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„Gender Issues in Chick-Lit: Struggles, Female Relief
Strategies and Happy Endings in Three Selected Novels
by Marian Keyes“

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1) Introduction

In 1996 the novel *Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding was published and through this publication a new genre later called “chick-lit” was established. The term describes a genre of popular fiction mainly written by female authors for a female audience. Chick-lit quickly became extremely successful and publishing houses earned a great amount of money with the publication of these books. The success of these novels has even been termed a “commercial tsunami” (Ferriss and Young 2). This genre has continuously gained popularity and is now already nearly two decades old, which is why it “appears to be more than a blip on the literary radar” (Wilson 214).

In general, it can be agreed that the stories focus on private life, are personal, light-hearted and often have a humorous tone. Sometimes chick-lit authors decide to write their books in first-person narration to make them sound even more personal and appealing to their female readers. Moreover, the main protagonists are aged between their early 20’s and their late 60’s and they are mostly women who experience struggles in their lives, such as “love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more” (Montgomery). The main protagonists are usually white unmarried women and they tend to lead “singleton” lifestyles in big cities like London or New York. However, the genre has evolved and many subgenres developed which categorize chick-lit stories according to different aspects of women’s lives as, for example, race, age or lifestyle choices (Wilson 215).

Moreover, there even exists a guide written by Sarah Mlynowski, who is a chick-lit bestselling author, and Farrin Jacobs, who is a former chick-lit editor, to writing your own personal chick lit story. They state that chick-lit books deal with personal experiences of women and, thus, everyone can sit down and write a chick-lit book. When readers read chick-lit they often think “*I’ve thought that, I’ve been in that situation, I’m pretty sure I’ve dated that guy*, and so on, until [they] arrive at, *Hmm, I could write that*” (Jacobs and Mlynowski 7). When it comes to creating the main character, the authors explain that “she is Everywoman, with quirks and problems

that are believable yet larger than life. She's confident yet insecure. Smart but naïve. Lovable yet flawed" (Jacobs and Mlynowski 64). In terms of story line, the majority of chick-lit novels involve "some type of self-discovery or self-acceptance, but there can also be a more specific theme underlying it all" (Jacobs and Mlynowski 113). Furthermore, in every chick-lit story there has to be some kind of conflict included in order to make the story interesting to read. Along with external conflicts such as break-ups or loss, the internal conflicts of the characters also have to be taken into consideration. In the majority of story lines the internal and external conflicts collide at some point which means that something that happens externally to the characters forces them to deal with their feelings and emotions (Jacobs and Mlynowski 116).

Taking this into account, let us now for a moment take a look at a "typical" chick-lit story. The short story *Girls' Weekend* by Marisa Mackle is about a woman called Emma who lives and works in Dublin. She is in a relationship with Martin who momentarily is on golfing holidays without her in Spain. Emma is disappointed that he did not ask her to join him and all she can think about is him. In order to distract Emma from stressing about her boyfriend, her best friend Annette convinces her to spend a girl's weekend in Galway. In the following, we look at an extract of this short story (Mackle 309-310):

What Emma saw in that ejit of a man, Annette would never know. It was terrible the way he'd turned her fun-loving friend into an insecure fruitcake. 'Listen,' she began pragmatically, 'you've got to pretend to Martin that you had some kind of life while he was away, OK?' 'Right,' Emma agreed, then hesitated. 'So ... er ... how are we going to do that then?' 'Well, it will be hard I admit,' Annette said, 'but a weekend away might just save you from this nutcase existence.' Emma thought about it. A weekend away. God, she hadn't had one of those in years. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea. 'Where would we go?' 'Dunno,' Annette shrugged. 'Galway is always good for a break but I'm open:' 'Galway ... mmm ... I'd have to ring Martin though.' 'For what? Annette could feel her blood pressure rising.' 'Well, um, just to let him know where I am, you know, in case he's ringing. He might be wondering where I am.' 'That would be good though, Em.' 'Do you think?' 'Let him sweat. Now I know it'll be hard but it will be worth it in the end. He'll be mad for you when you get back.'

In this chick-lit short story typical features of chick-lit as, for example, men being the focus in a woman's life, can be identified. Some people argue that chick-lit tends to present a stereotypical image of women, which is why the genre has often been the subject of contemporary debates with feminist writers and other critics (Wilson 215). In this context, the question that can be raised is whether chick-lit "is a useful medium for understanding the experience of women within contemporary culture or is pointless fluff that exacerbates gender stereotyping and inequality" (Wilson 215). Furthermore, Wilson claims that reactions to the chick-lit genre are diverse as some critics "expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism", whereas others claim that it "should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life" (9).

Moreover, in order to find out whether the characters in chick-lit stories are solely represented as stereotypes it is useful to take a look at what identity is and how it is defined. According to Woodward, identity helps us to find a place in the world and create a connection between ourselves and the society which we live in. Moreover, the concept of identity raises important questions about "how individuals fit into the community and the social world and how identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations" (Woodward 1). When it comes to gender questions, Butler states that gender is a performed activity, however, it happens unconsciously. In this context, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that this activity is not for that reason automatic or mechanical but a practice of improvisation. Additionally, gender is always done with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary (Butler 2). Butler also discusses terms of recognition, stating that terms such as "masculine" and "feminine" can always change and are constantly in the process of being remade (Butler 10).

In order to identify and analyse the gender issues at stake in the novels under review they will be related to a theoretical framework. Feminist theory is appropriate for this undertaking as it aims to "examine [...] the ways in which our personal identity is formed by our culture's definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman" (Tyson 139). Feminists argue that family roles and the socioeconomic system depend to a large extent on a person's gender in Western societies. Thus, feminist criticism focuses mainly on the "situations and ways in which men and women are treated

differently depending on their sex and on how men are socialized to be masculine and women to be feminine” (Tyson 139).

For this analysis, existing approaches to identity will be explained and incorporated and, moreover, they will be connected to the characters of Marian Keyes’ chick-lit novels in an attempt to answer the research questions presented below. Additionally, texts will be investigated from a critical feminist perspective.

The interest in analyzing novels by Marian Keyes is a result of the fact that the author rejects the criticism of superficiality in her work by claiming that she is also addressing quite serious topics such as depression, drug abuse or loss, which are not typical themes in traditional chick-lit stories. In this respect, this thesis will explore whether female stereotypes are presented in her novels, regardless of the fact that the author has taken a more serious approach to telling her stories.

1.1) Research Questions

A special interest is taken in the identification of gender issues in selected works by the successful Irish chick-lit author Marian Keyes. These gender issues will be identified by focusing on women’s struggles, female relief strategies and happy endings. For this in-depth analysis a closer look will be taken at the novels *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel’s Holiday*. This analysis is based on the following research questions:

- 1) What are the underlying social and cultural issues that inform the representation of women in Keyes’ work?
- 2) Are the women’s struggles in Keyes’ work gender specific? Are certain issues around being depressed represented as typically female?
- 3) Are the strategies of female behaviour presented in Keyes’ work viable ways to achieve female emancipation and self-determination or are they in fact narrowly defined cultural models that send women the false message: i.e. that it is their sole responsibility to do the emotional work to keep heterosexual relationships working – even if their partners are abusive.

- 4) Can the happy endings represented in the narratives be seen as epiphanies¹ in the Joycean sense since these moments of insight tend to make women readers reflect on their situation in terms of discovering a liberating feminist consciousness – or, does it rather send readers the implicit or explicit message that all they can do is hope for a “happy ending” that will primarily please the men that are involved.

This thesis begins with a theoretical consideration on the matters that are at stake: The question of how to define chick-lit will be considered, a historical background will be given, existing subgenres will be outlined and the place of chick-lit in the literary world will be discussed. This theoretical chapter is followed by an investigation of gender issues and their development and representation in our society. Taking into account the insights gained from the theoretical propositions, the subsequent chapters will provide a textual analysis of Marian Keyes' novels focusing on gender issues.

2) Part One: Chick-Lit and Gender Issues

2.1) Chick-Lit

2.1.1) Defining Chick-Lit

The term “chick-lit” is relatively new and several authors, scholars and critics have tried to find a suitable definition for this term, which was and still is extremely controversial in the literary world. Thus, before going into greater detail on the topic of chick-lit, a closer look at some definitions has to be taken.

Smyczyńska gives one possible definition by stating that the chick-lit genre includes works of fiction by contemporary British and American female authors whose intended readership is primarily young adult female readers (23). According to her, these novels distinguish themselves from other genres by their pastel-coloured covers and their light-hearted, humorous plots which “depict the personal, social and professional lives of young women working in cities” (23). This type of literature

¹ See chapter “3.7) Happy Endings” for an explanation of the term “epiphany”.

emerged in the mid-1990s with the publication of the novel *Bridget Jones Diary* by the British novelist Helen Fielding in 1996 (Pérez-Serano 136). Chick-lit is said to be a kind of postfeminist fiction which focuses exclusively on the female point of view, “offering a humorous approach to the readers about the vicissitudes that take place in the protagonist’s life” (Pérez-Serano 136). The authors take on a hyper-realistic approach when it comes to portraying their main characters, as the story lines tend to centre on their human flaws and imperfections (Pérez-Serano 137). Chick-lit authors mainly decide to write their stories in first person narration in order to be able to show the most intimate thoughts and opinions of the female protagonist. The narrative style is, moreover, highly informal, conversational and what the reader gets “is the delusional, biased narration of the subjective perceptions of an individual” (Pérez-Serano 137).

A scholarly definition of the term is given by Chris Baldick, who states that chick-lit is “a kind of light commercial fiction addressed to British women readers of the late 1990s and early 2000s and subsequently imitated in the United States and beyond” (Baldick s.v. ‘chick-lit’, online dictionary). Similar to Smyczyńska, Baldick also states that

Chick-lit novels are written by women about the misadventures of contemporary unmarried working women in their 20s or 30s who struggle with multiple pressures from reproachful mothers, inadequate boyfriends, and tyrannical bosses while consoling themselves with shopping trips, chocolate, and erotic daydreams. The stories are commonly told in the first person in tones of humorous self-deprecation (Baldick s.v. ‘chick-lit’).

