Universiteit Utrecht

Master's Programme: **Literature Today**

Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities

2020

In Praise of Unlikeable Women:

Exploring Unlikeability in "Postfeminist" Times in

My Year of Rest and Relaxation and *Fleabag*

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Abstract

This thesis is premised on a critique of the widespread and enduring imperative for female characters to be likeable, both in fiction and on television. My project includes a close textual analysis of Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as well as an examination of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television series *Fleabag*, both of which having been criticized for their unlikeable female characters. Instead of pathologizing these characters' unlikeability, I direct my attention towards criticizing the current "postfeminist" position, which works to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as empowered consumer (Tasker and Negra 2) and fetishizes aspirational female characters as a distraction from systemic sexism that continues to impact women's lives. Decades of chick lit and chick flicks that portray female characters following patriarchal expectations have led readers to push back and label "unlikeable" the women characters that do not fit these set categories.

Both the protagonists portrayed by Moshfegh and Waller-Bridge act in a way that is disproportionate with normative expectations of womanhood by depicting feelings and experiences women have long been encouraged to suppress. In doing so, they disrupt the postfeminist claim that feminism is no longer needed, thus engaging in a form of political resistance by refusing to allow their dark emotions to be translated into patriarchal standards.

The first chapter of this thesis establishes the concrete features of postfeminism, by drawing on definitions provided by Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie and others. Chapters Two and Three offer an evaluation of my two case studies of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag*. These case studies of two anti-heroines are aimed to portray women that are realistically constructed by showing negative traits and behaviors that real-life women can relate to. As such, I will show how the two characters created by Moshfegh and Waller-Bridge are liberated from the high standards placed on postfeminist females. In doing that, I aim to demonstrate how the extra-textual conversation deeming these characters "unlikeable" is distinctly encoded in gendered expectations about how women should behave, as defined by our current postfeminist background.

KEYWORDS: unlikeability, postfeminism, complex female characters, dark feelings, negative criticism

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Introduction

> I have a horrible feeling that I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.
>
> – *Fleabag*[1]

The unnamed narrator from Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Fleabag from Phoebe Waller-Bridge's eponymous television series lead vastly different lives, yet their experiences intersect through the ways in which they navigate their emotions, thereby generating a similar kind of popular reception. Set in major cultural and financial capitals, New York and London, both works center around two female characters who are on the brink of a mental breakdown. Moshfegh's narrator is an orphaned 24-year-old woman who recently graduated from Columbia University, holds a mindless job at an art gallery, and takes on the project to sleep for an entire year, hoping to wake up a better and more enlightened person. Fleabag is the owner of an unsuccessful guinea pig-themed café, who goes through life navigating a series of masochistic relationships with men, as she is haunted by grief and guilt over the recent death of her best friend. Both works depict characters leading rootless, anxious lives who navigate adulthood with deadpan humor that is revealed to cover unbearable shame and sadness. They both tend towards self-sabotage as a coping strategy and turn to meaningless sex to fill the void of their unstable lifestyles. Most importantly, both works have generated the same kind of public critique, with countless articles addressing their shared "unlikeable" features, spotlighting female

[1] Season 1, Episode 1.

characters who refuse to contain their dark feelings for the sake of normalizing gender inequalities.

Numerous articles debating the likeability (or, more precisely, lack thereof) of these two characters continue to emerge on various popular websites, to the point where it becomes a challenge to find reviews in which how detestable, subversive, selfish, self-destructive or sex-obsessed the main characters in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* presumably are is not the main point of focus (see, for example, Lincoln and Wilson). The extra-textual conversation surrounding these works position the two protagonists as anti-heroines, although that was not what Moshfegh and Waller-Bridge intended them to be. Their intention, rather, was to create characters that are unhindered by the gendered representations imposed on women, by portraying female characters that do not filter their socially unacceptable behavior, nor do they apologize for it. In an interview discussing *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* from 2018, Rich Juzwiak mentions that the book's protagonist does not behave the way women are generally expected to behave, and proceeds by asking Moshfegh whether her motivations are reactionary or simply matter of fact. Moshfegh's answer comes as the following:

> I have a tendency to just not want to participate in groupthink, period. I feel like there are certain things that, as a woman, are inextricable from the group experience of being a woman. Certainly, there's overlap between what's being spoken about in this wave of… I don't know if you call it feminism or just, like, social politics. I didn't feel like I was corresponding to that in any deliberate way. I felt like I was just really imaging the lives of these women and the irritation in limitation that they would experience. That's kind of it.

Similarly, in an interview for *Vice* magazine from 2016, Lauren Oyler mentions that "[a] lot of writers have characterized Fleabag as 'unlikeable,' which is a trendy way to talk about female characters who do bad things," and goes on asking the show's creator whether it was her intention to create an "unlikeable" character. Waller-Bridge answers:

> Not at all! It was important to me that she's funny, self-aware, and entertaining company for the audience to keep—but also, whenever she seems callous or dismissive, it's because of underlying pain. I hoped that pathos would balance out the more caustic sides of her character. I think that a woman not giving a shit about what people think in a certain moment—being undercutting or self-aware—weirdly means that she's a profoundly unlikable person. I see [Fleabag] as a person whose mood changes and is defined by her pain, not necessarily her actions.

As such, both Moshfegh and Waller-Bridge clearly show how their protagonists were not necessarily created as anti-heroines, even though this is how they have been categorized by readers and viewers. To be clear, my thesis does not aim to account for and to analyze the recent influx of unlikeable female characters in popular culture. My research attempts, rather, to explicitly link the negative responses from readers, viewers and critics who are most affected by these characters' unlikeable traits with our current postfeminist political and cultural background, which embraces stories of bubbly and positive female protagonists that conclude with their acceptance of patriarchal expectations. As such, I attempt to unpack the social and political struggles that both Fleabag and Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist direct to our attention, albeit both doing so in a very passive manner, as I will demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 3.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the word "unlikeable" is described as "not having pleasant or appealing qualities," and the provided example is "an utterly unlikeable character." An important question to raise in this thesis, in relation to the novel and the series, would be: to whom are these characters unlikeable, and based on what factors? Although (un)likeability is a subjective matter, what is undeniable is that what we generally find (un)likeable is a social construct which reflects the values and principles of one's environment. Thus, it is safe to claim that the negative responses towards both Moshfegh's protagonist and Fleabag are symptomatic of the values and norms we hold true today in relation to female characters, an idea that will be further analyzed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Two feminist critics that have previously and notably discussed the topic of unlikeable women in fiction are Roxane Gay and Kameron Hurley. In an article titled "Not Here to Make Friends," Gay observes that "from a young age, [she] understood that when a girl is unlikeable, a girl is a problem." After finding a note in her high school yearbook that reads "I like you even though you are very mean," Gay has a revelation: "I understood that I wasn't being intentionally mean. I was being honest (admittedly, without tact), and I was being human." Her statement is indicative of the way in which women's expressions of complex emotions can easily be interpreted as offensive and thus rendered unlikeable. Throughout the article, Gay draws a connection between female characters who do not follow a particular code of conduct as dictated by society and their negative critical reception. More often than not, female characters who embody unpleasing but nonetheless *human* characteristics require a diagnosis for their unlikeability in order to be tolerated. Similarly, Gay observes how in the case of the movie *Young Adult*, Charlize Theron, who stars as Mavis Gary, is diagnosed by many reviewers as mentally ill, because "[t]he simple explanation, of Mavis as human, will not suffice."

A similar formula can be found in both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag*, where most critical discussions aim to justify the protagonists' presumed dysfunctionalities by seeing them as an aftermath of their traumatic past (Pejcha; Foiles). However, the characteristics that critics and reviewers find as "flawed" are further encoded in gendered expectations about how women should behave. That is why, by and large, when male characters act in concretely unethical ways, they are simply labeled as "anti-heroes" (such as Humbert Humbert, Jay Gatsby, Don Draper, Patrick Bateman, Tony Soprano and so on). However, when female characters act in the same manner, a totally different conversation ensues. As Gay puts it in "Not Here to Make Friends," "[w]hen women are unlikeable, it becomes a point of obsession in critical conversations by professional and amateur critics alike. Why are these women daring to flaunt convention? Why aren't they making themselves likeable (and therefore acceptable) to polite society?" For this situation to change, Gay claims that literary merit should not be dictated by morality – which further reflects how likeable a character is – and argues in favor of an increased visibility of unlikeable female characters:

> I want characters to do bad things and get away with their misdeeds. I want characters to think ugly thoughts and make ugly decisions. I want characters to make mistakes and put themselves first without apologizing for it (…) I want characters to do the things I am afraid to do for fear of making myself more unlikable than I may already be. I want characters to be the most honest of all things — human.

Kameron Hurley also addresses the topic of female unlikeability in her essay titled "In Defense of Unlikeable Women," published in 2016. At the core of the essay lies a critique against the deeply rooted disposition in readers to hold female characters to higher standards than male characters. As Hurley notes, the traits we most root for in male characters – such as complexity,

confidence and even the occasional selfishness – become the marks of the aforementioned "unlikeable character" when attributed to females. According to Hurley,

> Male writers, and their male protagonists, are expected to be flawed and complex, but reader expectations for women writers and their characters tend to be far more rigid. Women may stray, but only so far. If they go on deep, alcoholic benders, they'd best repent and sober up at the end. If they abandon their spouses and children, they'd best end tragically, or make good. Women must, above all, show kindness. Women may be strong—but they must also, importantly, be vulnerable. If they are not, readers are more likely to push back and label them unlikable.

This double standard delineated by Hurley for men and women in works of literature and other arts is further explored by Lili Loofbourow in her essay "The Male Glance," where she explains how content created by women is often seen as superficial or inferior in quality to content created by men. Loofbourow points out that our ability to see complexity in works created by or centered around women is diminished by our reading habits. Moreover, the author argues, centuries of glancing over female-driven stories have led readers to the assumption that there is little to be found there. As Loofbourow puts it, "the glance sees little in women-centric stories behind cheap sentiment or its opposite, the terrifically uninteresting compensatory propaganda of "female strength"." Hurley supports her argument by directing our attention towards the distinctly gendered roles women were cast as over time – mothers, caretakers, servants, assistants, handmaidens etc. In the case in which women do not fit these categories, there is a certain supposition that something must be inherently unnatural – or they are simply deemed unappealing ("In Defense of Unlikeable Women").

Author Claire Messud combats this issue head-on in an interview from 2013 with *Publishers Weekly* regarding criticism she has received about her own characters. When the interviewer, Annasue Wilson, asks the author if she would like to be friends with Nora, the protagonist from *The Woman Upstairs*, adding that her outlook is "almost unbearably grim," Messud responds:

> For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet? Krapp? Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov? (…) If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities. The relevant question isn't "is this a potential friend for me?" but "is this character alive?"

Nonetheless, while writers like Gay, Hurley, Loofbourow and Messud point out the problems of glancing over female-centric texts and labeling complex female characters who stray from the normative expectations of womanhood as "unlikeable," they do not specifically offer any background on or explanation for why that might still be the case today, a time when it is commonly believed that feminism has already achieved its purposes. In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2008), Angela McRobbie comments on the state of feminism in contemporary (media) society:

> [In] popular culture there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, women are not being pushed back into the home, but instead there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without. (8)

Similarly, in *Young Women's Dis-identification with Feminism: Negotiating Heteronormativity, Neoliberalism and Difference* (2009), Christina Scharff puts McRobbie's claims into practice by interviewing a diverse group of 40 women aged between 18 to 35. Her results support McRobbie's claims and exemplify a postfeminist logic: "feminism was either considered as valuable, but anachronistic and therefore irrelevant to the present, or fiercely repudiated as extreme and dogmatic" (5). Comments by women she interviewed ranged from "I am just not sure whether, to what extent [feminism] is still important nowadays" (145) to "nowadays, you don't have to talk about it much, because it is also normal (…) it does not need much clarification, or debate, it is simply clear that the woman is also allowed to work, that she has certain rights, that the man cooks, or, I mean, I feel it's simply normal" (145). Such comments support McRobbie's claim that feminism is understood as no longer needed, as it has already achieved its main purposes.

Nonetheless, these case studies were conducted over a decade ago, which poses the question whether they are still relevant today. As I will demonstrate in the last section of the first chapter, postfeminism itself has gone through different phases – from feminism being fiercely repudiated to being acknowledged as positive, yet irrelevant to the present. However, the values postfeminism represents remain distinctly encoded in our society. As Rosalind Gill puts it in "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times" (2016), "I look forward to the day when the constellation of values and ideas signaled by "postfeminism" no longer extern their chilling cultural force, but in the meantime, we are a long way from being post-postfeminism" (625-6).

Despite their so-called "unlikeable" characters, both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* remain highly popular works of art, with countless reviews searchable on the internet,

which can only imply that people *do* like these stories and perhaps even relate to the characters to a certain degree[2]. This, in turn, shows that readers indeed relate to women who are sometimes cruel, ill-mannered and downright oblivious to proper conduct, yet they remain at the same time influenced by our society which champions "acceptable" women who do not *need* to be depressed, angry, or difficult, an idea that stands in contrast to Sara Ahmed's figure of the "feminist killjoy" (2010), which will be further analyzed in both Chapter 1 and 2.

