Power to bribe, cajole and blackmail the protagonists of its encounters” (Baylis and Smith 120) to the more subtle but equally pervasive types of ploy fitting for a consumer society: its techniques for enticing and enthralling the unsuspecting consumer. Thus the potential for the emergence of such archetypal characters as the Shopaholic (see Everyman, see medieval drama) is now overwhelming.

Equally saliently, another question that crops up is this: to what extent is consumerism, this new type of globalization, free-floating, deregulated, dissipated and disparate, by contrast with the stronghold and iron grip of the super-powers of yore?

Indeed Becky’s (Becky a.k.a. Shopaholic) indiscriminate appropriation of consumer space (the malls in her native Britain and in the US) is a case in point. Not only does she replicate her habit of indulging in excess, irrespective of where she finds herself on her business trips, but in her consumer frenzy she actually obliterates any boundaries of specificity or local-ness:

God, I adore shopping abroad. I mean, shopping anywhere is always great—but the advantages of doing it abroad are:

1. You can buy things you can’t get in Britain.
2. You can name-drop when you get back home. (‘Actually, I picked this up in New York.’)
3. Foreign money doesn’t count, so you can spend as much as you like.

Ok, I know that last one isn’t entirely true. Somewhere in my head I know that dollars are proper money, with a real value. But I mean, *look* at them. I just can’t take them seriously.

I've got a whole wodge of them in my purse, and I feel as though I'm carrying around the bank from a Monopoly set. Yesterday I went and bought some magazines from a newsstand, and as I handed over a \$20 bill, it was just like playing shop. It's like some weird form of jet-lag—you move into another currency and suddenly feel as though you're spending nothing. (Kinsella 163-64)

Apart from this newly-acquired invisibility of foreign currency—money becomes impalpable—one can also note the playful, ludic overtones (see *homo ludens*, i.e. playful man) that the game of Monopoly yields—consumers become infantile players in a topography of infinite possibility, i.e. the shopping mall, that caters for every absurd, child-like, whimsical consumer desire. Note also the reference to jet-lag—a state of mental dissipation in which your senses atrophy, as it is suggested that they do in the post-hedonistic experience of purchasing. If the act of purchase is associated by authors in the literature in the field with the intoxicating act of drug-taking and the gratification of so doing, then this too is bound to have its side-effects, referred to here as 'jet-lag'. Dazed and amazed by the novel—yet repeated—experience of shopping, Becky does experience some rather more serious side-effects, namely she becomes immersed in the world of debt, bank overdrafts and perpetual procrastination of payment. (The situation becomes ludicrous at times, when Becky is hunted down by her creditors, who follow her everywhere.) It is what some authors—(see Andrews 3)—call “the never-never-land culture of credit”, i.e. a downspiralling of accumulated debt that you forever fail to face up to. It is, one might argue, the new Utopia of postmodern times. And all this with high finance, the banks, the new form of globalizing excess—or austerity, as the case may be.

Becky, the consummate shopaholic, has an ideological avatar in Bridget Jones—see Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and its sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, published in 1999.

Bridget's appropriation—and as I will endeavour to demonstrate in what follows, her gentrification of—global—space is evident in such scenes as the ones in Thailand, where she goes on a jaunt, and where she is arrested by mistake for some putative drug-dealing/smuggling. The interplay and indeed shift of paradigms is apparent in exchanges she engages in with the locals:

'So why haven't you captured him?'

'He's in Dubai,' he said dispassionately.

Suddenly I felt really quite annoyed.

‘Oh, he’s in Dubai, is he?’ I said. ‘And you know he did it.
 You know I didn’t do it and he made it look as though I did and I didn’t.
 ...
 because you can’t be bothered to get someone to confess to something I didn’t do.’
 He looked at me in consternation.
 ‘Why don’t you get him to confess?’ I said.
 ‘He is in Dubai.’
 ‘Well, get somebody else to confess, then.’
 ‘Miss Jones, in Thailand, we ...’ ...
 ‘We are doing everything we can,’ he said coldly. ‘Our government takes any breach of the drug codes very seriously.’
 ‘And my government takes the protection of its subjects very seriously.’
 (Fielding 315)