This genre deals with female main protagonists who are feminine and who know how to accessorize and negotiate. Moreover, these individuals are often imagined as being able to quote verbatim from magazines like *Glamour*, *In Style* or *Cosmopolitan* (Guerrero 88). According to Guerrero, this is the new suitable definition of the contemporary woman aka the chick. The genre focuses on all the good and negative aspects of the new, modern woman with sarcasm and humour (Guerrero 88). The main protagonists of chick-lit novels are usually educated and, thus, often hold university degrees in the humanities as, for example, English or philosophy. Moreover, they normally have good jobs and in the media sector such as well-known publishing houses (Smyczyńska 149). According to Montoro, the chick-lit genre “conjures up images of a kind of aspirational lifestyle among the females of the

genre, symptomatic of a kind of middle class existence which also encodes certain urbanite and consumerist values of the society these females live in and which is so often depicted in the novels” (Montoro 15).

In this context, it is interesting to raise the question of what chick-lit is not, as some people tend to confuse romantic fiction with chick-lit. These two genres share a common origin in the romantic novel of the 19th century; however, they do not belong to the same genre. Contrary to chick-lit, authors of contemporary romance focus on a love affair between a male and a female, including adventurous themes and offering usually an idealized version of the major characters. Moreover, viewpoints of both characters are offered, a serious tone is used and weaknesses and doubts of the characters are rarely depicted (Pérez-Serano 136-137). In general, it can be said that in romantic fiction “the characters are flat, the narrator is omniscient, and the story is written in the third person form”, which are all attributes that do not completely fit the chick-lit genre (Pérez-Serano 136-137).

Chick-lit is considered to consist exclusively of written narratives, para-literature or popular fiction, and alliances with popular entertainment are not avoided. As a result, tensions between high and popular literature are inevitable (Harzewski, *Tradition* 33). In other media contexts this genre is best exemplified by the famous and successful HBO TV series *Sex and the City* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones Diary*. Both *Bridget Jones Diary* and *Sex and the City* were originally newspaper columns published in books in 1996 (Harzewski 3, *Chick Lit*).

2.1.2) Historical Background and Development of Chick-Lit

As a result of improved printing technologies and an expanding middle-class reading public a new class of women writers emerged in the 19th century. Due to these beneficial circumstances these female authors quickly gained popular recognition and earned a sizable capital and, thus, they became an object of criticism for their male counterparts. The anxiety over women’s writings was expressed through negative criticism against their “amatory fiction and, in later decades, domestic novels” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit* 2).

Well-known authors like the American writer William Dean Howells classified women's nineteenth-century popular domestic fiction under the rubric of "dubiosities", and Nathaniel Hawthorne criticized the "mob of scribbling women" (Harzewski, *Chick Lit* 2). This critical response by male authors is partly motivated by the female authors' high sales, which gave male authors a reason to be envious. Nearly 150 years later a variant of romance fiction emerged, which was also denounced soon as being of superficial interest and inferior merit (Harzewski, *Chick Lit* 2).

The last decade of the twentieth century experienced a rebirth "of antinovel discourse directed at a new set of women prose writers" (Harzewski, *Chick Lit* 2). These female authors writing popular fiction have been classified as chick-lit writers. The term chick lit appeared first in 1996 after the publication of the extremely successful comic novel *The Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding. The novel quickly became a widely discussed bestseller, in which a female main protagonist writes about her life struggles, such as unsatisfactory relationships with men or her frustrations about failing attempts to lose weight. Between the publication of the book and the release of the film in 2001, the book sold eight million copies and was translated into thirty-three languages. The sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (published in 2004) by Helen Fielding contributed as well to the success of the chick-lit genre (Ferriss and Young 2).

Marian Keyes' first novel *Watermelon* was published in Ireland in 1995 and also contributed next to Fielding's immensely to the great success of chick-lit. Today the genre of chick lit has reached the status of a feminist bestseller as "literature for the 'new woman', the contemporary reader of our post feminist culture, and a 'new woman's fiction'" (Ferriss and Young qtd. in Ragaišienė 68). In 2002, for example, more than 71 million dollars were earned only with chick-lit books, which is why publishers such as Harlequin, Broadway and Pocket Books had to create separate imprints dedicated exclusively to the genre (Ferriss and Young 2). As can be seen, chick-lit is extremely successful and lucrative compared to many other niches in the fiction industry (Razdan qtd. in Peitz 23).

The success of chick-lit can also be explained by ongoing changes in society as many people decide to lead "singleton" lifestyles, which is reflected in these novels.

Journalists call this phenomenon the “Bridget Jones Effect” which describes thirty-something women who become consumed with “dating panic” and “strategies for meeting Mr Right” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit* 3). As stated by Harzewski, married couples became a minority in the sum total of American households for the first time in 2005 (*Chick Lit* 3). Chick-lit is “both a commentary on and a product of the singles market, which expanded in the late 1990s from matchmaking services and Club Med to a large-scale commercial sector and e-business niche” (Harzewski, *Chick Lit* 3).

Taking into account the popularity of the genre one might argue that the women feel increasingly attracted to chick-lit stories because they represent a lifestyle of imagined harmony and relationships that seem to be unattainable nowadays.

2.1.3) Genre and Subgenres of Chick-Lit

Soon various subgenres emerged out of the chick-lit genre, such as “mommy lit”, “mystery lit” or “marriage lit”. All of these subgenres are part of the chick-lit genre but focus on different aspects in women’s lives. Baldick states that more and more subgenres developed as the boom of chick-lit (sometimes also called chic fic) continued into the early 21 century (2008). In the decade after *Bridget Jones* was published, chick-lit has crossed the “divides of generation, ethnicity, nationality, and even gender” (Ferriss and Young 5). The genre has reached out to different generations as, for example, to women over forty. The subgenre for the “older” audience is called “hen lit”, “matron lit” or “lady lit”.

Additionally, Johanna Johnson identified the genre of adolescent chick-lit, which was given the name “chick-lit jr.”. Johnson claims that, similar to their adult counterparts, “junior chick-lit novels affirm flawed women, acknowledging their insecurities and offering lessons in negotiating relationships” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 7). Between “hen lit” and “chick-lit jr.” another subgenre, which is called “mommy lit”, is placed. Novels belonging to the “mommy lit” genre deal with the question as to whether women can have it all, that is, a successful career and family life.

On chicklitbooks.com several other subgenres in the field of chick-lit are presented in greater detail. There are, for example, anthologies, which contain chick-lit stories by different well-known chick lit authors. An example for a typical anthology of this type

is “Irish Girls Back in Town” with stories by successful Irish writers like Cecilia Ahern (“The Calling”), Patricia Scanlan (“Façades”), Gemma O’Connor (“Dinner with Annie”) and Sarah Webb (“How Emily Got Promoted”) (Montgomery, “subgenres”).

Another subgenre is “glamour lit” and it is often defined as being fashionable, fancy, glamorous and sometimes arrogant. The main protagonists in the novels are often career women who work in the entertainment industry. An example for this subgenre is the novel *The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger (Montgomery). Surprisingly, all these transformations of the genre also include the development of “Christian lit” or “church-lit”. Whereas Jewish authors and heroines have appeared in the field of chick-lit right from the beginning, the characters’ religion have not played a leading role in the novels. In the context of church-lit, however, religion is an important factor to the protagonists. A question that is raised within church-lit is, for example, whether church lit girls can be as devoted to their Prada as they are to their prayer beds (Ferriss and Young 6).

Moreover, it can be discussed whether the genre’s emphasis on consumerism and sexual escapades clash with Christian values (Ferriss and Young 6). Crossing the radical divide we find “ethnic lit”, which is also a subgenre of chick-lit, consisting of, for example, “Sistah lit” and Chica lit”. Novels like *Waiting to Exhale* by Terry McMillans change the focus from the naïve single white female protagonist looking for Mr. Right to a more experienced black woman opting for the reality of friendship (Guerrero qtd in Ferriss and Young 6). Chick-lit novels included in this subgenre focus on the “lives, loves, and friendships of Latina heroines”. Additionally, chick lit authors have also worked on including second-generation Chinese American and Indian American protagonists in their fiction (Ferriss and Young 6).

Chick-lit is not only prominent in the literary world but has been transferred to other media, such as television and film. It is a subgenre in television which includes TV programmes that centre around a group of female friends who explore challenges in their lives and learn how to deal with them. These shows are targeted explicitly, but not exclusively, at women and they prioritize relationships, personal growth and achievement over more externally driven plots. In contrast to soap operas or family dramas, chick-lit television is deliberately female-centred (Hunting 188).

The majority of chick-lit programs are comedies or dramas mixed with melodrama and witty humour and they rely heavily on conversations and dialogues for narrative development. Prominent issues are, for example, workplace related story lines, male and female relationships or family relations, all of which are consistently subordinate to the female social group. Moreover, male characters appear only as causes of conflicts or problems and as objects of desires and, thus, become topics of discussion of the core group. Another typical aspect of chick-lit television is that it “features themes and aesthetics drawn from other forms of media associated with women like the romantic comedy film, women’s magazine, or chick-lit novel” (Hunting 188). If a program contains several of the presented attributes, it can be considered to be a part of this subgenre. Representatives of this television subgenre are the series *Sex and the City*, *Lipstick Jungle* or *Cashmere Mafia*. Additionally, Hunting acknowledges that many other programs including *Desperate Housewives* and *Cougar Town* could be included in the chick lit genre (188).