The combination of finding a character unlikeable yet still relatable is, to a certain extent, antithetically positioned to what is nowadays described as a "guilty pleasure." According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a guilty pleasure is "something pleasurable that induces a usually minor feeling of guilt." It is very often referenced in connection to two of the most notable genres to emerge during this time period – chick flick movies and chick lit novels, both of which following a distinctly postfeminist logic. They are called "guilty pleasures" precisely because people like these female characters – or they have been *made* to like them, despite arguments about their culmination into patriarchal acceptance, as the ending usually reinforces the importance of getting married and starting a family. However, *Fleabag* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* do not follow the same pattern, but rather stand in stark contrast to postfeminist protagonists by continuing to disturb and subvert readers' expectations by ending in an unsatisfying manner and leaving their issues unresolved. They are not what readers would call "guilty pleasures," yet they nonetheless offer a certain satisfaction giving their undeniable popularity. As such, my interest lies precisely in unpacking the politics of the negative critical responses towards these characters, despite their popularity. In doing that, I will show how a

[2]It is worth mentioning that the women in these works are both white, cisgender, middle-class, heterosexual women.

double standard for male and female protagonists continues to be deeply rooted in our current postfeminist movement, despite its perfunctory claim of gender equality. In order to achieve that, attention must first be paid to the concrete features of postfeminism and its significance as a theoretical framework.

A deeper look into the postfeminist discourse will allow me to examine how readers in this post-Second-Wave era are engaging with texts and other media products, and what happens when some works such as *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* mark a departure from it. In order to pinpoint the exact peculiarities of postfeminism, I will draw on explanations provided by different scholars, such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, both of whom having written extensively on the topic. I will also offer various analyses on what many media scholars consider to be distinctly postfeminist cultural products in order to better explore the themes and features that characterize this movement. Finally, by discussing the concrete features of postfeminism and applying them to analyze cultural products which adhere to this movement, I will not only show the ideology that I believe to best characterize our current moment, but I will also demonstrate how postfeminist popular culture punishes female characters who refuse to meet its standards – or, in this case, renders them “unlikeable.”

Chapter One: Postfeminism in Media and Literature

We live in a cultural moment that rejoices at the activism of the past and obsessively boasts about its post-gender, post-racial, post-feminist underpinning ethos. Yet, at the same time, it is baffling how movies or books that stray from the normative (often male) hero – which acts in accordance to gender norms as dictated by a patriarchal society – are still frowned upon and excessively debated. After the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s, some people felt that equality has been achieved and there was no longer any need for activism (McRobbie 12). As such, a new moment is born, unanimously described as "postfeminism"[3] (Gill 2007; Tasker and Negra 2007; McRobbie 2008; Scharff 2009; Gill 2016). For the sake of periodisation, scholars agree that the year of 1990 marks a turning point in feminist history, and it is viewed as "the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory" (McRobbie 13). In their book titled *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra define postfeminism as:

> [working] in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes education and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. (2)

However, despite these characteristics, many scholars still oppose the insinuation that the work of feminism is complete (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2008; Tasker and Negra 2007; Scharff 2009; Gill

[3]The word "postfeminism" is written interchangeably throughout this thesis. Some authors prefer the spelling "post-feminism," however I choose to use it without hyphenation.

2016), which led to many arguments as to the meaning of the word "post." As Dick Hebdige (1988) claimed in relation to postmodernism, this is an indication that *there is something worth arguing about* (qtd. in Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 147). As Gill puts it, arguments regarding the nature of postfeminism primarily centre around perceived transformations in feminism over the last centuries. However, even a couple of decades later, there is still no agreement as to what exactly the term "postfeminism" signifies (147). The term is used in various and contradictory ways to signal either a theoretical position – a type of feminism after the Second Wave – or a regressive political stance (148).

Authors such as McRobbie, Gill, Tasker, Negra and Susan Faludi understand postfeminism as contributing to backlash against feminism (qtd in. Robinson 33). Shelley Budgeon argues that writers who view postfeminism as anti-feminism understand the term to mean that "equality has been achieved" and that "goals are constructed as individual problems and not political ones" (qtd. in Robinson 33). McRobbie, in particular, claims that postfeminism invokes feminism as "that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole new repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (12).

In discussing the postfeminist movement, McRobbie dismisses Third Wave feminism for being too "optimistic" about the progress that has been made (10). Similarly, Gill dismisses Fourth Wave feminism by claiming that this new resurgence of interest in feminism in the media and amongst young women rises alongside and in tandem with intensified misogyny ("Post-postfeminism" 610). As Muriel Fox argues, "[m]ost of us who were in the Second Wave still say we are still in the Second Wave (…) because the major issues haven't been resolved" (qtd. in Mendes 132). Moreover, I would argue that, in some ways, the current wave of feminism could

even be considered as a continuation to the Second Wave's legacy. For nearly a century, supporters have tried to add a provision to the Constitution which guarantees equal rights for men and women; yet only this year (2020) the Equal Rights Amendment (penned during the Second Wave) was finally ratified by enough states, although there is still controversy about whether that means it is officially ratified on a federal level (Lyons, Astor and Salam).

Nonetheless, I maintain that the critical notions behind the term "postfeminism" as an analytical category best underlines contemporary popular culture's relationship with feminism. In our modern society, as McRobbie agrees, the impact of class inequalities, racism and the myriad obstacles for girls growing up in poverty are eclipsed by the emphasis on individualism, improvement, success and the significant increase in the number of young women going to university (73):

> The increase in educational qualifications (…) as well as the growing numbers of girls staying on at school after 16, and going to university, means that it is in effect primarily young women who are providing the New Labour government with reasons to claim that their policies are successful. This could also be seen as an example of women coming forward and feminism fading away on the basis of its work being done, substantial degrees of equality having been won, and enduring inequities are now attended to by mainstream governmental processes. (74)

On the other hand, other writers who oppose McRobbie's idea of postfeminism simply understand the term to mean shifts within feminism and critique hegemonic styles of feminism (Robinson 33). My understanding of the term aligns with the first mentioned one. More specifically, my interpretation of postfeminism draws primarily from McRobbie and Gill. Just as

McRobbie claims that postfeminism takes feminists elements into account in order to dismiss and repudiate it, I argue that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* take postfeminists elements into account (embodied in the character of Reva, the narrator's best friend in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Claire, Fleabag's sister) so as to show what McRobbie calls "the postfeminist masquerade" (59). The term coined by McRobbie is understood as what in Foucauldian language might be referred to as "technologies" (qtd. in McRobbie 7) that aim to re-instate excessive femininity (on the basis of the independently earned wage), while also restoring hegemonic masculinity by "endorsing this public femininity which appears to undermine, or at least unsettle the new power accruing to women on the basis of this economic capacity" (66). One highly cited and equally popular example which reinforces the idea of a "postfeminist masquerade" is Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, as I will describe in detail later in the chapter.

Thus, as might be evident by now, this thesis draws heavily from Gill's account of postfeminism, which she portrays as a *sensibility* rather than a *movement*, combining both feminist and anti-feminist themes, and is closely tied with neoliberal politics of the self. In her essay titled "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," Gill offers the following "features" of postfeminism:

> These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (149)

The above characteristics are becoming increasingly noticeable in contemporary representations of women, both in movies and in literature. Although they seemingly include feminist elements through their showcasing of empowered female characters (along with their freedom of choice and the celebration of their purchasing power), what is continuously ignored are forms of systemic sexism that is still affecting women's lives today. This is best exemplified by McRobbie's idea of "double entanglement," where feminism has achieved Gramscian common sense, and, consequently, is now fiercely ignored (12).

To better explain how the notion of the double entanglement plays out in our society, McRobbie gives the example of George Bush supporting the campaign to encourage chastity among young people, while later declaring that civilisation itself depends on traditional marriage (12). Or, to offer a more recent example, U.S. President Donald Trump continuously assures the public that he respects women (as the title of one article from The Washington Post puts it), claiming things such as, "I have tremendous respect for women and the many roles they serve that are vital to the fabric of our society and our economy," and, "I respect women, I love women, I cherish women" (Blake). However, countless articles and videos on the internet point to his blatant sexism. In 2018, *The Week* magazine released an article containing "61 Things Donald Trump Has Said About Women," where Trump mentions things like "While @BetteMidler is an extremely unattractive woman, I refuse to say that because I always insist on being politically correct," and "If I were running *The View*, I'd fire Rosie O'Donnell. I mean, I'd look at her right in that fat, ugly face of hers, I'd say, 'Rosie, you're fired.'" (Lange).

Understanding the definitions provided by Tasker, Negra, McRobbie and Gill is of paramount importance in order to grasp the seriousness of supporting cultural products (texts, movies, television series, advertisements, etc.) that portray women who do more than simply

recycling the image of females as empowered and aspirational subjects. Stephanie Gwin, in her thesis exploring female rage in a number of contemporary books and movies, critiques the two most notable genres that emerged during this time period – chick flick films and chick lit novels – for their dismissal of feminist politics. As Gwin puts it,

> [Click flicks and chick lit] feature female protagonists who are too preoccupied with buying shoes to pay attention to the wage gap; who are too engrossed in finding the man of their dreams to critique rape culture; and who are too focused on becoming wives and mothers to notice the attack on women's reproductive rights. (1)

These genres are mostly targeted towards a largely female audience, and their influence is significant. They do not only seem to argue that the work of feminism is over by promising newly found freedom and independence (most apparent through participation in consumer culture), but they also vilify women who do not participate in this manifestation – as happened, for example, with Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* after it was turned into a movie. After having received serious backlash against her vengeful protagonist (Saner; Dobbins), Flynn responded that "to [her], that puts a very, very small window on what feminism is." In an interview with *The Guardian*, Flynn claims:

> Is it really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it's also the ability to have women who are bad characters … the one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing. In literature, they can be dismissably bad – trampy, vampy, bitchy types – but there's still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish. (qtd. in Burkeman)

According to McRobbie, the kind of feminism that is taken into account in this context is "liberal, equal opportunities feminism, where elsewhere what is invoked more negatively is the radical feminism concerned with social criticism rather than with progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order" (14). It would be hard to argue that Moshfegh's unnamed character and Fleabag are meant to appear to their reader and viewer as radical feminists. As a matter of fact, they might not appear as feminists at all. As I have shown previously, Moshfegh herself claimed that "[she] didn't feel like [she] was corresponding to [feminism] in any deliberate way" (Juzwiak), while *Fleabag*'s protagonist mentioned in the first episode of the first season that "[she] has a horrible feeling that [she] is a (…) morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist" (20:27 – 20:38). However, their passivity nonetheless marks a symbol of resistance against the aspirational and lean-in form of feminism imbedded in our contemporary culture. While they do not openly discuss women's rights in either works, nor do they approach feminism in any radical manner, I argue that they still challenge the widespread idea, delineated by McRobbie and Gill, that the work of feminism is over, by continuously subverting readers' expectations and distancing themselves from conventional postfeminist texts. Nonetheless, in order to understand how they differ from quintessential postfeminist works, attention must first be paid to the specific characteristics of postfeminism and applying them to analyse various postfeminist popular products.

The Obsession with Femininity

One of the most striking aspects of the postfeminist culture is its obsession with femininity as a bodily property (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 149), now presented as a matter of choice rather than

obligation. According to Gill, in today's media, possession of a "sexy body" is presented as a women's main source of identity. Moreover, women's bodies are presented as requiring constant monitoring, surveillance and discipline "in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness" (149). This idea goes hand in hand with what McRobbie denounces as "the postfeminist masquerade," which reinstates traditional feminine practices of self-maintenance as the norms of feminine grooming (59).

McRobbie offers *Bridget Jones's Diary* as the prime exemplification of what she calls "the postfeminist masquerade." Bridget is a product of late-twentieth century modernity – she is a free agent in her early thirties, single, childless and able to enjoy employment as much as her male friends. Yet, despite her feminist freedom, Bridget is reassuringly feminine. Her girliness is almost infections, and the audience can't help but sympathize with her. As McRobbie notes:

> With the burden of self-management so apparent, Bridget fantasises about very traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment. Flirting with her boss during office hours, Bridget imagines herself in a white wedding dress surrounded by bridesmaids, and the audience laughs loudly because they, like Bridget, know that this is not how young women these days are meant to think. (20)

Yet, the movie seems to say, it is surely a relief to be able to escape this freedom and go back to simpler times, when women did not have to carry the burden of equality (20). Once again, the danger of this discourse lies on the fact that irony is used as a tool to vindicate such behaviour; or, similarly, the movie is conceived as a "guilty pleasure," in which the audiences indulge occasionally as an escape from the over-complicated gender politics of today's world. Nonetheless, the question that must be asked in this situation is: at what point does this

behaviour stop being a mere convenience of what seems like a progressive society in which feminism is portrayed as having already achieved its purposes, and when does it start being a blatant return to patriarchal values?