If we are to acknowledge Edward Said’s East-West dichotomies (see his seminal work *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* 1978), i.e. the prophets and soothsayers in the East, a land of makeshift architecture and improvisation, versus the West with its doctors, i.e. scientists, and positivist thinkers, then we can notice here a very volatile positioning at the two ends of the east-west continuum as defined by Said. Indeed there is ideological resonance in the prison scene, no stiff-upper-lip for Bridget. Her attitude on her business trips to Asia is prescriptively colonial, but on this particular occasion—as a result of her temporary imprisonment—she becomes a flawed imperialist, it is she who readily sheds her rationalistic, positivist persona and fleetingly assumes a new mask, that of an accommodating individual, ready to negotiate and compromise, surprisingly willing to relinquish all her veneer of righteousness, integrity and lack of bias in pursuit of the re-definition of justice, as she sees it when under duress. Here Bridget comes to resemble some unprincipled “trader” in a bazaar, a market with no fixed prices—or principles or regulations, for that matter—and her plea for justice pathetically degenerates into bathos. There is a crescendo in her illicit, under-the-counter negotiation with the Thai official: “Well, get somebody else to confess, then.” Is this cue to be paradigmatically located in the volatile East or in the stable, solid West? Is Bridget here her “local self”, the reliable, trustworthy, quintessential Brit—or has she undergone metamorphosis into her Eastern counterpart, the sly and versatile Easterner?

The posture—that of an out-of-time colonial—that Bridget finds herself in comes at a personal price. Bridget is minutely describing and bewailing her physical condition, to say nothing of her precarious mental state at this point:

Monday 25 August. 7 st 2 (attention-seeking thinness), no. of–oh fuck it, brain has dissolved. Good for slimming, surely.

Noon. Bad, low day. Must have been mad to think I could influence anything. Am bitten to death by mosquitoes and fleas. Am nauseous and feeble with constant diarrhoea ...

(Fielding 314)

All this can be said to portray her as a colonial with a difference: this is the unlikely insecurity of the one who travels to conquer, to bring along their set of values, indeed to gentrify. Bridget in her feeble state is here a caricature of the generic colonial. Not only is she a Brit, replicating and globalizing mainstream values, the values of western society, but she is also a bearer of the institutional prestige of a global TV network. Now the mass media is another crucial promoter of globalization and inter-connectedness, the intricate worldwide networks that pervade all continents and promote events that instantly and ubiquitously become breaking news, making the whole wide world a captive audience.

Bridget is quite significantly portrayed as working for a major British TV network, similar to the BBC or to CNN, and the clout she is supposed to have in her position is again parodied, in the sense that there is an incongruous juxtapositioning at work here between the serious, power-laden discourse of news reporters / current affairs programmes on the one hand and the frivolousness of details about clothes on the other, as when the bikinis she is made to wear make her look like a bimbo, and a flawed bimbo at that. Her mental imaginative repertoire includes a scene with her boss, Richard Finch, who supposedly utters a somewhat licentious remark involving Bridget's bikini (the juxtaposition of the two words 'campaign' and 'bikini' is indicative of the appropriation of consumerism).

The Thai man cleared his throat to speak. "We ..."

'And I am a journalist,' I interrupted him. 'On one of Great Britain's top television current affairs programmes,' I said, trying to fight back a vision of Richard Finch going 'I'm thinking Harriet Harman, I'm thinking black underwear, I'm thinking ...'

'They're planning a vigorous campaign on my behalf.'

Mental cut to Richard Finch: "Oh, Bridget droopy bikini hasn't come back from her holiday, has she? Snogging on the beach, forgot to get the plane." (Fielding 316)

Bridget emulates her peers—another Briton in a postcolonial stance:

'How's your career going here?'

‘Bit bloody static, to be perfectly honest,’ he said cheerily. ‘Black bloody hole of Calcutta, unless you get down to the islands of course. Oh sorry.’

(Fielding 315)

The man utters “black bloody hole of Calcutta”, apparently, one might argue, as if to point out that there’s nowhere else to go from here, it’s a dead end, no more globalizing to do, that it has all come full circle.

Conclusion

All in all, as I have shown above, the heroine of chick lit inhabits an ideological dystopia; she is neither local nor global, but she is, one might say, “glocal”.

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