Another aspect worth discussing in the context of chick-lit is that the term arose as a counterpart to the term “lad-lit”, which can be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. It describes a genre that focuses exclusively on a male readership. This term was introduced for marketing purposes, as some publishers believed that such popular fiction would open up a lucrative new “lad” readership. It was supposed to be a new kind of popular fiction concerning the “lad” of that time, “a supposedly carefree hedonist devoted to football, beer, music, and casual sex: a figure created in contrast to the feminist defined ‘New Man’ of previous decades” (Baldick). However, the publishers realised soon that although men enjoyed buying glossy magazines, such as *Arena* or *FHM*, they hardly ever bought books. *Fever Pitch* (published in 1992) and *High Fidelity* (published in 1995) by Nick Hornby are key texts of this genre, as both of the novels have a male main character who is dominated by a typically masculine obsession, such as having a high interest in football. Moreover, both novels highlight an inability of the male protagonist to communicate with women (Baldick s.v. ‘lad-lit’). British lad-lit arrived in America slightly later than the more successful first wave of chick-lit. Thus, it was often mistakenly believed to be a backlash against the *Bridget Jones* phenomenon. However, Baldick states that “the correct answer to the question ‘which came first, the chick or the lad?’ is: the lad” (Baldick).

Finally, it is important to mention that American chick-lit differs from British chick-lit. The differences, however, are not significant, as the Americans only have evolved the genre into different varieties (Montgomery). According to Montgomery, British novels tend to be humorous and more frivolous. As this overview suggests the genre addresses a wide range of readers by presenting several different character types the reader can identify with.

2.1.4) Chick-Lit and Romance Fiction

This section of the diploma thesis tries to place chick-lit within the genre of romance fiction as the literary work by Marian Keyes seems to be a hybrid form of “chick-lit” and “romance”. Definitions of “romance” will be considered and the connection to chick-lit will be explained.

According to Ramsdell, in the strictest sense “all popular fiction is romantic” due to the fact that the world in fiction is presented as it ought to be and not as it is and, thus, can be considered as unrealistic or romantic (4). However, when people refer to the term of romance nowadays, they have a specific concept in mind rather than fiction in general. Today the term romance is specifically used when people refer to love stories in general. However, the classification cannot be made easily as certain features in a literary work have to be identified in order for a work of fiction to be classified as a romance. Not any kind of love story will thus be classified as romance (Ramsdell 4). The term chick-lit is often associated with romance fiction, however, there are some differences. For example, the origins of the term ‘romance’ remain “lodged in narratives detailing heroic tales and sagas [...] while also referring to stories of a particularly marked sentimental nature [...]” (Montoro 7). The chick-lit genre is solely associated with the latter.

Above all, in a work of fiction of romance the main focus of the story line is the “love relationship between the two main characters” (Ramsdell 4). Other complications, problems or mysteries usually occur throughout the course of the story development, however, these events are always of secondary interest next to the love story. In contrast, a non-romance may contain a romantic love story, however, the primary plotline focuses on something else entirely (Ramsdell 4).

Another typical feature of romance fiction is that it has to engage the feelings of a reader which, means that it “must have a quality – whether through character development, plot structure, point of view, or style – that allows, almost demands, a certain emotional involvement on the part of the reader” (Ramsdell 4). Janice Radway argues that in order “to qualify as a romance, the story must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but what it feels like to the object of one” (qtd. in Ramsdell 4). Furthermore, a romance has to have a satisfactory ending, which is usually a happy ending as for example, a marriage of the couple in the story (Ramsdell 4).

To sum up, a romance novel must contain two basic elements, namely, “a central love story and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending” (Montoro 8).

Marian Keyes’ novels include not only typical features of chick-lit but also of romantic fiction. Her main characters are often on their personal journey of finding their inner peace, make a successful career in their jobs or try to work out other personal problems and issues in their lives. Moreover, the story lines are often built around a love relationship which develops throughout the novel. Keyes’ novels can also be compared to the romance subgenre of “Contemporary Romance” as the novels “usually focus on the attempts of a woman to find success and happiness both professionally and romantically. Usually by the end of the book, she has attained both” (Ramsdell 43). The main goal for characters in romance novels is to find a “committed, permanent, monogamous relationship” with a future of a marriage and children (Ramsdell 43).

A typical feature of the chick-lit genre, which distinguishes itself from the previous romance, is the representation of women as sexual players instead of romantic players only. In contrast to romance fiction, the chick-lit heroine is portrayed as sexually active, having an autonomous sexual desire and to have multiple sexual partners, at least until the female main character finds her Mr. Right (Rowntree 2). Marian Keyes includes both types of women in her novels, which shows again that her works can be considered as a mixture of both chick-lit and romance fiction.

The most striking difference between typical chick-lit novels and novels by Marian

Keyes is, however, that Keyes' works usually tend to have a more serious tone and her main characters have to deal with difficult situations, such as illnesses or losses in their lives. Chick lit books, on the other hand, are generally light-hearted, humorous and usually deal with superficial everyday problems of women. Keyes herself says about all of her novels that they are "a comedy about something serious" (Vallely).

Thus, Keyes' novels do not fully fit into the chick-lit genre and can therefore be seen as a hybrid form between chick-lit and romance fiction. A more detailed discussion of this aspect of Keyes books can be found in the section "Typical Features of Chick-Lit".

2.1.5) Chick-Lit in the Literary World

Chick-lit is big business and, therefore, it is not surprising that it "raises eyebrows and concerns" (Ferriss and Young 2). In the beginning, several critics considered the new chick-lit genre to be trash literature, and there were publications which said that it was nothing more than "fluffy, mind-numbing garbage" and "formulaic vapid prose" (Montgomery). Furthermore, the novel *Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding had been a subject of severe criticism as feminists claimed that the book betrayed the feminists' achievements of emancipation.

According to these critics, the superficial topics addressed in the novel have established goals of self-actualization that are pursued by many contemporary young women. Topics like the female body, beauty and heterosexuality had been designated as "institutions of patriarchal oppression" by the second wave of feminism before the publication of the novel (Mabry qtd. in Ragaišienė 68). As stated by Guerrero, the feminists who had fought for equality in society in the 1960s and 1970s now had daughters who embraced the opposite and "were reaping the rewards of those struggles" (88). Nevertheless, the publication of the *Bridget Jones Diary* has led to an outpouring of many more novels of this genre, many of which became extremely successful (Ragaišienė 68).

The new genre has been polarized between critics, who dismissed chick-lit as trivial fiction and readers who fully embraced the genre and claimed that it reflects the

realities of contemporary women (Ferriss and Young 1-2). Ward states that chick-lit is “almost more like a mindset than a literary subgenre” (qtd. in Peitz 13). According to her, chick-lit is not only concerned with books, but a part of a prominent popular cultural phenomenon. This phenomenon has been termed “chick culture” and it includes mostly American and British media of popular culture that focus on middle-class women in their twenties to thirties. The most prominent forms of media dealing with chick culture are definitely chick-lit and chick-TV programs, including chick flicks² (Ward qtd. in Peitz 13). However, there are also other manifestations of pop culture such as “magazines, blogs, music - even car designs and energy drinks” (Ward qtd. in Peitz 13).

Besides, several critics tend to see the chick-lit genre only as popular literature for adult female readers who “embrace consumerist ideology and the images of femininity perpetuated by mass culture” (Ragaišienė 69). By doing so, they ignore the fact that novels of this genre also address central human and social concerns and important topics. Additionally, they discredit the valid experiences of women all over the world. As stated on the website chicklit.us, the genre appeals to readers who “want to see their own lives in all the messy detail [as it is] reflected in fiction today” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 3). Jacobs and Mlynowski state that one BBC critic attacked chick lit by stating that the novels “merely hold up a mirror to women’s lives” but they raise the question why this fact is a negative aspect about this genre as looking into the mirror is often a valuable way to reflect, learn and grow (10). Moreover, they add that chick-lit is extremely honest and reflects women’s lives of today, including “their hopes and dreams as well as their trials and tribulations” (10).

Chris Mazza is an opponent of chick-lit and claims that it is a genre “populated by heroines entangled in endless self-doubt, depreciation, and blunder” (qtd. in Ragaišienė 69). Moreover, Mazza states that the term chick-lit initially appeared in an anthology on experimental women’s fiction which she had worked on, entitled *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (published in 1995). The name of the chick-lit rubrics was used in an “obviously sardonic” sense and was originally meant to make aware of the “damaging, lingering stereotype(s)” of gender roles in our society (Mazza, *Who’s*

² The term “chick-flick” describes a genre of “post-classical mainstream fiction films that offer a popular postfeminist take on a wide range of ‘female concerns’ [...], focus on female protagonists, and are aimed primarily at a female audience” (Kuhn and Westwell s.v. ‘chick-flick’, online dictionary)

Laughing 18). The original meaning of the term chick-lit, as it was used in the anthology, featured women that were courageous, strong, independent, confident and worked against the encoded norms of society (Mazza qtd. in Ferriss and Young 3).

Mazza claims that the current usage of the term chick-lit does not reflect the original intention to present a continuous change between the relationship of women and society (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 3). According to Mazza, “a stroll through any bookstore confirms that chick lit’s second incarnation looks not at all like its first” (*Who’s Laughing*, 18). In the author’s perspective, this new meaning embraces exclusively “an old frivolous or coquettish image of women” (Mazza, *Who’s Laughing* 18). The new chick-lit genre consists of novels and short stories featuring, without exception, only career women looking for love. Thus, it has completely failed to achieve the initial intention of experimental fiction included in the anthology (Mazza, qtd. in Ragaišienė 69).

In this context, it is also interesting to consider possible meanings of the term ‘chick lit’, due to the fact that critics tend to associate it with negative connotations. Johanna Webb Johnson claims that when the word ‘literature’ is cut down to ‘lit’ it is immediately implied that the work is of lower quality (141). Moreover, Rende argues that both words contain negative connotations, as the word “chick” refers to the slang term for a young woman and “lit” is the shortened word for literature, which typically denotes “frivolity and insignificance” (qtd. in Peitz 26). Jacobs and Mlynowski, on the other hand, argue that the term is used for marketing purposes and that it helps to get the books into the hands of readers. Many misguided people automatically assume that the story lines are superficial dealing only with twenty-something women who try to find their true love in a big city.