More noticeable today than ever before, women's bodies are constantly scrutinized and dissected by women as well as men, and they are always at the risk of "failing" (Gill, "Postfeminist Media 149). McRobbie lists the following comments from the popular reality TV program *What Not To Wear*:

> 'what a dreary voice', 'look at how she walks', 'she shouldn't put ketchup on her chips', 'she looks like a mousy librarian', 'her trousers are far too long', 'that jumper looks like something her granny crocheted, it would be better on a table', 'she hasn't washed her clothes', 'your hair looks like an overgrown poodle' 'your teeth are yellow, have you been eating grass?' and 'Oh My God … she looks like a German lesbian'. (144)

These comments are indicative of the pressure that postfeminist discourse still places on women, yet despite the conspicuous coarseness, the pretence of irony is used to suggest that the injurious comments are not to be taken literally (McRobbie 144). The effect, however, is profound and crucial to the (un)learning of what is nowadays considered acceptable and attractive when it comes to women's physical appearance. The comments listed above demonstrate how women are deemed unacceptable or, as the subject of this thesis puts it, "unlikeable," on account of the state of their appearance – something which does not usually happen in the case of men. In "The Male Glance," Loofbourow describes what happens when we look at a woman's face, as opposed to looking at a man's face, and comments on how we are tempted to grade aesthetics based on a gender curve:

> When you look at a face you've been told is female, you critique it at a much higher resolution than you do that same face if it's labelled male. Women's skin should be smoother. We detect wrinkles, discolorations, and pores and subtract them from a woman's beauty in ways we don't if that same face is presented to us as masculine.

A similar gendered dynamic as the one depicted by Loofbourow is at play when it comes to appreciating male versus female protagonists, as I will further exemplify through two cases from both television and literature. Hannah Horvath, the main character of the television series *Girls* (2012 – 2017) is written as a deeply flawed character and pushes past the notion that female protagonists need to be role-models or even sympathetic. Consequently, the majority of popular press discourse villainizes Hannah for being a narcissist and blames her for being so blatantly self-centred (Nguyen; Davis; Lord). That is because, as Margaret Rodgers puts it in her thesis "Voices of A Generation: HBO's Postfeminist Anti-Heroes" (2018), for a long time, female characters only existed as one-dimensional complements to a male lead, hence there was little space left for female narcissism (27). Comparing Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist of *Sex and the City* (1998 – 2004), to anti-heroes such as Tony Soprano, Rodgers quotes Dickson's argument which exposes a double standard that exists within popular discourse:

> To recap: Walter White sold meth. Tony Soprano strangled a man in cold blood. Carrie Bradshaw slept around, bought lots of shoes, and maybe used the first-person a little too much for people's liking. (…) But I have yet to see anyone argue that Bryan Cranston or James Gandolfini 'set men back.' Anyone still want to argue that culturally entrenched sexism is no longer a thing? (qtd. in Rodgers 17)

Consequently, when it comes to male protagonists, a different set of values and assumptions are at stake. Don Draper, the protagonist of the television series *Mad Men* (2007 – 2015), is rarely characterized as narcissistic or self-centred, but rather as a "leader" or "boss," because viewers respect his authority as a patriarch (Rodgers 28). Similarly, as Annie Lord observes in an article for *Independent UK* published in 2020, the character of Hannah from *Girls* is so hated that viewers once voted her as more unlikeable than Hannibal Lecter, "a serial killer who, in one episode of the *Hannibal* TV series, saws a man's leg off and serves it to him for dinner."

In literature, a similar popular discourse distinctly encoded in gendered expectations follows the characters of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* versus Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Although both novels are thrillers centring around two psychopaths, with arguably the same level of self-involvement, the major difference lies in the fact that one is a woman and the other a man, which led to two entirely different receptions of these characters. Ellis' novel has been described as "a modern classic" and "one of the two zeitgeist pieces of fiction that defined America at the end of the last century and the start of this one, the other being Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*" (Welsh). As for *Gone Girl*, it is hard to find any articles defining the book as a "modern classic." Rather, articles are more interested in finding "What "Gone Girl" Is Really About" (Rothman) or "Debating The Complicated Gender Roles in "Gone Girl"" (Vary), with the main point of focus being Amy's peculiarly unfeminine behaviour. As such, postfeminist media culture does not only glorify a kind of endearing femininity (such as the one portrayed by Bridget Jones), but also villainizes (is perplexed by, or else, completely ignores) works that dare to flaunt this convention.

Individualism, Choice and Empowerment

Another key feature of postfeminism is its emphasis on individual choice and empowerment (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 153) as expressions of gender equality. The notion that our actions are freely chosen and not dependent upon external factors is central to postfeminist discourse, which presents women as now meritocratically-judged and autonomous beings that are no longer affected by any type of power imbalances (153). As such, women are often depicted in media as following their own desires for the sole purpose of "feeling good," and it is a moral imperative that they convince themselves they do it for themselves and not for a man. In her account of postfeminism's focus on individualism, Gill gives the example of young women who choose to have Brazilian waxes or breast augmentation surgery simply to feel good about themselves. However, what is not conveyed in this scenario are the underlying pressures that might push a young woman to do these things thinking that they might solve her problems, nor is the commercial interests of the other party (153). Moreover, despite postfeminism's strive to present women as fully autonomous agents who are no longer constraint by the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1999), it is interesting to observe how the resulting "new" look of women is still peculiarly conforming to patriarchal standards – hairless body, symmetrical body proportions or a highly feminine behaviour. In Gill's words, this discourse "simply avoids all the interesting and important questions about the relationship between representations and subjectivity, the difficult but crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass-mediated ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own" ("Postfeminist Media" 154).

Furthermore, the very fact that profit is gained from the exploitation of women's bodies points to the high success of contemporary capitalism, which, as Kat Banyard (2010) observes,

has managed to "package feminism and [sell] it back to us as empowerment via capitalistic means" (qtd. in Savigny and Warner 17-8). As Savigny and Warner further explain:

> [W]e consume in order to be feminists. In capitalist postfeminism we don't march to be feminist, or protest, or express our intellect, or autonomy; contemporary capitalist postfeminism means we buy fake boobs, and head on to reality TV programmes. We buy into the 'enlightened sexism' purveyed by our media cultures. (18)

The notion of "enlightened sexism" becomes immediately apparent in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. As McRobbie observes, the movie celebrates the idea of personal freedom and empowerment, but it is worth asking what exactly translates as personal freedom in this case. Although Bridget works in a reputable publishing house, she is not particularly career-minded. Her most ardent desire, she hints in her diary, is to find the right man. The movie itself confirms this motif when the opening scene finds Bridget worrying about remaining alone, while the soundtrack of "All By Myself" by Jamie McNeal distinctly plays in the background. Despite the many choices and freedoms she rejoices in, Bridget is constantly reminded of a number of risks she is undertaking – the risk of not ending up with the right man, the risk of missing the chance to get pregnant, and the risk of remaining a spinster, forever isolated from the world of happy couples. Therefore, with the burden of personal freedom so apparent, Bridget seems to be willing to give it all up in exchange for a simpler and happier destiny (McRobbie 20). In this case, again, feminist values are taken into account, but only to be repudiated and repackaged as burdensome politics in a postfeminist context. In this modernized version of womanhood, it is of utmost importance that one's actions are presented as freely chosen – yet how inegalitarian, traditional and old-fashioned they are should be completely and unapologetically overlooked (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 154).

Another example where the concept of female individualisation (as a dismantling of the feminist movement) is offered by Christina Scharff in her thesis exploring women's relation with feminism (2009). A participant named Miranda told Christina about a job she had been offered in a high-profile industry, admitting that she got the job because she was a "girl" and because she was "pretty" (156). She continues by mentioning that "that's what they want, they want to be able to take a pretty girl with, to a client lunch, and keep the client interested. I know that, it doesn't bother me, but, I know it is not right maybe, but I don't really care, I could use it to my advantage too" (156). As Scharff observes, although Miranda demonstrates feminist awareness by acknowledging that "it is not right," she rationalizes her gendered objectification by claiming that it could benefit her. In this case, various ideas pertaining to postfeminist discourse that I previously discussed become immediately noticeable. Firstly, the "double entanglement" notion proposed by McRobbie is made apparent by the incorporation of both feminist and anti-feminist claims (McRobbie 12). Secondly, there is the emphasis on femininity as a bodily property (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 149) since the participant mentions that she managed to get the job because she was a girl and she was pretty. Thirdly, as Scharff observes, feminist standpoints are made irrelevant (156). Finally, and perhaps above all, the participant's statement reflects the postfeminist emphasis on choice, empowerment and individualism (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 153).

Irony and Knowingness

I have previously described irony as being an important factor when indulging in the so-called "guilty pleasures," or, more specifically, in finding solace in patriarchal values by resorting to

describing them as "harmless fun" (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 160). Indeed, irony and "knowingness," as Gill describes them, are two essential vehicles of postfeminism. As both Gill and McRobbie agree, the idea of "knowingness" is mostly used in contemporary advertising, with the intention of hailing audiences as sophisticated consumers, by "flattering them with their awareness of intertextual references and the notion that they can 'see through' attempts to manipulate them" (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 159). Similarly, irony can be used in postfeminist discourses as a way of maintaining a safe distance between oneself and certain beliefs, without having to take responsibility for them. According to Gill, in postfeminist media culture, "irony has become a way of 'having it both ways', of expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually 'meant'" (159).

More specifically, McRobbie critiques a television advertisement from 1998/9, in which supermodel Claudia Schiffer takes off her clothes while descending a flight of stairs on the way to her new Citroen car all the while maintaining that it is a self-consciously sexist advertisement, therefore it is justifiable. She goes on to explain how the advertisement seems to claim that there is no exploitation involved – the woman is doing it knowingly and for her own enjoyment. Moreover, the audience is aware that Claudia Schiffer is one of the world's most famous and highly paid supermodels, hence any impulse to call the advertisement sexist is instantly dismissed and even runs the risk to be ridiculed (McRobbie 17). As such, this advertisement is distinctly postfeminist in nature, as it comprises all the characteristics analysed so far: its obsession with femininity (with enormous emphasis on the model's flawless body), freedom of choice and empowerment (she does not only deliberately invite "the male gaze," but she rejoices in it), as well as being highly conscious of her position, to the point where any kind of objection will be prevented by the advertisement's ironical nature. Once again, the ironical nature of this

advertisement supports McRobbie's claim that postfeminism takes feminist elements into account for the sole purpose of showing its current uselessness.

A similar dynamic is at play in the Wonderbra advertisement portraying model Eva Herzigova looking down admirably and invitingly at her cleavage, which, as McRobbie mentions, was positioned in major high street locations throughout UK on full size billboards (16). Here, as well, the male gaze is invited without any sense of guilt, hinting that is once again permissible to take pleasure in women's bodies. In doing that, the advertisement seems to count on the audience as sophisticated and irony-aware consumers. As McRobbie puts it, "the younger female viewer, along with her male counterparts, educated in irony and visually literate, is not made angry by such a repertoire. She appreciates its layers of meaning, she gets the joke" (17).

As Heike Missler notes, the postfeminist sense of humour that McRobbie describes in this advertisement is a generational phenomenon, as only those who had grown up in the aftermath of the 1960s and 1970s feminism can smile at a self-consciously sexist advertisement. Viewers are therefore put in a conflicted situation. On the one hand, they intuitively know that they should find the advertisement offensive due to its conspicuous sexism; on the other hand, the self-consciousness of the image implies that there is no sexism involved and that the model is admiring her own cleavage out of her own choice (120). Once again, the notion of "personal choice" is invoked as a way to dismiss accusations of sexism. Elspeth Probyn coined the term "choiceoisie" to represent those who choose to "[make] it look as if choices do not have any political/ social meaning and effects" (qtd. in Missler 120). Her statement is, moreover, closely linked to Gill's notion of neoliberalism as being an important factor in postfeminist discourse (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 163). According to Gill, in postfeminist media culture, neoliberalism

has shifted from being a political and economic rationality to a mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres. She defines the term as the following:

> Neoliberalism is understood increasingly as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The individual must bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their actions. (163)

Gill's definition of neoliberalism underlines how, in postfeminist discourse, women, to a much greater extent than men, are required to work to transform the self and present every action as freely chosen (163). Because of that, making use of irony fosters ambiguity, as the meaning encoded by the ironist (the producer) can differ from the meaning decoded by the interpreter (Missler 119). An example of how irony can work both ways is provided by Hutcheon who cites Madonna's entire career being based on her ironic performances (qtd. in Missler 122). The pop star's procedure of creating a spectacle of her sexuality can either be interpreted as deconstructing patriarchal values or as bowing to them. As Missler asks, "is she successful because of her irony or because of her complicity?" (122). Any attempts to offer a critique against such practices will, nowadays, be dismissed as subscribing to the "feminist thought police" (Gill, "Postfeminist Media" 161) or to the "feminist killjoy" described by Sara Ahmed (2010), which tells us something important about the power of irony in contemporary media.

Different Types of (Post)feminisms

I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter that many scholars indicate the year 1990 as a turning point in feminist history, as a demarcation of when we entered the postfeminist moment.

Yet, it is important to note that postfeminism itself has taken many different shapes over the years, highlighting a multiplicity of different "feminisms" that, as I will show, exist in tension with each other.

An interesting topic to consider is the relation between feminism and femininity since the 1990s until the current moment. If the 1990s and early 2000s portrayed a kind of feminism that was simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated (McRobbie 32), making many women refusing to claim the label of being a feminist out of fear of being considered unfeminine (Scharff, "On (Not) Wearing Pink" 111), the feminism displayed today is increasingly desirable, stylish, and decidedly marketable (Gill, "Post-postfeminism" 611), all the while being highly embedded in our celebrity culture. Both these seemingly antithetic positions exemplify a postfeminist logic, in which feminism is either considered "valuable" yet outdated, hence irrelevant to the present, or fiercely repudiated as extreme and dogmatic (Scharff, *Young Women* 5). Nonetheless, in either case, the feminism presented falls in line with its broader cultural moment and, I would argue, does little to challenge patriarchal values.

In an article titled "On (not) wearing pink" (2019), Christina Scharff analyses Charlotte Curtis' book *Feminists Don't Wear Pink and Other Lies* and quotes the following passage which specifically highlights the type of feminism that was prevailing the early 2000s:

> Feminists didn't use make-up (my favorite hobby). They didn't shave their legs (my favorite form of exercise). Feminists didn't like boys (my favorite type of human) and, most importantly, feminists definitely didn't wear pink. And pink was my favorite colour. (113)

As Scharff notes, what Curtis references in this passage is the image of a feminist that exists concomitantly with the image of an unfeminine woman. That is, a woman who is purposefully unconventional because she refuses to participate in activities that are associated with conventional femininity (113). In this light, the highly cited statement "I am not a feminist, but…" (Buschman and Lenart 1996; Moi 2006; Dotollo 2011; Seron, Silbey, Cech, Rubineau 2018) could be interpreted as a confirmation of a woman's femininity, suggesting that although she is not an "unfeminine" woman, she still holds feminist views (Scharff, *Young Women* 39). Yet, this rejection of feminism as unfeminine could also be interpreted as a performative act that reiterates the normative femininity and heterosexuality of pre-feminist days (39). As Scharff puts it, "young women's repudiation of feminism could be regarded as performative citations of femininity which re-affirm heteronormativity through repeated performances of culturally sanctioned acts that emerge from and reinforce the heterosexual matrix" (40).

In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed offers the example of "the happy housewife," which she describes as "a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labour under the sign of happiness (50), but which, nonetheless, retains its force as a place holder for women's desires. To illustrate her point, Ahmed quotes the following passage from Darla Shine's *Happy Housewives:* "Being home in a warm, comfy house floating around in your pajamas and furry slippers whiles sipping coffee as your babies play on the floor and your hubby works hard to pay for it all is not desperation. Grow up! Shut Up! Count your blessings!" (qtd. in Ahmed 52). In associating the image of the "happy housewife" with an image of leisure, comfort and ease, Shine calls for a return to pre-feminist times, when women had not given up their feminine values in order to become invested in "being desperate," while being betrayed by the feminist movement which has "dropped the ball for women at home" (qtd. in Ahmed 52).

Nonetheless, the idea that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive was not only apparent in the realm of cultural representations during the 2000s but was also based on everyday, societal observations. Sue Sharpe's findings from 2001 show how the stereotype of all feminists being "man-hating lesbians" was very common even amongst British heterosexual women in her study (qtd. in Scharff, *Young Women* 41). Similarly, Rúdólfsdóttir and Jolliffe's study from 2008 stressed how the word "feminist" had negative connotations amongst women and was often seen as antithetical with femininity (qtd. in Scharff, *Young Women* 41).

Over the years, however, women's relationship with feminism has changed, albeit not necessarily for the better. In an article published in 2016, Gill positions the current moment as "one of the most bewildering in the history of sexual politics," claiming that "for every uplifting account of feminist activism, there is another of misogyny; for every feminist "'win'," an outpouring of hate, ranging from sexual harassment to death threats against those involved; for every instance of feminist solidarity, another of vicious trolling" (613). Indeed, we are living in a social, cultural and political moment which is perhaps best described as incorporating both feminist and anti-feminist ideas that are deeply entangled with ideas of individualism. This type of feminism is, as Gill describes it, "stylish, successful, and youthfully hip" (Gill, "Post-postfeminism" 610), and provides a newly found reassurance of and return to femininity.

The portrayal of the current feminism as both positive and outdated is best described by Whelehan's statement that "in today's cultural climate feminism is at one and the same time credited with furthering women's independence and dismissed as irrelevant to a new generation of women who no longer need to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy because they have already 'arrived'" (qtd. in Scharff, *Young Women* 146). Nonetheless, there remains a complicated

ambivalence about it. The following statement of one woman, called Julia, interviewed by Scharff best underlines the perplexing postfeminist sensibility of today's world:

> We are not free. I would like to say that. (…) we haven't reached a state where we can lean back and say: 'no matter what, I still want that my bum doesn't have any wrinkles'. (…) [T]here is often this kind of 'it's all good and now we can look after ourselves again and be beautiful and take care of our bodies' and so on. That's bullshit. I don't think it has stopped. Somehow, something else has happened, I think, something else took place, I really can't describe it any better, it has somehow fizzled out. (142)

The "something else" that Julia refers to is a cultural shift that no longer depicts feminism in an entirely negative light, but rather positions it as a positive movement that has brought important changes, which, in turn, renders it anachronistic and therefore no longer needed (McRobbie 2008; Scharff 2009). Unlike the feminism of the 2000s, the "hip and youthful" feminism of today's culture is unapologetically associated with beauty and femininity. This idea is exemplified by a comment made by Grazia columnist Polly Vernon when talking about her book *Hot Feminist* (2015), in which she invites her reader to look at feminism as "rebranded": "What kind of feminist does that make me? The shavey-leggy, fashion-fixated, wrinkle averse, weight-conscious kind of feminist. The kind who likes hot pink and boys; oh, I like boys! I like boys so much…" (qtd. in Gill, "Post-postfeminism" 618). As such, this "rebranded" type of feminism does not only champion femininity, fashion-love and consumerism, but it is also unencumbered by the need to have a position on anything (618) and is resolutely *not* angry. The following statement written by Vernon describes it best:

> Of course, I should probably say at this juncture that I have absolutely no idea how you should be a feminist. None. I don't know, and I wouldn't begin to try to tell you. I wouldn't dare tell you, indeed, and nor should anyone else, for the basic reason that you are YOU, which makes you a very different kettle of feminist fish from ME, or indeed THEM. (618)

The figure of the woman as decisively *not* angry or, as the subtitle of *Hot Feminist* puts it, "modern feminism with style, without judgement," is distinctly positioned against the "feminist killjoy" discussed by Ahmed in her book titled *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). According to Ahmed, the feminist killjoy ruins the happiness of others and refuses to convene by continuously exposing feelings that are negated under public signs of joy (65). Moreover, continues Ahmed, feminists kill joy by disturbing the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places (66) – such as moments of sexism or patriarchal acceptance.

Ahmed's exploration of the figure of a feminist killjoy is useful to the understanding of the rather radical perceptions of feminists of the early 2000s (described in terms such as "man-hating lesbians," as I previously argued). The figure of the radical feminist or troublemaker thus shares the same horizon with Ahmed's feminist killjoy – they are both highly repudiated for their refusal to conform to certain standards – an idea that is crucial for my subsequent analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* and their deliberate disturbance of normative femininity. As such, this chapter on postfeminism as a theoretical background that defines contemporary feminist practices is needed to better understand what McRobbie calls the re-instatement of gender hierarchies through new subtle forms of resurgent patriarchal power (47); making sense of the values and ideas signalled by "postfeminism" is key when discussing texts that challenge them. Ultimately, I want to establish that the extra-textual conversation labelling

the female characters from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* “unlikeable” is precisely encoded in postfeminist ideals of womanhood.

Chapter Two: (Un)happiness and (Un)likeability in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

While the feel-good/self-care industry is flourishing and the field of positive psychology is becoming increasingly popular in order to keep up with postfeminist images of women as empowered and aspirational subjects (as discussed in Chapter 1), the recent proliferation of "unlikeable" woman-centred novels, such as Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, shift away from these norms to a more subversive approach to women's issues.

In this chapter, I will employ Sara Ahmed's theories on happiness, as discussed in her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), to analyse the way in which Moshfegh's protagonist refuses to contain her dark feelings in order to gratify patriarchal expectations of women as feminine, docile, and contented beings. I focus on (un)happiness as an umbrella term for what in feminist cultural studies of emotion and affect is known as "bad feelings" (Ngai 2005; Stephens 2016). These feelings include fatigue, ennui, boredom, cynicism, indifference, depression, etc., all of which are being explored in Moshfegh's novel. Yet instead of pathologizing the protagonist's unhappiness, I aim to shed light on the problematic relationship between happiness and likeability. Simply put, I will analyse how being unhappy (and, subsequently, socially disobedient) as a female character translates into being unlikeable in a society that prioritizes positivity above everything else and demands that women assume normative, feminine identities.

The twenty-first century has seen a considerable rise in fictional female villains (see, for example, the protagonists of *Gone Girl* or *Killing Eve*); these characters have not always been as common or popular as they are today. As I argued in Chapter 1 of this thesis, with the emergence of the postfeminist culture in the 1990s came the introduction of chick lit and chick flicks, two

genres that Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young describe as featuring "single women in their twenties and thirties navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships" (qtd. in Gwin 47). Despite their undeniable popularity, chick lit and chick flicks have been regarded by various feminist scholars as failing to critically engage with women's struggles under patriarchy, and, as I mentioned previously, they almost always conclude with a happy ending. As such, by the end of the movie or book, most heroines find a solution to their career problems and fall in love with the man of their dreams. As Genz and Brabon argue, these genres "[do] not know what to do with the problems and paradoxes [they] unearth about contemporary women's lives and experiences (qtd. in Gwin 48).

The underlying positivity of these genres could be read in line with Rosi Braidotti's feminist philosophy, which is grounded in an "ethics of joy and affirmation" and argues that feminism is best served by "a more joyful and empowering concept of desire and for a political economy that foregrounds positivity, not gloom" (qtd. in Stephens 275). The problem with this stance, however, is that this ethics of joy and positivity is also coupled for Braidotti with the moral obligation to "avoid sadness and the relations that express sadness" (276), which places further constraints on individuals who fail to meet these standards. Elizabeth Stephens describes this issue in "Bad Feelings: An Affective Genealogy of Feminism" (2016):

> When joy and positivity are privileged as ethical states, despondency and negative might be construed as personal ethical failings in a way that overlooks how mediated these affects are by wider cultural and subjective forces. Such a move places responsibility for cultural affective conditions—such as misery in the face of structural oppression—onto the shoulders of individual subjects, not all of whom share Braidotti's considerable resilience or privilege. (276)

Nonetheless, other feminist theorists have not been as dismissive of the role of emotional negativity as Braidotti. Sianne Ngai, in her book *Ugly Feelings* (2005), raises important questions about negative feelings and their ambiguous relationship with political action. According to Ngai, negative emotions that underline situations of suspended agency are charged with political meaning, as they encourage us to ponder the following questions:

> What, if anything, is this inexpressive character feeling? Is [this character's] unyielding passivity, even in the polemical act of withholding his labor ("I prefer not to"), radical or reactionary? Should we read his inertness as part of a volitional strategy that anticipates styles of nonviolent political activism to come, or merely as a sign of what we now call depression? (1)

By considering such questions, Ngai looks at the political potential of unprestigious feelings over grander passions that pervade contemporary media culture – such as sympathetic associations towards strong, inspirational and cheerful female characters – which further allows for fresh examinations of cultural products (either movies or literature) that are deemed subversive for their portrayal of dysphoric feelings.

Following Ngai's thinking, James Burford notes in "What Might 'Bad Feelings' Be Good For?" (2017) that feelings that are usually interpreted as positive and strong, such as hope and optimism, are the ones that are usually connected with political potential, whereas weak or "bad" feelings, such as depression, numbness or fatigue are often described as political liabilities (70). In this chapter, rather than pathologizing "bad" feelings as politically useless, I argue that they might, in fact, have a political impact precisely because they do not comply with the pervasive positivity and *happiness* imposed by the postfeminist society. Therefore, negativity, as well as

unhappiness, in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* provides a way to critique the compulsory positivity of contemporary Western societies.

Throughout *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the nameless protagonist experiences many of the previously mentioned "bad" feelings, from chronic fatigue and ennui, to brutal honesty and rudeness towards her only remaining friend, Reva: "You're needy (…) Sounds frustrating," she tells her (Moshfegh 13). After quitting her job at an art gallery – where the art was supposed to be subversive and shocking but, in reality, it was all just "canned counterculture crap" (36) – the protagonist sets on a journey to "hibernate" for an entire year, a project she describes as "self-preservational" (7). The psychopharmaceuticals prescribed by Dr. Tuttle, a questionably-accredited psychiatrist who helps with her year-long induced coma, are what allow the nameless protagonist to detach herself from the conscious world. As such, a new routine installs itself:

> I took a shower once a week at most. I stopped tweezing, stopped bleaching, stopped waxing, stopped brushing my hair. No moisturizing or exfoliating. No shaving. I left the apartment infrequently. I had all my bills on automatic payment plans. I'd already paid a year of property taxes on my apartment and on my dead parents' old house upstate. Rent money from the tenants in that house showed up in my checking account by direct deposit every month. Unemployment was rolling in as long as I made the weekly call into automated service and pressed "1" for yes when the robot asked if I'd made a sincere effort to find a job. (2-3)

In just this paragraph, the novel manages to dismiss many of the implicit imperatives that postfeminism places on women, as described in Chapter 1. Firstly, the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline is completely dissolved by Moshfegh, whose protagonist

does little (if anything) to keep up with traditional feminine practice of self-maintenance. Secondly, the obsession with femininity as a bodily property as well as the emphasis upon consumerism are two notions that the protagonist overlooks with total indifference while engaging in her experiment in oblivion. Finally, although female empowerment, even when following a postfeminist logic, aims to present women as fully autonomous agents that are no longer constraint by the "male gaze," it is important to note the difference between what is described as female empowerment in Moshfegh's novel, as opposed to what empowerment means in a distinctly postfeminist novel or movie, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Thus, if Bridget's most ardent desire is to lose weight and look as attractive as possible for her male boss (conforming, once again, to patriarchal as well as postfeminist standards), Moshfegh's protagonist portrays empowerment as exactly the opposite, by assuming an entirely asocial behaviour and dismissing conventional ideals of feminine beauty and grooming.