However, the genre has proven that it has become rather diverse encompassing themes ranging from dating to dealing with death (13-14). This raises the question if Marian Keyes’ novels are indeed only superficial reflections on banal events from everyday life or whether they are concerned with more serious topics as well. Keyes herself claims that it is the more serious topics that she is interested in: her stories “reflect the real problems facing modern woman including serious illness, domestic

violence, rape, bereavement, alcoholism and depression” (Vallely). For example, in *Rachel’s Holiday* the protagonist is a drug addict who struggles to find her way back into life.

Imelda Whelehan, who is another supporter of chick-lit argues that chick-lit, as a form of a feminist bestseller, deals with daily concerns like consumerism, media images and job opportunities, as well as important topics such as gender roles and self-identity (4-5). As stated by Montgomery, not every chick-lit book is of high quality and especially earlier novels are rather superficial and without literary merit. However, as the genre has evolved, the standard has gone up and the range of chick-lit books encompasses anything from light and glamorous to deep and meaningful. Moreover, Montgomery addresses also the aspect of marketing. Publishing companies often decide to use glossy covers for novels which make them appear more trivial than they actually are because the publishers want to attract a larger reading audience (Montgomery). It can be stated that chick-lit has owned its right to be labelled as “the new woman’s fiction” due to its outstanding success and huge fan community (Ferriss and Young 12).

Clearly any kind of new successful genre or trend will be judged by the public, but only time will show whether chick-lit will continue to be a prominent part in the literary world or not. In this context, Shari Benstock asks some interesting questions:

When time has made its inevitable judgement, will chick lit prove to have been a popular diversion, no more (or less) important than Harlequin romance? Is it just Junk [sic] food for (semi)professional turn-out-of-the-millennium woman? Will its ability to speak to women be limited to its own time and place? (qtd. in Peitz 19)

These questions cannot be answered yet, but the next generations of readers and scholars will certainly have more data and insights and are likely to offer answers to these questions (Benstock qtd. in Peitz 20).

2.1.6) Typical Features of Chick-Lit

In every chick-lit story there are certain typical features relating to the characters, themes, narrative technique, narrative style and the design of the book covers. Some features have already been addressed in the previous chapters but now a more

detailed in-depth analysis will be presented. Chick-lit novels can easily be identified by these common characteristics.

One aspect that can be recognized immediately is that the covers of these books are especially glossy and attract attention as they have bright colours and striking pictures on them. Moreover, they often show women and things typically associated with young females, such as fashionable handbags and high-heeled shoes. As stated by Pérez-Serrano, the reason why chick-lit books are published with glossy covers is the fact that chick-lit “has been sold to the mass market as consumer goods. In one way or another, this needs to be reflected on its image” (137). Some examples of typical chick-lit covers are presented in the following:



Figure 1: The Book Covers of Marian Keyes' *Rachel's Holiday* (1995) and Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2005) and *The Undomestic Goddess* (2006)

Devoted readers of chick-lit can easily identify themselves with the main characters and their manner of speaking. Moreover, many of these novels are told by a female protagonist. Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones Diary*, for example, suggests “spontaneity and candor with its use of the diary form” while other chick-lit authors prefer to make use of the typical, confessional style of chick-lit books by including letters and e-mail messages (Ferriss and Young 4). Furthermore, the majority of chick-lit books introduce a first person narrator “to craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers” (Ferriss and Young 4). In addition, chick-lit novels are often conceived as quest narratives that are “not [just] focused on one relationship

exclusively, as there is a process of trial and error before finding a suitable partner” (Pérez-Serano 137).

In terms of structure, chick-lit novels have usually short chapters, which make them easy to read. However, this does not at all result in shorter books, the length of chick-lit novels varies considerably but most of them are rather voluminous. Marian Keyes’ novels have an average length of 500 pages. Next, a closer look at the narrative structures can be taken (Pérez-Serano 137). According to Pérez-Serano, a novel can have a circular structure, which means that the action starts and finishes at the same point in time, that is, the moment of resolution. Pérez-Serano states that this shows that the novel “has been written as a consequence of the event and from the knowledge of how it is going to be resolved” (137-138). Another variety of narrative structure is that of using two plot lines which belong to different temporal spaces. This has been termed “dual narrative” and it means that there is “an alternation between past and present, shifting between one chapter and the following one” (Pérez-Serano 138). A third narrative structure, the chronological narration, is used, for example, when a novel is written in diary form (138).

Chick-lit authors usually make use of a highly informal, conversational language and, thus, slang and swearwords are used frequently (Pérez-Serano 138). Moreover, these novels are often written with a humorous tone, which is another distinctive feature of chick-lit and, as mentioned by Keyes, a “non-negotiable element” (qtd. in Pérez-Serano 138). Language is an important tool when it comes to expressing ideas, because authors play with words and invent new expressions as, for example, “emotional fuckwittage”, which is a term used for men who are not able to commit in relationships. Another example is “a fake bake”, that is, any form of self-tanning or “feathery strokery” which refers to anything related to the feminine side of men (Pérez-Serano 138).

The main protagonist is usually a white, young female who belongs to the middle-class and is often between 20 and 40 years old. Furthermore, she typically chooses to live in big cities, such as New York or London, and to work in media-related professions or secretarial jobs. The main character’s surroundings and relationships to other characters can be put into categories and follow a series of stereotypes.

Characters like the “gay best friend, the awful flatmate, the pushy boss [or] the overprotective parents” can easily be identified (Pérez-Serrano 138). Chick-lit often deals with women growing up, learning to take responsibility for their actions and figuring out “who they are and what they need versus what they think they want” (Jacobs and Mlynowski 10). Now the female main protagonists are the girls next-door and the centre of popular women’s novels is no longer limited to “windblown tragic heroines” as, for instance, depicted in novels by Danielle Steele or descendants of “Hollywood/mob dynasties” (Jackie Collins). These were the typical fictional characters who became bestsellers in the 1980s and 90s. (Jacobs and Mlynowski 11).

Moreover, it is interesting to take a look at typical settings of chick-lit fiction as “the sphere of work represents one of the narrative elements which have been subjected to generic change in women’s mainstream fictions” (Smyczyńska 148). This setting of chick-lit stories is no longer represented as a background for romance but the workplace “seems to have acquired a fairly autonomous status in the novels” (Smyczyńska 148). It has become a place for “professional competition” and “realisation of personal ambitions” (Smyczyńska 148). Nevertheless, the workplace is also still a place for opportunities of romantic encounters, such as flirting, after-hour sex or affairs between two individuals. The workplace has become more important in the development of chick-lit stories because it provides a place for social life, including both professional and personal frustrations (Smyczyńska 148). Due to the fact that the characters’ lifestyle possibilities “depend directly on their incomes and professional position, the workplace acquires a new significance in singleton novels (Smyczyńska 148). The protagonists are often not satisfied with the position they hold in their workplace and, thus, they often aspire for an upgrade of promotion. In some novels, the characters are happy with their job or are fortunate and get or have a job that is commensurate with their passions (Smyczyńska 149). However, the majority of protagonists are not lucky and their chances of promotion are rather limited. Thus, their usual tactic “is to wait quietly and patiently for their superior to leave [...]” (Smyczyńska 149).

In this context, it is interesting to take a look at Marian Keyes’ works as they do not fully adjust to the pattern of typical chick-lit fiction. Above all, the most important point

that should be taken into consideration is that the Irish author mixes conventional chick-lit with romance, and she addresses also more serious topics and uses more complex subplots, that is, for example, drug addiction and disease. By doing so, she manages to create a contrast between light comic and serious topics but is able to sustain a humorous tone throughout the whole story. Another feature of Keyes' works is that not all of her main protagonists live "singleton" lifestyles as they are often in a relationship at the beginning of her stories. However, these relationships are not necessarily maintained throughout the whole novel (Pérez-Serrano 138).

According to Vallely, Keyes "writes smart, sassy, sexy comic novels as high gloss and deftly applied as the lipsticks of her strong twenty- and thirty-something female characters. But the comedy is imbued with serious themes which she says reflect the real problems modern women have to face including "serious illness, domestic violence, rape, bereavement, alcoholism and depression" (Vallely).

2.2) Gender Issues

As we have hitherto established concerns regarding chick-lit fiction we will now turn into to theoretical approaches towards gender issues. First, the concept of identity will be discussed and, second, relevant feminist theory will be considered as a useful reference frame for this analysis.

2.2.1) Identity and Culture

In order to find out whether the characters in chick-lit stories are solely represented in a stereotypical way, it is essential to ask how concepts of identity can be grasped and how they have been defined. According to Woodward, identity helps us to find a place in the world and create a connection between ourselves and the society which we live in. Moreover, the concept of identity raises important questions about "how individuals fit into the community and the social world and how identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations" (Woodward 1).

In addition, the concepts of subjectivity and identity are connected to each other and although people often tend to use these terms as synonyms, a distinction has to be made. As stated by Barker, subjectivity is “the condition of being a person and the processes by which we become a person; that is, how we are constituted as subjects (biologically and culturally) and how we experience ourselves (including that which is indescribable)” (215). Self-identity, by contrast, describes the “verbal conceptions we hold about ourselves and our emotional identification with those self-descriptions” (Barker 215). In this context, the term of social identity is extremely important as it includes all expectations and opinions other people have about an individual (Barker 215). Moreover, identities are “contingent, culturally specific productions”, which means that they are “social constructions and cannot ‘exist’ outside of cultural representations” (Barker 216). In western societies the concept of identity is not only personal but also social and it shows people how they are similar or different to other individuals (Barker 216).

Taking this into account, it can be stated that identities are “produced, consumed and regulated within culture – creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about identity positions which we might adopt” (Woodward 2). Since the focus of this thesis is on identities, it is crucial to know about the “circuit of culture”, which includes processes of “representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation” (Woodward 2).