Unlike Braidotti, Ahmed, in her study of happiness, sets out to reclaim the importance of emotional negativity and *un*happiness for feminism, by focusing on those who "are banished from [joy], or who enter this history only as troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy" (17). Based on the numerous critiques that position this character as "unlikeable" (Lincoln; Wilson), I argue that Moshfegh's protagonist inhabits Ahmed's description of a "killjoy" or "troublemaker." As Ahmed argues, to be a good modern subject is to be perceived as a happiness-cause, as making others happy. To be bad is, thus, to be a killjoy (20). This chapter proceeds by claiming that it is precisely the lack of happiness that readers found in this book that made them dislike its protagonist. Therefore, the next section of this chapter is devoted to understanding the unhappy effects of happiness and discovering how happiness is used as a disciplinary technique that constructs subjects by orientating them around cultural norms.

The Unhappy Effects of Happiness

Phrases such as “I just want you to be happy” or “I am happy if you are happy” are commonly exchanged within intimate relationships, yet what is rarely asked is: where does the imperative to be happy come from? Although happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, that does not necessarily mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness (Ahmed 1).

This part of the chapter does not aim to provide a history of happiness. Instead, based on Ahmed’s research, I am interested to find out how happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, and what happens with subjects who do not conform to happiness as a “wishful politics” (as Simone de Beauvoir puts it), which demands others to live according to a (societal) wish (qtd. in Ahmed 2). According to Richard Layard, happiness, in its simplest definition, is “feeling good,” while misery is “feeling bad,” which further implies that one can measure happiness in terms of how good people feel (qtd. in Ahmed 5). As Ahmed notes, happiness research is primarily based on self-reporting: if people say they are happy, then they are perceived to be happy. The problem with self-reporting, however, is that it presumes a transparency of self-feeling, which means that we rely on people to be entirely aware of their feelings and to justify them accordingly (6). Let us consider, once again, the figure of “the happy housewife.” When authors such as Darla Shine (as quoted in Chapter 1) associates the image of the “happy housewife” with an image of leisure, comfort and ease (based on her own findings and self-reporting), that does not mean that her experience is representative of how it generally feels like to be a housewife or that all women share her views. Rather, to claim that all women

are happy doing housework is, according to Ahmed, to justify gendered forms of labor (50). As she puts it, "how better to secure consent to unpaid and poorly paid labor than to describe such consent as the origin of good feeling?" (50).

Another model of measuring happiness is put forth by Meik Wiking, CEO of The Happiness Research Institute in Denmark. According to Wiking, a simple technique to collect data on happiness levels around the world is simply noticing people: "After observing the person for five seconds (…) I note down whether they smile or not, their gender, estimate their age, jot down whether they are with someone or not and what they are doing" (Wiking).

As mentioned on its website, when measuring happiness, The Happiness Research Institute examines three different dimensions: the cognitive (overall life satisfaction), the affective (what kind of emotions – both positive and negative – people experience daily), and the eudaimonic dimension. The latter dimension builds on Aristotle's perception of "the good life." As Ahmed notes, the happiest life, according to Aristotle, is the life devoted to "contemplative speculation," as a form of life that would only be available to some and not others (qtd. in Ahmed 13). Moreover, it is worth noting that Aristotle's argument that the happiest life is the one devoted to contemplative speculation is also a life of high moral standards, a life that "conforms with virtue" and "involves serious purpose, and does not consist in amusement" (Aristotle 273). Furthermore, as Ahmed observes, to consider happiness as a form of "world making" is to consider how happiness makes the world cohere around the "right people." Thus, where we find happiness teaches us more about what *we* value rather than what is *of value* (13). In that case, Ahmed argues, "happiness not only becomes what is valued," but rather "allows other values to acquire their value." As such, when we think of happiness as a self-evident good, then it becomes precisely the evidence of the good (13).

If we follow the Aristotelian definition of a good life as a contemplative one, that further conforms with virtue and involves a serios purpose, then, by definition, Moshfegh's protagonist positions herself at the other extreme, since her biggest desire is to "escape the prison of [her] mind and body" (Moshfegh 18) by sleeping all day, for an entire year. For her, sleep is the source of infinite pleasure and freedom, which provides "the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of [her] waking consciousness" (46). If philosophers find values in "the thinking of thought," as Ahmed puts it, then Moshfegh's protagonist finds value in the act of sleeping. Nonetheless, she assures the reader from the beginning of the novel, her intentions are not suicidal; rather, they are "self-preservational," since "[she] thought [sleeping] was going to save [her] life" (7). She notes:

> This was good, I thought. I was finally doing something that really mattered. Sleep felt productive. Something was getting sorted out. I knew in my heart – this was, perhaps, the only thing my heart knew back then – that when I'd sleep enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reburned. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be but a dream, and I could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation. (Moshfegh 51)

Based on Layard's definition of happiness as "feeling good," or the definition provided by the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as "a state of well-being and contentment" as well as "a pleasurable or satisfying experience," it can be argued that Moshfegh's protagonist does not share these feelings, which positions her as an *un*happy character. According to Ahmed, the history of the word "unhappy" can teach a lot about the unhappiness of the history of happiness. In one of its earliest use, "unhappy" meant "causing misfortune or trouble" (qtd. in Ahmed 17). Yet, "to

cause" is a causative verb, which indicates that a subject will cause some type of change, i.e., it will cause something or someone to do or be something. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the same verb as "an agent that brings something about" and the provided example is "She is the cause of your troubles." This example is significant in the way it sheds light on the effects that an unhappy subject has on another subject, which can be interpreted as unhappiness that brings about unhappiness. In that sense, both good and bad feelings can be generative, which means that if people feel bad, they can certainly bring other people down. According to Ahmed, when people complain, worry or express pessimism about the future, they can also cause the recipients of these expressions to act in the same way as a form of return, which will affect what impressions they have of that place or person (43).

Moreover, a more recent definition of the word "unhappy" is, as Ahmed notes, "miserable in lot or circumstances" or "wretched in mind." The word "wretched" has a suggestive genealogy, coming from "wretch," which refers to "a stranger, exile, or banished person." As Ahmed observes, "the wretch is not only the one driven out of his or her native country but is also defined as one who is "sunk in deep distress, sorrow, misfortune, or poverty (…) a miserable, unhappy, or unfortunate person"" (17).

Therefore, if one puts these two definitions together, it can be argued that, in being unhappy (and, thus, different from the postfeminist characters examined in Chapter 1, who are depicted as following their own desires for the sole purpose of feeling good and being happy), Moshfegh's protagonist is not only perceived as a stranger to the twenty-first century promise of happiness for all women, but is also the *cause* of unhappiness for others who are looking for happiness in places that is nowhere to be found. Nonetheless, in a book where the main premise displays unperturbed inertness for an entire year, it could even be argued that the protagonist's

objective is to not *cause* anything. Hence, the protagonist's refusal to actively generate anything, I maintain, is precisely what is so appalling to the twenty-first century readers living in a labour-demanding society. As such, the protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* manages to disrupt the postfeminist fantasy of ubiquitous happiness not by teaching what it means to assume the role of a stranger or a banished person, but by estranging us from the very happiness of the familiar. In doing that, she is positioned as an anti-heroine and, as the title of this thesis puts it, becomes "unlikeable" in a society that prioritizes good feelings:

> Sometimes what you encounter cannot extend the good feeling; then you lose the good feeling and you are "brought down." Such moments of loss are quickly converted into anger: you become angry as the object not only hurts but has taken your good feelings away. Happiness is precarious and even perverted because it does not reside within objects or subjects (…) but is a matter of how things make an impression. (Ahmed 44)

The Figure of a Female Troublemaker

Time magazine once described the works of Charles Bukowski, one of Moshfegh's literary influences, as the "laureate of American lowlife," which led critics such as Ariel Levy to claim in a 2018 article titled "Ottessa Moshfegh's Otherwordly Fiction" that "[t]he underbelly of human behaviour and emotion could be literature, if it was approached with sufficient precision and passion." In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the unnamed protagonist locks herself in her apartment and spends most of her time sleeping, aided by Neuroproxin, Maxiphenphen, Valdignore and Silencior supplemented with Seconol, Nembutal, Valium, Librium, Placydil, Noctec, Miltown "when [she] suspected [she] was lonely" (26). Nonetheless, despite the novel's

seemingly lifeless plot, countless articles have been written about its protagonist, many of them focusing on her morally questionable traits (Levy; Tolentino; Lincoln; Stoner; Miller).

"If you're the type of reader who is looking for friends, Ottessa Moshfegh is probably not the writer for you. [Her] oeuvre reads almost like an attempt to see just how 'unlikeable' characters can get," claims Michel Lincoln in an article written for *Chicago Review of Books* published in 2018. Having thus established Moshfegh's protagonist as an anti-heroine that portrays "being alive when alive feels horrible" (Tolentino), this chapter continues by considering the nameless protagonist as someone who is alienated from the postfeminist promise of happiness and gender equality, by speaking from recognition of how it feels to inhabit the place of an unlikeable, unhappy female character. In doing this, I borrow Ahmed's figure of the "troublemaker," which she defines as someone who does not place her hopes for happiness in the "right" things, but who speaks out about her unhappiness with the very obligation to be made happy by such things (60). Lastly, by discussing the agentic potential of a female troublemaker, this part of the chapter aims to allow the text to become "readable in new ways" (Ngai 8) and therefore generate fresh examinations of cultural issues related to women's portrayal in literature.

"We are all going numb," Dahlia Lithwick writes in a 2018 article for *Slate* Magazine, hinting at political engagement in the Trump era. Going numb, in the face of a disconcerting daily reality is always a more seductive choice than standing up to it. "It was easy to ignore things that didn't concern me," Moshfegh's narrator similarly says. "Subways workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn't matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn't have worried" (Moshfegh 4). The protagonist's underlying passivity and indifference to the waking world gets her fired from her

job at Ducat. In a small act of rebellion, she defecates on the floor of the gallery: "That was my proper goodbye" (51).

Recently orphaned, the protagonist has exactly two personal relationships: a sporadic relationship with Trevor, an older man working in finance, and a friendship-kept-at-bay with a character called Reva, who occasionally visits her at her apartment. In both relationships, she resists every stereotype of the female nurturer, while she also looks down on "dudes" reading Nietzsche, Proust and David Foster Wallace on the subway, "jotting down their brilliant thoughts into a black Moleskine pocket notebook" (32), which further reflects her rejection of the contemplative life that involves "serious purpose," as discussed earlier in this chapter. Through the figure of Reva, the narrator dissects her disappointments with the postfeminist lifestyle. Because of that, just as McRobbie claims that postfeminism takes feminist elements into account only to dismiss and repudiate them, so I argue that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* takes *post*feminist elements into account in order to ridicule them.

Following a similar pattern as in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Reva has an affair with her boss, and her biggest obsession is conformity, fitting in. Further, in accordance with a distinctly postfeminist logic, Reva, who has a bachelor's degree in economics from Columbia University, works a pink-collar job as an executive assistant and is obsessed with her looks:

> Nothing hurt Reva more than effortless beauty, like mine. When we'd watch Before Sunrise on video one day, she'd said, "Did you know Julie Delpy's a feminist? I wonder if that's why she's not skinnier. No way they'd cast her in this role if she were American. See how soft her arms are? (Moshfegh 10)

The character of Reva inhabits, thus, all the postfeminist characteristics discussed in Chapter 1. She is an obsessive dieter and places her trust in life philosophies from "self-help books that usually combined some new dieting technique with professional development and romantic relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women "how to live up to their full potential"" (15). Moreover, she fits Tasker and Negra's definition of postfeminist women as empowered consumers by always staying up to date on the latest brand names – "She made regular trips to Chinatown for the latest knockoff designer handbags," the narrator claims (Moshfegh 9).

Yet, despite her deepest efforts, Reva is portrayed as an unfortunate character, always envious of the narrator's effortless demeanour. As the protagonist mentions, "[s]he saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes. I had chosen my solitude and purposelessness, and Reva had, despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted – *no husband, no children, no fabulous career*" (14, emphasis added). Just like Bridget Jones, Reva's most ardent desire is to find the right man and start a family before it is too late, which are ideas that are presented to the reader as freely chosen, and as the primary source of this character's happiness.