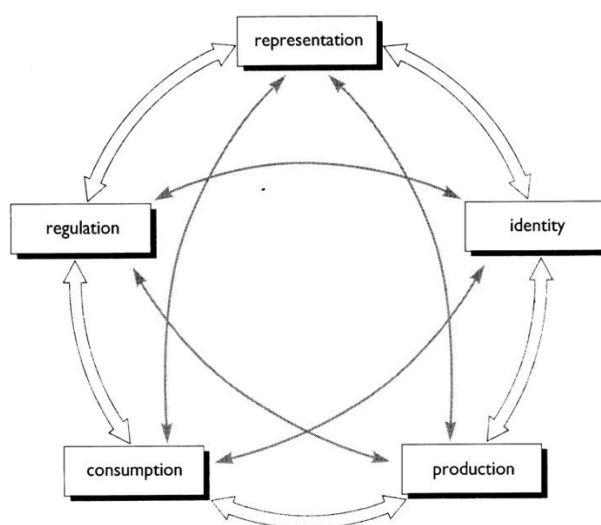


Figure 2: The Circuit of Culture according to Du Gay (qtd. in Woodward 3)

The moments in this circuit are not linear processes and, moreover, each moment in the circuit is tied up with each other. This circuit of culture facilitates understanding of a cultural text or artefact. Although only issues about identity will be analysed in this thesis, other moments of the circuit of culture are implied as well, because they all belong to each other and are intertwined in complex ways (Woodward 3). This connectedness can be shown and analysed by, for example, taking a look at “sexual identities”, which are “represented through cultural texts and symbolic systems which are produced and consumed at particular historical moments at which they are subjected to regulatory systems of which they also form part” (Woodward 3).

Stuart Hall uses the term “identity” to

refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be spoken. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall 6).

Moreover, Hall argues that identity has to be understood as “an effect of adopting a particular subject position, and as a point of attachment to particular discursive strands” (qtd. in Smyczyńska 8). Once this concept of identity is understood, Smyczyńska states that chick-lit fictions can be discussed focusing on their “potential production of identity positions and discursively constructed modes of reading” (8).

Woodward presents some key concepts of identity which are also helpful for addressing questions concerning gender issues. First, identity has to be conceptualized, which means that it has to be broken down into different dimensions in order to understand how it actually works. Next, identity develops in relation to others and symbolic marking establishes difference (Woodward 12). The representational systems for national identities are, for example, a uniform or a national flag.

Furthermore, identity is maintained through social and material conditions and social and symbolic processes are important for the marking and maintaining of identities (Woodward 12). Symbolic marking is “how we make sense of social relations and

practices; for example, regarding who is excluded and who is included”, whereas social differentiation focuses on “how these classifications of difference are ‘lived out’ in social relations” (Woodward 12). Looking at the concept of identity also means to look at “classificatory systems” due to the fact that they give information on how social relations are organised and divided.

Butler focuses on identity in connection to gender issues. In her work *Undoing Gender* different aspects of gender issues and questions are discussed which are extremely useful for the analysis and discussion of chick-lit fiction. According to Butler, gender is a performed activity that happens without a person’s knowing. However, it is important to emphasise that this unconscious activity is not automatic or mechanical, but instead a practice of improvisation. In this context gender is always performed with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary (Butler, *Undoing 2*)

People often think that their gender is something they own, but in reality the terms that “make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself)” (Butler, *Undoing 2*). In addition, the statement “[y]ou make me feel like a natural woman” can only be valid if both genders are clearly differentiated from each other (Butler, *Gender Trouble 22*). Thus, Butler argues that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” (*Gender Trouble 22*).

Moreover, Butler claims that gender becomes less important as soon as people “realize that the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood” (*Undoing 3*). Being a certain gender does not mean that a person has to desire in a certain way, however, it is not easy to separate the life of gender from the life of desire due to the fact that a person’s life is dependent on social norms (Butler, *Undoing 3*). As stated by Butler, the Hegelian tradition links “desire with recognition, claiming that desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings” (*Undoing 3*). In addition, individuals “only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable

standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler qtd. in Benstock, Ferriss and Woods 185). In this context, Butler adds that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender” (Butler qtd. in Benstock, Ferriss and Woods 185).

Moreover, there are social histories for terms such as “masculine” and “feminine” but they are also changeable depending on the culture in which they are used. In fact, geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints change the meanings of these terms depending on who imagines whom and for what purpose (Butler, *Undoing* 10). In addition, Butler argues that the recurrence of these terms “does not index a sameness, but rather the way in which the social articulation of the term depends upon its repetition, which constitutes one dimension of the performative structure of gender” (Butler, *Undoing* 10). Thus, terms of gender are never the same but are constantly in the process of being remade (Butler, *Undoing* 10).

Furthermore, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that people are driven by unconscious processes, which is known as the “drive”. However, this “drive” is “neither exclusively biological nor cultural”, but a combination of both” (Butler, *Undoing* 15). If norms always constitute humans which are not made by them individually, they at least have to understand in what ways the constitution takes place (Butler, *Undoing* 15). According to Butler, the staging and structuring of affect and desire “is clearly one way in which norms work their way into what feels most properly to belong to me (Butler, *Undoing* 15).

In conclusion, it can be said that everything in a society is culturally constructed and a person’s identity and life is defined by social norms. These norms are constantly being remade and differ depending on the society which a person lives in. Moreover, gender is not something that people own but it is a product of cultural norms. People need to educate themselves and have to find out what constitutes norms in a society in order to break through stereotypes and cultural programming. This knowledge is also useful for the analysis of this thesis and can be used to identify instances of gender issues in literature.

2.2.2) Feminist Theory

In order to identify and analyse gender issues in selected works by Marian Keyes, the chick-lit genre has to be placed within a literary theory. Feminist theory is appropriate for this undertaking as it sets out to “examine [...] the ways in which our personal identity is formed by our culture’s definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman” (Tyson 139). Looking at our society from a feminist point of view, family roles and the socioeconomic system depend to a large extent on a person’s gender. The focus is on situations and ways in which men and women are treated differently depending on their sex and on how men are socialized to be masculine and women to be feminine” (Tyson 139).

As stated by Bressler, the traditional fairy tale *Cinderella* presents typical examples of female stereotypes in Western societies, as Cinderella has to accept that, in addition to being beautiful, she must be “good-natured and meek” (143). Moreover, good-looking females like her are victims of their lives and cannot do anything but to wait patiently for a handsome, young and wealthy prince who will save, marry and take care of them for the rest of their lives. The traditional Cinderella is a dependent creature who accepts the commands of a patriarchal society. Her stepsisters, on the other hand, represent another stereotype, namely, that looking bad and ugly is connected to being a cruel and unfriendly person (Bressler 143).

Feminist theory tries to fight against these cultural stereotypes of women presented in the fairy tale. According to feminism, women must reject the idea that they are “mindless, weepy, passive, helpless creatures who must wait for a man to come and make their lives meaningful” (Bressler 144). Furthermore, females have to understand that their life is not dependent on physical beauty and that they are not limited by their sex (Bressler 144). As stated by Bressler, it is important to be aware of the fact that a person’s sex is biologically determined whereas a person’s gender is culturally determined (144).

In the majority of cultures men are in powerful positions, whereas women suffer from “varying degrees of oppression depending on, amongst other things, their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation, and the country or region

in which they live” (Tyson 139). Thus, the aim of feminists is to understand the ways in which females are oppressed in order to be able to reduce or even eliminate this oppression. Their goal is to change the degrading view of females in order to help women realize that they are not an insignificant Other, but that “each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man” (Bressler 144). Moreover, feminism fights for better family policies, such as nutrition and healthcare for mothers and their children, parental leave, qualitative and affordable day care and providing shelters for abused or battered women and their offspring (Tyson 140).

In an ideal society for feminists, women and men are encouraged to “fulfill their full potential as human beings regardless of the extent to which their abilities and inclinations differ from traditional (patriarchal) definitions of femininity and masculinity” (Tyson 139). Patriarchal ideology is prominent in people’s everyday lives, however, it is difficult to recognize it due to the fact that everyone has become so accustomed to this ideology that it often seems invisible. This invisibility makes it even more dangerous because it is difficult to address an issue which pretends not to exist (Tyson 139).

Barker identifies three different types of feminism, namely liberal, socialist and radical feminism. According to him, liberal feminists focus on “equality of opportunity for women” (24). This can be achieved “within the broad structures of the existing legal and economic frameworks” (Barker 24). In contrast, socialist feminism stresses the “interconnections between class and gender, including the fundamental place of gender inequalities in the reproduction of capitalism” (Barker 24). Whereas liberal and socialist feminists put their focus on “equality and sameness”, radical feminism analyses important existing differences between males and females. By doing so, differences of females and the “superiority of ‘feminine’ values” are celebrated (Barker 24).

In this context, it is essential to take a look at Ervin Goffman’s essay “The Arrangement between the Sexes” which gives more insight on how modern societies are culturally structured and what role gender plays in them. Every society has ideals of its own and conceptions of what is typical and characteristic for the two existing

sex classes. According to Goffman, there exist “ideals of masculinity and femininity, understandings about ultimate human nature which provides grounds [...] for identifying the whole person, and provide also a source of accounts that can be drawn on in a million ways to excuse, justify, explain, or disapprove the behaviour of an individual [...]” (Goffman 303).

This means that a person’s behaviour is normalized and approved in gender specific ways which are constructed through society. Gender identity develops as soon as individuals “build up a sense of who and what [they are] by referring to [their] sex class and judging [themselves] in terms of the ideals of masculinity (or femininity) [...]” (Goffman 304). As stated by Goffman, with ‘gender identity’ society gives people the most profound form of self-identification, which is supposedly even more far-reaching than a person’s identification through age. Any kind of disturbance or change of gender identity is not anticipated as an easy matter (Goffman 304).

In this regard, it has to be mentioned that performances of masculinity and femininity are defined as “doing gender”, due to the fact that males and females perform activities that are appropriate for the society’s constructed sex classes. Individuals can only be recognized as masculine or feminine as soon as they show typical behaviours which are associated with a sex class (West and Zimmerman 127-128).

The next points that should be taken into consideration are the most important basic concepts of the feminist theory. In the following, these concepts are presented and explained in more detail. *Patriarchy* [emphasis added] is, as already mentioned above, an important term for feminists as it describes a society where males hold all or most of the power and, thus, it is given to them to promote traditional gender roles. Men and women who support patriarchy believe that anyone who violates traditional gender roles is in some way “unnatural, unhealthy, or even immoral” (Tyson 142).

Feminist theory tries to widen people’s horizons by explaining that “socializing women and men to conform to traditional gender roles means limiting people’s options, denying them the choice to follow the path that best fulfils their potential” (Tyson 142). Thus, it is important to make aware of the fact that it is patriarchal programming which is “unnatural, unhealthy and unethical” (Tyson 142).

Another basic concept that will be explained in more detail is *traditional gender roles* [emphasis added]. According to these roles, men are deemed to be naturally “rational, strong, protective, and decisive”, whereas women are naturally “emotional (which, in a patriarchy, usually means irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson 142). However, it is important to recognize that these gender roles are produced by society and patriarchy rather than by nature and this mindset has been used to justify many inequities in the past and today. Examples of these inequities also feature prominently in the world of work. Men still tend to earn more money than women for the same work and, moreover, women are often excluded from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions (Tyson 142).

Additionally, females are told that they are not made for certain careers such as mathematics or engineering. Regardless of the job a woman has outside of her home, her primary responsibility is to take care of their children and domestic chores (Tyson 142). It is interesting to look at Keyes’ fiction from the perspective of a feminist and identify whether her fiction promotes traditional gender roles or breaks with typical conventions and presents independent women in powerful career positions.

Next, it is important to address and discuss the *objectification of women* [emphasis added] as females who adhere to traditional gender roles are often considered to be “good girls”. According to Goffman, men in Western societies are often likely to perceive women as “fragile and vulnerable” and they think that they need to be protected from harsher things in life (308). Moreover, females may be defined “as less than men, but they are nonetheless idealized, mythologized, in a serious way through such values as motherhood, innocence, gentleness, sexual attractiveness, and so forth [...]” (Goffman 308).

They are put on pedestals and idealized as “pure, angelic creatures” whose main aim is to please the men in their lives. In contrast, women who do not conform to the traditional gender roles are seen as “bad girls”, especially when they decide to violate the rule of sexual conduct for patriarchal women as, for example, when they are dressed inappropriately or behave in a manner that can be considered as sexually provocative. In a patriarchal society men sleep with “bad girls” because they are

thought of as sex objects, whereas they marry “good girls” who are considered to be worthy enough of bearing the men’s children (Tyson 142).

Feminist theory makes aware of the fact that “good girls” and “bad girls” are an objectification by patriarchal society, which means that they are not seen as “independent human beings with their own goals, needs, and desires” but they are evaluated “only in terms of their usefulness to patriarchal men” (Tyson 142). Women are identified as patriarchal stereotypes and even the stereotypes that appear to be positive, such as “virginal angels” or “selfless nurturers”, are damaging for females due to the fact that they “reduce women to their roles as patriarchal objects and suggest that ‘good’ women aspire to nothing else” (143 Tyson).

Moreover, patriarchy is based on *sexism* [emphasis added] which is the belief that women are by nature inferior to men. Sexist people are of the opinion that traditional gender roles are right and correct because men are innately superior to women and, thus, they should be in charge in all aspects of life, such as, business, politics, family and all other important social institutions. In everyday language the term “sexist” is reserved for a person who expresses his or her patriarchal beliefs with particular “arrogance, self-righteousness, or anger”, however, the term suits every person who has sexist beliefs to any “practice, policy, or custom” that disadvantages women merely to the fact they are women (Tyson 143). Therefore, it can be concluded that the terms “sexist” and “patriarchal” are synonyms, however, the term “sexist” tends to be an insult for patriarchal men or women, whereas the term “patriarchal” is not (Tyson 143).

Feminist theory opposes sexism by distinguishing between a person’s sex and *gender*. While a person’s sex is their biological makeup as female or male, such as their sex organs or body chemistry, a person’s gender is the cultural programming as female or masculine like, for example, behaving as a sweet and naïve girl or as a “macho-man” (Tyson 143). This theory argues that people are born as male or female, however, they are not born as feminine or masculine. This means that it is the society and cultural programming which decide what is appropriate behaviour for women and men and what is considered to be feminine or masculine (Tyson 143).

Taking this into account, it can be stated that feminism “is centrally concerned with sex as an organizing principle of social life where gender relations are thoroughly saturated with power” (Barker 24). The phenomenon of oppressed and subordinated women can be observed across a range of social institutions and practices, which means that powerful men and female subordination are structurally positioned in society (Barker 24).

A quote from Simone de Beauvoir perfectly sums up this circumstance: “One is not born a woman; one becomes one” (qtd. in Tyson 143). Tyson argues that the choice of footwear can be taken as an example for cultural programming. As stated by the author, women decide to wear high heels not because they need help reaching the top shelf of the cupboard, but because society tells them that this kind of footwear is feminine. Furthermore, such footwear is considered feminine because it makes them, amongst other things, less mobile than men and, thus, less able to compete (Tyson 143).

2.2.3) Historical Development of Feminism

In order to better understand the feminist theory it is important to take a look at the historical development of feminism and to mention some important representatives of feminist criticism. Over many centuries and in different countries women have fought for their sex and have articulated their complaints, needs and hopes in various ways (Walters 2). However, only a small group of females who deeply engaged in fighting for women’s rights would have described themselves as ‘feminists’ (Walters 3).

According to feminists, prejudice against women and gender discrimination has already started with the biblical narrative in which Eve is blamed for the fall of humanity. Another incident of discrimination can be found in ancient Greece where Aristotle claims that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled” (qtd. in Bressler 145). Moreover, religious leaders, theologians and philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine state that women are nothing more than “imperfect men” and, according to them, “these imperfect and spiritually weak creatures [...] possess a sensual nature that lures men away from spiritual truths, thereby preventing males from attaining their spiritual

potential” (Bressler 145). The gender discrimination continues over the centuries and also Darwin writes in his work *The Descent of Man* (1871) negatively about women by claiming that they are “characteristic of [...] a past and a lower state of civilization” (qtd. in Bressler 145). In addition, Darwin states that men are “physically, intellectually, and artistically superior” (Bressler 145).

Throughout literary history, it is evident that women were “traditionally perceived as sources of inspiration, as accessories to the production of great works” (Berensmeyer 115). Women always got the supporting role where “male poets were kissed by the Muse, they had mothers, wives, sisters or daughters who might become involved with the poetic process as addressees or secretaries” (Berensmeyer 115). However, they were rarely “perceived as writing *subjects* in their own right, and they were usually denied the noble titles of ‘author’ or ‘poet’” (Berensmeyer 115).

This discrimination continued for many centuries, until Mary Wollstonecraft raised her voice and fought with her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (published in 1792) against patriarchal opinions in her society. From her point of view, women must be independent, stand up for their rights and fight against a society dominated and defined by men (Bressler 145). Females have to be the leading ladies of their own lives, articulate themselves and, most importantly, “reject the patriarchal assumption that women are inferior to men” (Bressler 145).

Although this first step in the right direction was taken in the 18th century, it took until the Progressive Era of the 1900s that feminist criticism became more prominent and started to grow. In this era, women “gained the right to vote and became prominent activists in the social issues of the day, such as health care, education, politics, and literature” but, however, being equal to men was not made a reality at this point of history (Bressler 145).

Another representative for feminist criticism is the British author Virginia Woolf who wrote the essay *A Room of One’s Own*, published in 1919, which laid the foundation for feminist criticism. In this work Woolf conducted her famous thought experiment which will be presented in the following:

What if Shakespeare had had a sister, Judith, endowed with the same creative gifts as her brother – would the world ever have been able to see or read a play or a sonnet written by her? Would 'Judith' have been able to produce great literature, or would a male-dominated society have denied and suppressed her artistic talent, enforcing upon her the more conventional roles of sister, wife and mother (Walters 115).

In her essay, Woolf claims that men have treated women as inferiors and they are not interested in doing anything to change this behaviour. Moreover, men define what it means to be feminine and have the power and control over "political, economic, social, and literary structures" (Bressler 145). According to Woolf, women must fight against these social opinions about women and establish their own identity in a world dominated by males. Furthermore, females must "challenge the prevailing, false cultural notions about their gender identity and develop a female discourse that will accurately portray their relationship to the world of reality and not to the world of men" (Bressler 146). Woolf published her essay at a time of continuing social and technological modernisation and, thus, she got a chance to be heard (Berensmeyer 115).

Simone de Beauvoir published an important work for feminist criticism as well in 1949. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir claims that the French society is patriarchal and controlled by men. Similar to Woolf, Beauvoir is of the opinion that the men in this society define what it means to be male and female. According to Beauvoir, due to the fact that the female is not male, she becomes the Other, who is "an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, the dominant being in the society" (qtd. in Bressler 146).

Moreover, the female is always inferior to the male and, thus, she is "a secondary or nonexistent player in the major social institutions of her culture, such as the church, government, and educational systems" (Bressler 146). As stated by Beauvoir, every woman must fight against these cultural norms in her society, become an autonomous being and define herself outside the present societal construct if she ever wants to become a significant human being next to the men in society. The only way to become independent and autonomous is to reject being labelled as "the Other" (qtd. in Bressler 146-147).

In the 1960s and 1970s females begin to organize again and a movement called 'Women's Liberation' develops and their central concern is to focus on issues "specific to women in their reproductive and social roles" (Walters 3). This term was often shortened "sometimes affectionately, sometimes in a derogatory way, to 'women's lib'" (Walters 3). In this century, feminism finds new voices because of the prominence of political activism and existing social concerns. In this era, Kate Millett publishes the book *Sexual Politics* in 1969 and this marks the beginning of a new wave of feminism (Bressler 147).