According to Ahmed, happiness databases show us which individuals are happier than others, and by making correlations between happiness levels and social indicators, they create the so-called "happiness indicators." Marriage, Ahmed notes, is generally considered one of the primary indicators of happiness. The argument is simple: if one is married, then it is predicted that one is more likely to be happier than if one is not married. The danger here, however, is that such finding can also be perceived as a recommendation: "get married and you will be happier!" (6). In this sense, the science of happiness could be described as performative: by finding

happiness in certain places, Ahmed argues, those places are presented as being *good*, as being what should be promoted as goods (6). Nonetheless, even when the opposite is proven (that not all women are happy being married, having children, or following a certain lifestyle), societal norms are still not put into question, and happiness continues to be searched in places where it is expected to be found, even when happiness is reported as missing (7).

The fact that many would see Reva's behaviour as "normal" is a reminder of the dominance of postfeminism over the contemporary society, where it has become commonplace to blindly follow societal norms, thinking that they act in your best interest. However, in an article for *Pacific Standard*, Rebecca Stoner critiques such normative ideas of postfeminist womanhood, and delineates a sharp distinction between the protagonist and Reva, claiming that "our narrator's determination to sleep for a year, to truly drop out, seems like a respectable rebellion." The protagonist, therefore, manages not only to distance herself from cultural norms and ideals that her friend, Reva, lives by, but also ridicules the obscene standards that are imposed on women. "I really hated when she talked like that," the narrator mentions after listening to Reva's advice on how to pre-plan outfits for the workweek on Sunday evening, as a way to avoid second-guessing in the morning (15).

As such, Moshfegh's protagonist refuses to conform to postfeminist imperatives of bettering oneself in order to "flourish" in an increasingly meritocratic society. On the contrary, she consumes drugs, watches bad television and eats bodega food. However, in doing that, she manages to act in a way that real-life women can relate to, as opposed to merely regurgitating aspirational female stereotypes: "Almost offensive with its close-to-bone truths, [*My Year of Rest and Relaxation*] is shockingly relatable," writes Isabel Dexter for *Elle* magazine. Moreover, the protagonist inhabits Ahmed's figure of a troublemaker by *passively* refusing to conform to

societal norms and by destroying what is thought by others not only as being good, but as the cause of happiness (Ahmed 65). In this case, that could be the figure of a female character as *likeable*, strong, aspirational or simply happy. Therefore, Moshfegh's protagonist spoils the happiness of others by refusing to go along with public displays of happiness, and in doing that, she manages to widen the horizons of women's portrayal in literature.

Happiness as End-oriented

Happiness is often described as what we aim for, or as an objective, which usually translates in the following formula: "If I do this, *then* I will be happy." Classically, Ahmed argues, happiness has been considered as an end, rather than a means. Aristotle viewed happiness as "that which all things aimed at." Thus, for him, happiness "is not just an end, but the perfect end" (qtd. Ahmed 26). The last part of this chapter argues that the amoral and non-cathartic ending of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is the final constituent that resulted in the readers' lack of satisfaction with its protagonist. Moreover, I argue that the picture that postfeminism paints of women as morally beatific beings consequently builds high expectations in readers who will, in turn, be negatively affected by the protagonist's failure to live up to their standards.

According to Ahmed, the judgement about certain objects as being "happy" is already made before they are even encountered. Moreover, these objects are attributed as the cause of happiness, which means that they already circulate as social goods before we "happen" upon them – which explains why we might happen upon them in the first place (28). One such example could be marriage or the wedding day as the happiest day of a person's life (29). Therefore, "objects" would refer not only to physical or material things, but also to anything one

imagines as leading to happiness, including values, aspirations, expectations, as well as forms of art (29).

Let us consider, once again, the popularity of a movie (or novel) such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*. When the movie was first released, women celebrated Bridget as an iconic figure that they could empathize with, because she resembled their own experiences with dating life. Moreover, Bridget's quirky personality and self-mocking attitude made her relatable for women who also failed to find love (Gwin 49). According to Imelda Whelehan, "women readers 'feel so much better about their own attempts at self-improvement' after witnessing Bridget's pathetic attempts to make herself more appealing to men" (qtd. in Gwin 50). Most importantly, as Stephanie Gwin argues, despite Bridget's constant errors and self-loathing, audiences root for her because she represents what a woman should be – funny, vulnerable, feminine. Moreover, Bridget knows that she should never express anger, and, above everything, her biggest desire is to start her own nuclear family. As such, it is precisely because Bridget does not stray away from postfeminist perceptions of female aspirations that she is rewarded at the end of the movie with the man of her dreams (51).

The protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* refuses to be associated with these stereotypes, yet she nonetheless buys into a cynical idea of happiness as nothing more than a respite from pain (Stoner). In order to cope with her grief over her parents' death, her loneliness, and her feelings that life might not be worth living, she plunges into oblivion with drugs from Dr. Tuttle, a character who, at her best, is able to offer superficial advice such as "Dial 9-1-1 if anything bad happens" and "Use reason when you feel you can. There's no way to know how these medications will affect you" (25). When Reva questions the wisdom of her plan, the protagonist asks, "If you knew what would make you happy, wouldn't you do it?" (58). As

Stoner notes, occasionally the protagonist does dare to hope that there is meaning to be found outside her haze. Yet she also has repeatedly told Reva that "being happy is dumb," Reva reminds her (Moshfegh 59).

As such, cleverly playing with the notion of happiness as end-oriented, much of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* appears to be oriented toward an event that will happen: "I trusted that everything was going to work out fine as long as I could sleep all day," the protagonist claims (27). The very expectation of happiness gives us a specific image of the future. According to Ahmed, this accounts for why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment: "we just have to expect happiness from "this" or "that" for "this and that" to be experienceable as objects of disappointment" (29). In the case of Moshfegh's novel, however, the event that eventually happens turns out to be a widescale tragedy (9/11), which further eliminates any remaining hopes for a happy ending.

As it happened in the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, readers root for Moshfegh's protagonist and her unconventional wellness plan; yet, disappointment surfaces when the ending of the novel does not include a tidy wrap-up and fails to offer any therapeutic or purifying release. Although the reader is confirmed that the plan had been successful – "My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things" (288) – the novel concludes ambiguously, with no resolutions for the future. The protagonist's actions are not translated back into patriarchal norms. Rather, it is the death of Reva falling from one of the Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001, that seems to wake her from her vapid existence. Unlike Bridget Jones, Reva, the perfect embodiment of postfeminist ideals, who had not once neglected to live her life as dictated by societal norms, fails to get the perfect ending. The narrator, on the other hand, continues living by resisting any clear resolutions.

As such, I suggest that the protagonist's failure to perform idealized femininity and to assume the role of an aspirational female character by the end of the novel might imply that she is not to blame for her inability to meet the ideal; instead, her amoral passivity and what seems like obstructed agency are dilemmas I take as charged with political meaning, since they function as catalysts for interrogation. Moshfegh's protagonist, therefore, stands apart from postfeminist protagonists by using her passivity and noncompliance with postfeminist norms to question the high standards compulsively placed on women in our contemporary culture. Therefore, readers' expectations are also challenged by Moshfegh in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the final message of which seems to be: "Wake up!" – after all, this is literally what the protagonist eventually does.

Chapter Three: Resisting Popular (Post)feminism: Womanliness as Masquerade and Unlikeability in *Fleabag*

I sometimes worry that I wouldn't be such a feminist if I had bigger tits.

- *Fleabag*[4]

As an ideology that could be said to span various centuries and cultures, the term "feminism" still lacks one agreed-upon universal definition, which consequently means that the views regarding the solutions to women's oppression may vary from person to person (Mendes 140). While this thesis is not concerned with providing a new definition for feminism, nor does it claim that the two works which I analyse are inherently feminist, I nonetheless argue that the contemporary state of feminism (which I have analysed under the term "postfeminism") facilitates a distraction from sexism that continues to impact women's lives. As Kaitlynn Mendes puts it in *Feminism in the News: Representations of the Women's Movement Since the* 1960s (2011), while the Second Wave has been largely defined by women's fight for equal rights, wage and sexual and reproductive freedom, it is less clear to understand the issues that contemporary feminism stands for (140). Therefore, by focusing on *Fleabag* as a case study, this chapter aims to discuss how the depoliticization of contemporary (post)feminism has resulted in ambivalence and profound confusion regarding the nature of feminism and women's relationship with it, despite being consistently described as "universally desirable" (Hemmings 1).

[4] Season 2, episode 4.

In writing and directing *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge creates a character that is unapologetic about her confusion towards contemporary feminism. In this sense, I am going to make use of Joan Riviere's concept of "womanliness as masquerade" (1929) to show how Fleabag assumes a mask of "womanliness" or femininity that allows her to navigate the high expectations imposed on contemporary female characters. Yet, she disrupts these norms by continuously breaking the fourth wall and letting the audience see her true, cynical nature, which allows the protagonist to establish ironic distance between herself and postfeminist ideals of femininity. As Waller-Bridge claims in an interview with Alex Jung form 2016, "Fleabag couldn't take [feminism] seriously because there was something about sincerity around the whole conversation that she was finding quite uncomfortable."

Moreover, as the aim of this thesis is to critique the imperative for female characters to be likeable, an idea ascribed to postfeminist ideals of femininity and positivity, I maintain that Fleabag's unconventional emotions and failure to resolve her struggles by the end of the series further discloses what Ngai calls the "limitations of sympathetic identification" as our society's dominant way of understanding the making of female characters in contemporary media (33). Finally, as the figure of the comedian is (historically) commonly coded as masculine, and, as Savigny and Warner argue, comedy as a genre of Hollywood cinema is typically understood as produced and consumed by men, particularly that which focuses on *physicality* and *vulgarity* (114), *Fleabag*'s protagonist ultimately subverts such expectations by assuming the figure of a woman comedian who embraces typically masculine codes of conduct (she indulges in sex, alcohol and nicotine and subverts traditional gender roles by constantly poking fun at men who lack her intellectual capacities), which further exposes her "unlikeability" as a female character.

Feminism as Universally Desirable

The dominance of popular media in our everyday lives has a significant consequence in the construction of our cultural discourses, as well as in the way we relate to the world. In its current incarnation, postfeminism (aided by capitalism) has achieved "selling" feminism back to us by focusing on what Savigny and Warner describe as "women's willingness to engage in their own commercialisation as objects" (15). This idea has opened the door to a consumer-driven, mediated feminism, one that positions women as "empowered" subjects through what Douglas (2010) calls "enlightened sexism" (qtd. in Savigny and Warner 16). This part of the chapter aims to explore the increasing popularity of feminism in media and celebrity contexts, which consistently position feminism as "desirable" amongst both men and women, paying particular attention to the role of femininity in securing this appeal. In doing so, I set the ground for my subsequent analysis of Fleabag as an unlikeable female character.

In her study of news representations of feminism (2011), Kaytlinn Mendes discusses overall trends in the coverage of feminist subjects spanning from the 1960s until 2008. As the author agrees, the last couple of decades have seen a consistent shift from straight reporting to interpretation and commentary (134). Supporting this idea, *Daily Mirror* editor Richard Wallace stated in 2007 that "today's newspapers are not necessarily about news," and that it was "no secret" that *Daily Mirror* has moved towards a more "magazine-style road." As Mendes notes, the shift meant that currently nearly all stories on feminism within this publication are in some way related to "celebrity culture, lifestyle or consumption," which she views as "a worrying trend for many feminist scholars who feel that such shifts remove feminism of its politics" (134).

Let us look at a couple of recent examples in which feminist topics are covered through what Mendes calls "soft" news stories (135). In 2014, *Marie-Claire* released an article titled "10 Signs That You're A Feminist," in which feminism is downgraded to a lifestyle concern stemming from women's fashion magazines. Yet, it is important to acknowledge how the "signs" themselves are distinctly postfeminist, stemming from professional opportunities for women and girls ("You believe that women's careers are just as important as their male counterpart's"), freedom of choice ("You believe in a woman's right to choose anything"), positioning women as empowered consumers ("You know how to take care of yourself and take pride in doing so") and sexual empowerment ("You believe in women having access to affordable birth control"). As Clare Hemmings observes, "[t]he acceptability of those '10 Signs …' was underwritten by Beyoncé's endorsement underneath; her *hyper-feminine* lacey attire captioned with her determination not to be a domestic drudge" (7, emphasis added).

In her study, Mendes observes a similar trend in popular culture, where feminism was linked to neoliberal themes of personal choices, sexual freedom or consumption (148). As she notes, "[s]uch views open up space to claim that anything is feminist – so long as it is freely chosen – and are problematic because they allowed women to claim feminist credentials while rationalizing and excusing patriarchal or capitalist practices that oppressed them" (148). Examples range from articles discussing young women's pleasure in their "freedom" to wear high heels, indicating that they are symbols of "sexual power and independence" (148) to others that question whether "good feminists bake cupcakes," which fit with wider notions of domesticity and what the author calls "retreatism:" pushing women back into the home (149).

Another powerful example of a campaign that aimed to rebrand feminism as universally appealing was *Elle*'s T-shirts that claimed, "This is what a feminist looks like," which were

photographed on many different celebrities (such as Ryan Gosling, Benedict Cumberbatch and Emma Watson), leading subjects interviewed by Mendes to say:

> I wear mine [T- shirt saying, 'This is what a feminist looks like'] with a mini and lipstick, and I tell anyone who asks that I love men, but that I'm also very clear about the importance of women having equality. I've learnt from Mum that being flirty and feminine is perfectly compatible with being a feminist. (qtd. in Mendes 150)

The problem with the above statement is twofold. On the one hand, it reduces feminism to a mere commodity that enables women to "consume" a feminist identity through promoting consumption as the quickest path towards female empowerment, which, as Mendes claims, further reinforces "patriarchal paradigms of (white, middle- class, heterosexual) beauty and femininity" (150-1). On the other hand, the subsequent shame that derived from wearing the "This is what a feminist looks like" T-shirt did not only disclose the mismatch between "claiming feminism and doing no work towards the alleviation of gender inequality," but rather, as Hemmings observed, it arose from "being implicated in the global economic inequality that produced the t-shirts themselves, as though there were no relationship between these issues" (11). Consequently, as Hemmings puts it, "any lingering sign of embarrassment in (…) Cumberbatch's strained smile appears to reference the subsequent scandal about whether the t-shirts had been produced under exploitative labor conditions in Mauritius or not" (7).

When Waller-Bridge is asked by Jung in the *Vulture* interview about *Fleabag*'s relationship with contemporary feminism, she claims that when the play was being written, feminism was becoming increasingly popular in the UK: "It was around the same time that Ryan Gosling was wearing T-shirts that said, *This is what a feminist looks like*," which made Waller-

Bridge wonder, “Is it cool to be a feminist?” and “Are there any rules to it and I’m getting it wrong, and how did you get it right?”

As such, *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge admits, was born out of her desire to write a character that does not shy away from exposing her bewilderment towards the shifting nature of feminism and feminist identities that were becoming increasingly “fashionable.” Hence, the next part of this chapter is devoted to analysing Fleabag’s cynical relation with cotemporary feminism, which challenges the notion that the work of feminism is over. As I will demonstrate, this is evinced by the protagonist assuming the concept put forth in 1929 by Joan Riviere called “womanliness as masquerade,” which argues that women who possess masculine traits wear a mask so as to hide their masculine traits and display, instead, their *femininity*. Although this concept is almost a century old, I argue that it still maintains its critical force in the postfeminist society, where women are continuously encouraged to wear masks that display feminine identities, which, in turn, allows for the re-stabilization of traditional gender differences.

Cynicism and Womanliness as Masquerade

Throughout *Fleabag*, the eponymous protagonist is given to a running commentary on the absurdity of events unfolding around her. Her cynicism (which covers both her conflicting relationship with feminism and her forged femininity towards men) reveals a stark contrast to the various “masks” women wear to perform idealized femininity. On the one hand, cynicism works to cover the protagonist’s unbearable sadness at the death of her mother, who succumbed to breast cancer, and her best friend, Boo, who hurled herself into traffic in a desperate attempt to

make her cheating boyfriend feel guilty. On the other hand, I argue, she turns to cynicism in order navigate to the puzzling gender relations of contemporary (post)feminism.

Fleabag's titular protagonist lives in London and struggles to keep afloat her small café business, which she had started with her now deceased friend, Boo. She periodically visits her widowed, distant father, who has started a new life with her manipulative stepmother (whom Fleabag openly dislikes), and sleeps with several men along the way. In times of crises, she and her sister go to established feminist gatherings – lectures, silent retreats or art exhibitions – which always end up being a disappointment.

In the first episode of *Fleabag*, the protagonist and her sister, Claire, attend a feminist lecture called "Women Speak," the motto of which being "Opening women's mouths since 1998." According to the protagonist, she and her sister have been attending such lectures since they were children because "[their father's] way of coping with two motherless daughters was to buy [them] tickets to feminist lectures" (09:32 – 09:36). The woman moderator opens the lecture by asking the audience the following: "Please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called perfect body" (14:29 – 14:42). Without a moment of hesitation, both Fleabag and her sister raise their hands, with the rest of the audience looking at them aghast. "We are bad feminists," Fleabag whispers amused (14:50 – 14:52).

The notion of a "bad feminist" goes back to Roxane Gay's essay published in 2012 carrying the same name, where she claims that "[t]here is an essential feminism, the notion that there are right and wrong ways to be a feminist, and there are consequences for doing feminism wrong." Essential feminism, Gay claims, suggests anger, humourlessness, hating pornography, not catering to the male gaze, hating sex and decrying the objectification of women – all of

which being characteristics that Fleabag embraces throughout the series. Yet, neoliberal feminism, which I have suggested throughout this thesis that best represents the postfeminist sensibility, is closely linked with beauty and femininity. As Elizabeth Wurtzel argued in a 2002 article for *Harper's Bazaar*, "[l]ooking great is a matter of feminism. No liberated woman would misrepresent the cause by appearing less than hale and happy."

However, despite contemporary feminism being closely linked with postfeminist ideals of beauty and femininity, there is also an imperative that demands of women not to perpetuate such groupthink, which explains why everybody fell silent when the moderator from "Women Speak" posed the question. Fleabag is aware that physical attractiveness is seen as a woman's main source of identity in postfeminist culture and she is unapologetic in admitting it out loud. However, she also notices that nobody else (except for her sister) is willing to acknowledge this issue, which further discloses McRobbie's image of "the immaculately groomed young woman in masquerade" (8). The concept of "masquerade," I maintain, lies at the heart of postfeminist practices, and functions as a catalyst for Fleabag's bewilderment at contemporary feminism. However, acknowledging the masquerade, as Fleabag does, might be the only way to "unmask" such practices.

According to Waller-Bridge's creative partner Vicky Jones, "[Fleabag] was written at a time when feminism was much more in doubt than it is now," which made them envision a protagonist who had been exposed to contradictory messages about women's roles in contemporary society. Above everything, their aim was to explore what would happen if an intelligent young woman internalized mixed cues about sexual freedom, empowerment, liberation and desirability, while assuming them as her own identity (qtd. in Edevane). As such, Fleabag is a product of postfeminism, although she never once explicitly diagnoses what causes

her dysfunctional relationship with sex, men and self-identity. Instead, she consistently breaks the fourth wall to address her audience, forcing viewers to step inside her obsessive brain, unpicking her sly jokes regarding the female condition in contemporary society.

In the opening scene of the first season, she addresses the audience by offering a detailed description of the scene they are about to watch:

> You know that feeling when a guy you like sends you a text at two o'clock on a Tuesday night asking if he can come and find you and you've accidentally made it out like you've just got in yourself, so you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything, dig out some Agent Provocateur business – suspender belt, the whole bit – and wait by the door until the buzzer goes? (00:18 – 00:34)

Yet, despite letting the audience know that she is in complete authority regarding the events that are unfolding, in "reality," she portrays herself as calm and obedient, assuming an attitude of "womanliness." As Waller-Bridge claims, "[t]he thing I really got off on was putting a female character out there that was all-knowing about sex and one step ahead, who knew what the guys were thinking before they thought it and yet still played slightly dumb to them. Oh God, it brought me so much pleasure" (qtd. in Malone).

The idea of performed femininity, or "womanliness" dates back to Joan Riviere's article titled "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929). According to Riviere, "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (303). To better explain her argument, Riviere goes on to offer the example of a housewife who can very well attend to typically masculine matters. Yet, when "any builder or upholsterer is called in she has a compulsion to hide all her technical knowledge from him and show deference

to the workman, making her suggestions in an innocent and artless manner, as if they were ' lucky guesses'" (307). Fleabag is always one step ahead of her peers, and she rejoices in informing the audience on a character's next line before they get to it, but she always makes sure she wears a mask of womanliness that positions her character as hyper-feminine and docile in front of a man:

> Fleabag: He says that…
>
> Arsehole Guy: Last night was incredible.
>
> Fleabag: Which you think is an overstatement, but then he goes on to say that…
>
> Arsehole Guy: It was particularly special because (….)
>
> Fleabag: And then he touches your hair (…) and thanks you with a genuine earnest…
>
> Arsehole Guy: Thank you.
>
> Fleabag: It's sort of moving. Then he kisses you gently (…) and then he leaves. ("Episode One" 01:46 – 02:38)

In the above dialogue, Fleabag pokes fun at the man's behaviour to the audience, but she nonetheless smiles and acts thankful while waiting for him to deliver his lines. This works as an example of Riviere's "womanliness as masquerade." Fleabag navigates her relationships with men as if "acting a part," where she pretends to be a rather frivolous and bewildered woman, yet in the end always poking fun at the camera, assuring the audience that she is playing a game. According to Riviere, a woman "has to treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a 'game', as something not real, as a 'joke'. She cannot treat herself and her subject seriously" (308). Yet, the consequence of acting in this way is that "the flippant attitude enables some of

her sadism to escape, hence the offence it causes" (308). Consequently, many people might feel attacked by the rawness of Fleabag's performance, as it challenges traditional gender norms in revealing how modern femininity requires women to constantly wear masks.

In the fourth episode of the first season, Fleabag and her sister attend an all-woman silent retreat, whose motto is "No matter what happens, a word must not be heard" (07:22 – 07:25). The sanctuary requires all women to remain silent at all costs, all the while partaking in menial tasks such as scrubbing the floors of the building and gardening, which led writers such as Annette Pankratz to argue about the scene that "[t]he therapeutic women-centredness sells Victorian misogyny as Zen exercise" (149). When the organizer asks women the reason for their decision to take part in the retreat, Fleabag, again, is the one who reacts first. Assuming a cynical attitude to the audience and her sister, yet taking on an expected position of "womanliness" towards the organizer, Fleabag claims: "I want to shut the noise and reconnect to my inner thoughts on the road to feeling more at one with myself" (06:24 – 06:28). Pleased by Fleabag's answer, the retreat organizer goes on to explain how "[t]his weekend is about being mindful. It's about leaving your voice in your head, and trapping your thoughts in your skull. Think of it as a thought prison in your mind" (06:34 – 06:47). As Fleabag concludes later in the episode, "We've paid them to let us clean the house in silence" (14:52 – 14:55).

The above scene is highly descriptive in terms of the contradictory messages put forth by a postfeminist society towards women, with the important detail that they are further encoded as feminist. As Priscilla Frank argues:

> The combination of "Women Speak" and the less officially named "Women, Shut Up" satirizes the constant tightrope women walk in the name of empowerment,

> caught between say more and say less, damned if you do, damned if you don't. Although feminism is clearly important to Waller-Bridge's character, something she feels compelled to pursue and embody, she constantly fights to keep a straight face when confronted with the impassioned absurdity propagated by established feminist spaces. (Frank)

Furthermore, the absurdity of this scene is only surpassed by the existence of an all-men's retreat nearby called "Better Man." In this setup, the men learn how to fittingly redirect their sexist anger by yelling "Slut!" and "Whore!" at inflatable female dolls. It is at this point that Fleabag takes off her cynical mask and admits that she is sad and lonely. "I just want to cry. All the time," (22:32 – 22:36) she says.

Fleabag's final incursion into a (post)feminist terrain is presented through her stepmother's "sex-hibition," which is an erotic art show that features plaster molds of penises that she has encountered throughout her lifetime, as well as a series of nude photographic self-portraits, which are further encoded as feminist. As Frank argues, the show does not posit that the stepmother's work is foolish, yet, she claims, "whether her artwork is doing much to help womankind, one plaster penis at a time, remains dubious" (Frank). Whether on purpose or not, I would argue here that this scene mirrors perfectly the ironical underpinnings of *Elle*'s "This is what a feminist looks like" T-shirt campaign, as it is quick to assume a feminist identification without considering doing any palpable work towards the dismantling of gender inequalities.

As usual, Fleabag does not refrain from her cynical commentaries, yet by the end of the episode (which is also a season finale) she admits that she feels completely lost at what I would argue to be the hypocritical and alienating politics of contemporary (post)feminism. As I

explained in Chapter 1, such feminism presents the obsession with the female body as constantly needing surveillance and monitoring, with the crucial difference that it is now a matter of a woman's choice, rather than obligation, to continuously attend to it. As such, the end of the first season leaves Fleabag claiming: "I know that my body, as it is now, really is the only thing I have left, and when that gets old and unfuckable I may as well just kill it (…) You know, everyone feels like this a little bit and they're just not talking about it, or I am completely fucking alone" (22:30 – 22:37). Consequently, the feminist gatherings that appear throughout *Fleabag* only manage to reify the protagonist's conflicting relation with contemporary feminism. Moreover, her cynicism (directed towards the audience) and presumed "womanliness" (directed towards men, as well as female figures that she finds preposterous), are strategic techniques that the protagonist uses in order to navigate the perplexing and contradictory ideas put forth by popular feminist discourses.

Nonetheless, despite being what could be considered an entirely relatable woman (Swain), Fleabag continues to be described as an unlikeable female character. As Stassa Edwards claims in an article titled "Amazon's *Fleabag* Is a Complex Look at an 'Unlikeable Woman'" (2016), "[t]here's a lot of cursing, drinking, sex with ridiculous men, and obligatory mentions of being a bad feminist. In short, everything that, in the world of television, signifies the modern middle-class woman's "unlikability" is played for its comic potential." As such, the last part of this chapter aims to discuss the implications of a female character that continues to subvert expectations by refusing to partake in normative expectations of womanhood. It is here, I maintain, at this site of challenge and subversion, that she is deemed "unlikeable."