Kate Millett is one of the first feminists "to challenge the social ideological characteristics of both the male and the female" (Bressler 147). Similar to many other representatives of feminism, Millett stated once again that "a female is born and a woman is created" (Bressler 147). To put it in other words, a person's sex is determined by nature whereas a person's gender is a social construct which is created by cultural ideals and norms (Bressler 147). In this context, it is important to mention that a distinction between the terms "feminist", "female" and "feminine" has to be made. The first term is a "political position", the second a "matter of biology" and the third a "set of culturally defined characteristics" (Barry 122).

Furthermore, Millett adds that "consciously or unconsciously, women and men conform to the cultural ideas established for them by society" (Bressler 147). Media, such as television, songs, movies and literature transmit, amongst other things, these cultural norms and expectations. Millett gives this behaviour of conforming to these "prescribed sex roles dictated by society" a term, namely, sexual politics (Bressler 147). In the 1970s, special attention was also given to books by male authors who constructed typical images of women and, thus, influenced the way in which women were seen and should behave (Barry 122). In general, within feminism "there is a strong emphasis on the 'constructedness' of femininity, that is, on such matters as conditioning and socialisation, and the influence of images and representations of femininity in literature and culture" (Barry 133).

Today feminism seems to have lost importance, because when Walters asked women in their 20s whether they see themselves as feminists or whether they had any kind of interest in this topic area, the majority of them answered that they do not

care about feminism at all. However, it has to be mentioned that all of these women were educated, had university degrees or were working, which means that they clearly were benefiting from earlier battles for women rights (Walters 4).

Feminist theory can be used in literature to ask important questions as, for example, whether the characters conform to patriarchal and traditional gender roles. Is the role of the strong, rational protector given to a man and the role of the submissive, emotional nurturer given to a woman? Are the women in literature presented as typical patriarchal stereotypes of females like, for example, “virginal angels” and “selfless caregivers” as well as “nags, gossips, seductresses and ‘bitches’” (Tyson 140)? Additionally, analysing literature with the help of feminist criticism can be done by looking at different areas which are explained in the following: Images of women and representations of female experience in texts can become the focus of analysis.

Furthermore, the focus can be put on women writers, “including the specific qualities and concerns of female authorship and the creation of a female tradition or canon”, as well as on the women readers by describing and analysing “the role gender plays in the reception of literary texts and the emergence of a distinct female readership” (Benstock, Ferriss, and Woods 153). Next, feminist theory can be used for analysing the language of a work by trying to define a “distinctly feminine mode of writing” (Benstock, Ferriss, and Woods 153). Last, it can be stated that feminist literary analyses may examine the publication of a work by having a look at the impact of the publishing system “on the production and consumption of texts by women” (Benstock, Ferriss, and Woods 153).

As can be seen above, feminist theory is particularly appropriate for the analysis of chick-lit fiction, as it asks important questions and looks at areas that are of great interest for the aim of this diploma thesis. In the three selected novels by Marian Keyes, various main female characters will be analysed in greater detail with the focus being on their personality and life situations. Feminist theory makes it possible to discern whether female stereotypes are presented in the novels and whether these female characters conform to the norms and expectations of contemporary society.

3) Part Two: Analysis of Three Selected Novels by Marian Keyes

3.1) Marian Keyes' Life and its Connection to her Novels

A biography of Marian Keyes is included in this thesis due to the fact that her own life experiences are often reflected in her novels. Her main characters have to deal with serious problems, such as drug abuse or mental illnesses, which are things that have happened to the author in reality.

Marian Keyes was born in Limerick in 1963 and brought up in Cavan, Cork, Galway and Dublin. Her family enjoyed oral story-telling, however, this did not encourage Keyes to start writing her own stories. First, she chose a more traditional path and started to study law and accountancy and ended up working in an accounts office in London³. At that time Keyes was in her twenties and she had to deal with low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence. These feelings resulted in her becoming an alcoholic (Vallely). "I'll be an alcoholic until the day I die. I will never be cured. It has to be managed on a daily basis. When I drank, I drank to kill pain. If I'm upset I still want something to numb me out. I've got to watch that. I still get awful depression. It's who I am" (Keyes qtd. in Vallely).

At the age of 30 Keyes tried to commit suicide by swallowing pills and vodka in her flat in London but in the end she panicked and called a friend for help. After this incident her family sent her, against her will, to a rehab centre in Dublin in the mid-1990s and Keyes has managed not to touch alcohol ever since (Vallely). Today Keyes divides her life into before and after drinking (Flood). Keyes started writing short stories a few months before she gave up drinking but she had no intention in showing them to anyone. When she finally came out of rehab, she decided to give her writing a chance and sent it to the Irish publisher Poolbeg and also mentioned in a letter that she had started to work on a novel (Flood). The publishers replied and asked to see the novel and for the first time in her life Keyes stepped up to challenge. "I had no idea what I was going to write. The start of *Watermelon* is very dramatic. I go straight into the action" (Keyes qtd. in Flood).

³ <http://www.mariankeyes.com/marian/biography>, 4.3.2015.

In 1995, the novel was published in Ireland and it became immediately successful due to Keyes' "chatty conversational style and whimsical Irish humour"⁴. The novel was even picked as a Fresh Talent book and translated in to many languages. Today the author's works are published in thirty-three languages⁵.

In total, Keyes has published thirteen novels and all of them are bestsellers all around the world. The titles of her novels are *Watermelon*, *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, *Rachel's Holiday*, *Last Chance Saloon*, *Sushi for Beginners*, *Angels*, *The Other Side of the Story*, *Anybody Out There*, *This Charming Man*, *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, *The Mystery of Mercy Close* and *The Woman Who Stole My Life*. To date, 30 million of her books have been sold and, moreover, *Anybody Out There* won the British Book award for popular fiction and the Melissa Nathan Prize for Comedy Romance. Moreover, *This Charming Man* won the Irish Book Award for popular fiction⁶.

People who have not read Keyes' books can easily be misled by the glossy covers and might assume that her novels are merely trivial chick-lit. In fact, all her books are extremely funny and always have a happy ending, however, they also address serious issues. *Rachel's Holiday* is about a young woman who tries to recover from a drug addiction in rehab, *This Charming Man* deals with domestic violence, *Anybody Out There* focuses on loss and *The Mystery of Mercy Close* deals with depression (Flood). Keyes says about her books that they are "very much a reflection of me. I'm very bleak, really melancholic. But I've always used humour as a survival mechanism" (Vallely).

In addition to her novels, Keyes has also written short stories and articles for magazines and other publications. Two collections of her journalism, called *Under the Duvet* and *Further Under the Duvet*, were published. All royalties from Irish sales were donated to the Simon Community, which is a charity for homeless people. In 2009, the author suffered from a severe depressive episode and was not able to

⁴ <http://www.mariankeyes.com/marian/biography>, 4.3.2015.

⁵ <http://www.mariankeyes.com/marian/biography>, 4.3.2015.

⁶ <http://www.mariankeyes.com/marian/biography>, 4.3.2015.

continue writing⁷. In her first interview since her depression she explained what she had to go through. "I don't want to sound self-pitying, but I felt the old me had been washed away, as if there had been an avalanche, and I'd come to and found myself in a totally different landscape, so I didn't know where anything was. I just felt the old me was gone forever" (Flood).

She realized that baking cakes helped her to cope with her illness and, thus, Keyes published another book in 2012 called *Saved by Cake*, which is a combination of recipes and autobiography. Two years later, Keyes published *The Woman Who Stole My Life* and started again to appear at public events. Keyes now lives in Dún Laoghaire with her husband Tony. They do not have any children⁸.

3.2) Plot Summaries

3.2.1) *Watermelon*

The novel *Watermelon* is 520 pages long and was published in 1996. The story opens with Claire Webster, who has just given birth to a beautiful little baby girl. Only a few hours after her daughter's birth her husband James visits her in the recovery room and admits to her that he was having an affair with another woman for the past few months. If this is not enough, he also reveals that he has decided to leave Claire for this other woman. Claire is shocked and devastated that James could do this to her, especially now when she is in such a vulnerable state. Alone in London with a little baby, Claire decides to go back home to her family in Dublin. She moves back home to her parents and her two younger sisters. She struggles with her new situation as a single-mother and turns to alcohol, loses her appetite and falls into a depression. All she wants is to get back together with her husband.

Time passes and Claire starts to feel better again. She decides to get back on her feet and start life anew with her daughter, who she named Kate. She also meets an attractive younger man who wants to have a real relationship with her. This is, however, prevented by James, who calls her and visits her in Dublin. He tells her that he has broken up with the other woman and that he wants to have her and his

⁷ <http://www.mariankeyes.com/marian/biography>, 4.3.2015.

⁸ <http://www.mariankeyes.com/marian/biography>, 4.3.2015.

daughter back in his life. Claire is now torn between a possible healthy relationship with the new partner, Adam, and going back to the father of her child and trying to make her marriage work. At first, she strongly believes that she has to go back to her husband for the sake of Kate and tells Adam that she cannot be with him. However, she realizes that she deserves someone who respects her and whole-heartedly loves her. Thus, she decides not to go back to James, who has treated her so badly in the past.

All she wants is Adam and she tries everything to get him back. Adam, however, has a secret that he has not yet shared with Claire. He is also a father of a two-year old daughter, who he has not seen in a long time since her mother did not want him to be a part of their lives. Adam has tried everything to get in touch with them but the child's mother has always refused to let him play a bigger part in the life of his daughter. Now after two years she has reached out to him to tell him that she wants to travel around the world on her own. Thus, she wants Adam to take care of their little daughter. Adam knows that this is by no means a perfect situation but he is still happy that he finally has got a chance to take care of his daughter and so he agrees.

Adam finally tells his secret to Claire and they find their way back together. They decide to go back to London together and start a new life with their two children.