Challenge, Subversion and Unlikeability

By the end of only the first episode of the series, the protagonist engages in anal intercourse (which she explains to the viewer by claiming "you're drunk, and he made the effort to come all the way over here, so you let him," followed by the observation that "he's thrilled" (01:14 – 01:20)); masturbates while watching a speech by then-U.S. President Barack Obama; gives her number to a stranger she has met on the bus, who in turn promises to treat her like "a nasty little bitch" (06:24 – 06:26) (which she finds amusing, but then pouts to the camera when he says he was joking); and, in an attempt to take off her sweater, reveals her lacy undergarments in the middle of an interview for a small business loan that would help her café remain open. Such scenes have led critics to claim that *Fleabag* "spearheaded a seismic shift in the way women could be depicted on TV – flawed, relatable, contradictory" and "not always particularly likeable" (Pollard). While I agree with Pollard's analysis of *Fleabag* as marking a shift in the way we see female characters, I argue that Fleabag's unlikeability stems precisely from the fact that she differs from female characters that we are generally exposed to in literature and television.

Firstly, in order to better understand where her so-called "unlikeable" characteristics come from, it is important to note that the figure of the comedian, according to Rosie White, is often culturally coded as masculine. She argues that, "like a surgeon…the word is ostensibly unmarked by gender [yet] it contains the traces of learned prejudices about male and female behaviours" (qtd. in Warner and Savigny 114). Furthermore, comedy as a genre of Hollywood is understood as produced and consumed primarily by men, "particularly that which centres on the physical, raunch or gross out" (114). Throughout *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge does not shy away from showing off her transgressive behaviour as a female comedian, as I have noted previously.

She indulges in alcohol, sex, nicotine and never misses a chance to poke fun at men who lack her intellectual acuity. While shopping for a sex toy as a present for her sister's birthday, accompanied by a character who is introduced to the audience only as "Bus Rodent," she cannot help from openly ridiculing the man's bewilderment towards a plastic vagina:

> Bus Rodent: You should totally get one of those.
>
> Fleabag: A vagina?
>
> Rodent: Yeah.
>
> Fleabag: Oh, I've already got one.
>
> Rodent: Really? You have? No, you've got one?
>
> Fleabag: I take it with me everywhere.
>
> Rodent: Look, no, you lie. You don't have one on you now?
>
> Fleabag: Yeah. [Into the camera] Never gonna get it.
>
> Rodent: Where? [...]
>
> Fleabag: Ha, you got me! I don't carry a vagina around with me. That'd be way too provocative. [Into the camera] Didn't get it. ("Episode Three" 14:34 – 15:03)

In an interview from 2019 with Tina Fey, Waller-Bridge mentions that, when *Fleabag* first came out in the UK, the British press was outraged at the explicitness of the series: "'This is the filthiest, most overly exposed, sexually exposing show ever'," Waller-Bridge recites. She continues,

> They made out like I was naked the whole way through. I was like, 'There is not a moment of nudity in the series.' I just say stuff about my arsehole straight down the barrel. I think that makes people feel so naked, but the language was more naked than the actual performance. (qtd. in Fey)

Further, as several critics observe, "Fleabag doesn't even end up sleeping with that many men" (Ashton), and the only time she is portrayed as having an orgasm is while masturbating. However, she nonetheless challenges traditional images of female characters as feminine beings by adopting typically masculine codes of conduct – from cursing, sexualizing everything, poking fun at men and at her uptight, hyper-feminine sister, to owning a business and refusing to "settle down" or to "better herself." Therefore, I maintain that comments which describe the protagonist as "vulgar" (Kearns) or "dirty" (Youngs) simply point to the pervasive concern in contemporary culture towards women who refuse to perform idealized femininity.

Moreover, *Fleabag* does not only push past conventional expectations of femininity, but also revolutionizes the way in which stereotypes are illustrated in comedy. Instead of the stock "hot girl next door," the characters from *Fleabag* are introduced as "Arsehole Guy," "Handsome Man," "Hot Misogynist," or "Rodent Bus," depending on the protagonist's interaction with them. Such stereotypes challenge the pervasive, patriarchal "male gaze" in popular media by marking a shift in the way in which the dynamic between men and women is portrayed in television, while also allowing women to assume a position of power, instead of vice-versa.

Another reason which could potentially explain the protagonist's unlikeability stems from her portrayal of negative emotions throughout the series, such as anger, sadness, grief, shame, doubt, etc. Unlike postfeminist works featuring so-called "unlikeable women" (such as *Sex and*

the City or *Girls*), where such flaws are overcome or resolved by the end of the movie, series or book – due to the heroines' successful careers, their choice to marry or to have children – *Fleabag* takes a completely amoral approach, by refusing to control, solve, or redirect the protagonist's issues.

To return to a point that I made earlier in the thesis, where I mentioned McRobbie's idea that postfeminism takes feminist elements into account in order to repudiate them, I maintain that *Fleabag*, as well, takes postfeminist elements into account so as to portray the opposition between traditional femininity and its subversive counterpart, best depicted in the dichotomy between Fleabag and her uptight, high-achieving sister. Just like Reva in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Claire is portrayed as an uptight, career-driven female character, with a diploma in business and working in finance across two firms – in both Finland and UK. She embraces positivity as her life philosophy, and claims, in the first episode of the second season that, "It takes a real commitment to be this happy," (15:55 – 15:57) and "Positive energy takes work. In the last six months, I've excelled. I take all the negative emotions and just bottle them and burry them and they never come out. I've basically never been better" (15:39 – 15:48).

In the fourth episode of the first season, when she receives an ardently desired promotion that requires her to move to Finland, Claire initially refuses to accept it, as it would mean leaving her husband and stepson, mentioning that "My husband is my life" (16:25 – 16:27). As Pankratz argues, this scene perfectly describes Claire's personal predicament and her decision in favor of family and husband. "Fleabag's life, however, is slightly more complex," Pankratz claims (150). As such, as Elizabeth Alsop has observed, what distinguishes Fleabag from other postfeminist characters is not necessarily her "unlikeability," but rather her vulnerability; that is, the openness with which she discloses feelings and experiences that women have long been encouraged to

suppress (Alsop). Moreover, the end of the series does not resolve the protagonist's issues, but rather makes a point that its dysfunctional heroine is nowhere near her happy ending. At the end of the first season, the audience finds that it was her who engaged in sexual intercourse with Boo's boyfriend, which later motivated her friend's lethal accident. Similarly, at the end of the second and final season, the audience departs from Fleabag without any resolutions for the future. Besides, unlike postfeminist movies, television series or books that provide a happy ending for their protagonists, Fleabag's only chance at love is not reciprocated. Rather, just as in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the ending is explicitly amoral and non-cathartic.

Too often have characters been rewarded with a happy ending, despite their various faults. Yet Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* aims to challenge this habitually recycled stereotype, and it does so through a kind of politics. In contrast to the "strong" female characters that have been dominating mainstream cinema for decades, *Fleabag*'s comparably "weak" and "unlikeable" protagonist undermines the conflation of complexity with an implicitly masculine code of values (Alsop). The victory in that resides on the fact that a world populated only with aspirational, strong female leads might suggest to readers or viewers that there are no impediments left to their broader attainment. As Alsop claims,

> *Fleabag's* protagonist, by the finale, has copped to some startling sins, and yet the episode's mantra ("people make mistakes") signals the sort of equanimity with which viewers are invited to accept this news. No matter how deplorable her actions, the point is for audiences to feel *with* the character, not about her. (Alsop)

Finally, the unnamed protagonist from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag*'s eponymous protagonist challenge the notion that the work of feminism is over, by assuming

identities that confront and deviate from what readers and audiences expect from them. In doing that, they are critiqued and marginalized as “unlikeable” female characters in a society that aims to silence, punish or ultimately redeem unhappy, angry, cynical and violent women by providing them with a happy ending that solves all their problems. The unhappy ending in both works, thus, can be thought of as a conciliation between aesthetics and politics, which pleads in favor of the continuous need of feminism in women’s lives.

Conclusion

Although the last couple of decades have seen a significant increase in female-driven stories, both on television and in literature, I have argued in this thesis that there is still a prevalent tendency in contemporary media culture to showcase female protagonists who assume traditional gender roles. Movies and television series such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Girls* or *Sex and the City* (all highly popular works) portray modern female protagonists that ultimately embrace very traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment. Bridget dismisses the freedom to enjoy employment as much as her male counterparts in order to pursue the man of her dreams, while her biggest fear is remaining a spinster. Hannah, the protagonist from *Girls* ultimately decides to move to the countryside and have a baby, while Carrie from *Sex and the City* finds her happiness by getting married. Such endings work to suggest to the audience that that the solutions to women's problems reside in their embracing of patriarchal expectations. Although there are certainly exceptions to this mould, I suggest that they remain exceptions, rather than the "norm."

Importantly enough, the above mentioned works have been produced at a time when it was typically believed that "feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without" (McRobbie 8), which has led many feminist scholars to argue that we are living a cultural and political moment that is best described by the term "postfeminism" (Gill 2007; Tasker and Negra 2007; McRobbie 2008; Scharff 2009; Gill 2016). However, it is crucial to note that contemporary feminism draws on vocabulary that includes words such as "empowerment" and "choice," as well as the granting of sexual freedom (1), which appeals to many young women because of feminism's newly established focus on the

individual, whereas the gains from prior collective efforts largely remain unacknowledged (Savigny and Warner 1).

The protagonists from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* direct our attention back towards feminist politics that many contemporary female protagonists dismiss in their individualistic focus towards self-betterment. Although I do not wish to suggest that Moshfegh's and Waller-Bridge's protagonists are the key to alleviating sexism and misogyny that continues to pervade contemporary society, I maintained, throughout this thesis, that their refusal to contain and resolve their "unpalatable," dark feelings for the sake of normalizing gender inequalities challenges readers' expectations of female protagonists, and in turn render them "unlikeable."

In the case of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, based on Sara Ahmed's theories of happiness (2010), I hope to have demonstrated how the protagonist's refusal to attend to normative expectations of "happiness" positions her as a subversive and "unlikeable" female character. I argued, amongst other things, that because both good and bad feelings are generative, a protagonist who refuses to be happy and positive can certainly cause similar effects in its readers – especially if the readers (influenced by various popular discourses regarding female characters that circulate within the media) root for the protagonists' improvement, and are eventually let down by looking for happiness and cathartic feelings in places where they are nowhere to be found.

In *Fleabag*, I aimed to show how the increasing popularity of feminism in contemporary society has to do with its excessive emphasis on femininity, which influences the audience's expectations towards female protagonists in popular media. I made use of Joan Riviere's concept of "womanliness as masquerade" to show how *Fleabag*'s eponymous protagonist puts on a mask

of femininity throughout the television series, yet she still disrupts expectations by continuously breaking the fourth wall and inviting the audience to see her true character, which emulates typically masculine codes of conduct.

Therefore, I suggest that the female characters that I analyse in this thesis manage to widen the horizon of how women are portrayed in literature and on television. By pointing out to the diverse critical discussions surrounding these works, which position their protagonists as "unlikeable" (Levy; Tolentino; Lincoln; Stoner; Miller), "vulgar" (Kearns) or "dirty" (Youngs), I aimed to show how our critical vocabularies point to the rise of a popular feminism alongside intensified misogyny and a return to idealized femininity. Moreover, I established at the onset of this thesis that neither Moshfegh nor Waller-Bridge intended their protagonists as anti-heroines or subversive characters; rather, they both aimed to create characters that simply do not filter their behavior in order to be "likeable." However, I still maintain that the representations of the female characters in both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* are intensely political, and so are the subsequent responses from readers and viewers. Following the popular feminist mantra, "The personal is political!" (Savigny and Warner 41), I suggest that there is an immensely political potential stemming from passive characters who refuse to participate in and perpetuate groupthink. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, "[i]t's a search for utopia that doesn't make a simple distinction between good and bad feelings or assume that good politics can only emerge from good feelings; feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation" (qtd. in Burford 70).

As such, although the two works I analyze in this thesis portray fictional characters, I maintain that the combination of subversiveness and relatability that readers have found in both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Fleabag* is immensely impactful in the way in which we

relate to and perceive women, both in fiction and in real life. This idea points to the transformative potential of fiction – conveyed either through literature or television – as a social critique that is readily available to people (as opposed to, for example, theoretical cultural criticism as done by Ahmed, Gill or McRobbie), which further challenges traditional gender norms and sets the ground for change.

Finally, I believe that studying the agentic potential of passive female characters that are nonetheless targeted as subversive and "unlikeable" would be a fruitful area for further scholarly research. More research needs to be devoted towards studying how female characters who do not perpetuate patriarchic thinking and disturb normative notions about womanhood are constructed and mediated in our popular culture in a way that marginalizes and antagonizes them. In the meantime, however, I argue that the multiple conflicted messages put forth by contemporary postfeminism and the labelling of characters who disobey conventional expectations of womanhood as "unlikeable" does point to the continuous necessity of feminism.

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Universiteit Utrecht

Faculty of Humanities
Version September 2014

PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism
Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism
Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
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- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
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The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.
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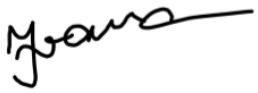
Date and signature: 26.02.2020   

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