3.2.2) *Sushi For Beginners*

The novel *Sushi for Beginners* has a total of 563 pages and was published in 2001. The story focuses on the lives of three women who are called Lisa, Ashling and Clodagh. Each of them is in a different situation in their lives, however, they are united in their longing to find happiness in the Irish capital Dublin. Lisa is a beautiful, ambitious and successful woman, who focuses on her career and always seems to get what she wants. Ashling, on the other hand, is self-conscious, trusting, albeit not particularly good-looking but also extremely honest and straightforward. In contrast to Lisa, she is more of a small town girl. Clodagh is married and has two young children. She seems to be a lucky woman as she has the right marriage, the right man and the good looks. From the outside her life looks perfect, however, she is struggling to find happiness.

The point of departure of the book's story is Lisa, who works at a successful magazine in London and thinks that she will be promoted to become the head of a magazine in New York. Instead she finds out that she will be the head of a magazine called *Colleen* in Dublin. Although Lisa is extremely unhappy about this change in her career she has no other choice but to take it, since her job in London has already been given to another colleague. At the same time, Ashling is applying for a job at *Colleen* magazine and waits to be interviewed. Her organised attitude impresses the heads of the magazine, and thus she is given a chance to prove herself in this new job. When Lisa arrives at the office, she is disappointed and unimpressed by her staff and the unglamorous look of her new office. She can find, however, one positive aspect about her new work, which is her handsome and self-confident colleague Jack. When she sees him for the first time, she promises to herself that she will get him, as he is in her opinion the only guy who is remotely near her league. Jack, however, seems to be reluctant to respond to Lisa's advances.

Clodagh is Ashling's best friend and is in a completely different situation in her life. While Ashling is still single, Clodagh is married, does not work and has two children. Everyone envies her but she is not happy and misses the excitement of her single life and is also finding a hard time getting peace from her two children. Bored and dissatisfied with her life she decides to start a new chapter and makes the decision to go back to work. She also starts to engage in more social activities and joins Ashling and her friends on nights out at comedy clubs. However, Clodagh realizes quite soon that finding a job is not as easy as she originally thought, since no one wants to hire a person who has not worked in a long time.

Meanwhile, Ashling starts to date the comedian Marcus Valentine. In the beginning, he does not seem eager to meet up with her but eventually they start a real relationship. Jack and Lisa also begin to open up to each other and, finally, decide to go on a real date. Jack, however, realizes at a party for the magazine that he is starting to have feelings for Ashling. Across the room, he watches Lisa and wonders why he is not falling for Lisa, who is beautiful and successful. The morning after the party Clodagh's husband Dylan visits Ashling and tells her that he has caught Clodagh in bed with Marcus, Ashling's boyfriend. Both of them are extremely

shocked and Dylan reveals to Ashling that he is planning to divorce Clodagh. Ashling decides to confront Clodagh about this incident and they also break off their friendship.

At the end of the book Ashling finds out that Jack has been attracted to her since the press release launch party and they end up as a couple. Lisa decides to move back to London to work for a rival magazine company and she also gets back to her ex-husband. Clodagh, on the other hand, is dumped by Marcus and has to deal with her new situation as a single mother.

3.2.3) *Rachel's Holiday*

The novel *Rachel's Holiday* is 625 pages long and was published in 1996. The story is about a 27-year old woman called Rachel who lives in New York. She lives in an apartment with a good friend and occasionally takes recreational drugs. She is self-conscious and thinks that she is overweight even though she is in fact rather thin. Rachel does not know why everyone keeps arguing with her about doing drugs, because each of her sophisticated New York friends takes them in social contexts. Rachel is convinced that this does not make her a drug addict. Rachel has a boyfriend called Luke, who is worried about her and does not approve of her irresponsible behaviour, which also leads to Rachel losing her job.

When Rachel ends up in hospital because of a drug overdose, her friends cannot continue looking at Rachel's addiction any longer and decide to inform her family. Her sister immediately catches the next flight to New York and is determined to take Rachel home to Ireland and send her to a rehab clinic. Rachel understands that it looks like she attempted to commit suicide when she had to be taken to hospital to get her stomach pumped, but she claims she never intended to kill herself. She tries to explain to her friends and family that this incident was just an accident. That night, she was just hyperactive and could not fall asleep, so she continued to take sleeping pills. The message that was found next to her bed was also not a goodbye note but just some random notes that she took before going to sleep. In her opinion the whole incident is a big misunderstanding. Her sister, boyfriend and flat mate see the whole situation differently and finally manage to persuade Rachel to go back to Dublin.

Before Rachel leaves for Ireland Luke breaks up with her because he cannot deal with her treating him so badly.

The only reason she accepts to go to Cloisters, an expensive rehabilitation clinic, is because she thinks that it will be like a wellness holiday and that she might meet famous people there. However, she quickly realizes that nothing in this clinic is fancy and that she has to go to group meetings with Sister Josephine, who - according to Rachel - wants nothing but to terrorise each member of the group. Moreover, Rachel has to share a room with an older woman, has to help with the housework and is not allowed to take any drugs. She is extremely disappointed about this, because in her opinion she does not have real problems like all the others at Cloisters and, thus, she does not understand why she cannot occasionally take some pills. After some time at the rehabilitation clinic and after many therapy sessions Rachel slowly begins to realize and accept that she is addicted to drugs and that she has many problems, which have led to her taking drugs in the first place. She begins the journey of discovering the reasons for her bad choices and tries to figure out how to change her life for the better.

When Rachel can finally leave Cloisters, she is told to continue to go regularly to group meetings in order to be able to stay away from drugs. She is also required to stay away from men for one year so that she can focus on herself. Rachel, however, does not listen to this advice and goes on a date with Chris, a guy who has also been a patient at Cloisters. She quickly realizes, however, that he is not good for her and she relapses and turns to drugs once again. After this breakdown Rachel finally decides to start anew and turn her life around. She manages to stay away from drugs, alcohol and men for one year and becomes a stable human being. After this year Rachel meets Luke, her ex-boyfriend again and they have a conversation. In the end Luke confesses his feelings for her and is willing to try it again with Rachel.

3.3) Typical Features of Chick-Lit and Romance Fiction in Keyes' Novels

As already mentioned, Keyes includes typical features of the chick-lit genre and romance fiction in her novels, which can also be identified in the three selected novels *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday*. Typical features

concerning themes, characters, book covers, narrative techniques, use of language and setting can be analysed. In the following, a closer look will be taken at these novels with the focus on some of the typical features mentioned above.

Above all, it can be stated that the combination of the chick-lit genre and romance fiction is prominent in all three novels by Marian Keyes. In *Watermelon* and *Sushi for Beginners* the author addresses serious topics such as depression or alcoholism, whereas *Rachel's Holiday* deals with both depression and drug abuse and addiction. However, the novels also embody most of the core-characteristics of the chick-lit genre, such as the typical 'feel-good' factor (Montoro 15). Keyes satisfies chick-lit readers with happy endings in all of her novels as they "seem to yearn for a sense of satisfying contentment at the moment of novel-closure" (Montoro 15). Happy endings give readers a comforting feeling "so that they are left with a 'sweet taste', as if they had just enjoyed a cup of their favourite cappuccino" (Montoro 15). With the use of this combination of genres Keyes successfully manages to combine and contrast light-hearted themes with serious topics and, moreover, is able to sustain a humorous tone throughout the narrative (Pérez-Serano 138).

To put it in other words, Vallely states that Keyes "writes smart, sassy, sexy comic novels as high gloss and deftly applied as the lipsticks of her strong twenty- and thirty-something female characters". However, the comedy is "imbued with dark themes which she says reflect the real problems facing modern women including serious illness, domestic violence, rape, bereavement, alcoholism and depression" (Vallely).

The structure of chick-lit novels also differs from novels of other genres as they usually have shorter chapters which, however, does not necessarily mean that the novels have fewer pages. In fact, the lengths of these novels vary tremendously and they can be either rather short or extremely long (Pérez-Serano 137). In the case of *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday*, Keyes makes use of shorter chapters, which provide a clear structure of the novels and make them easy to read. The lengths of all three novels vary between 500 and 600 pages.

Next, a closer look at the narrative structures of the novels will be taken. As stated by Pérez Serano, a possible narrative structure is that there are two different plot lines which belong to different temporal spaces. This narrative structure is called “dual narrative” and this term describes “an alternation between past and present [events], shifting between one chapter and the following one” (Pérez-Serano 138). Keyes makes use of this “dual narrative” in *Rachel’s Holiday*, where events alternate between Rachel’s life in the rehabilitation clinic and the main protagonist’s former life in New York. Moreover, this narrative structure is also used in *Watermelon* where the story lines alternate between the main protagonist’s new life with her baby in London and Dublin and past events with her husband James. However, this dual narrative is not as prominent in *Watermelon* as in *Rachel’s Holiday*. The novel *Sushi for Beginners* consists of three story lines of three main characters whose lives are intertwined. In contrast to the other novels, no flashbacks can be found and the story lines develop in chronological order.

Ferriss and Young state that the majority of chick-lit books are written in the first person narrative situation to “craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers” (4). This is also the case in *Watermelon* and *Rachel’s Holiday*, where Claire and Rachel are the only narrator-protagonists of the novels. Thus, the readers are able to identify with the main characters even better and they get to know the characters’ emotions, thoughts and feelings directly and without any mediation by an omniscient narrator.

In these two novels the heroine is the first person narrator who tells “a tale of self-transformation, self-realization, and self-empowerment as she navigates the messiness of her personal and professional life [...]” (Rowntree 1). Thus, the readers are able to identify with the main characters even better and they get to know the characters’ emotions, thoughts and feelings. Because of this narrative technique the novels are extremely subjective as the reader only gets access to one point of view, namely, the one of the main character.

The use of first person narration is interesting in the case of *Rachel’s Holiday* as it becomes clear right from the outset of the novel that the narrator is not only subjective but also extremely unreliable. While everyone else around Rachel sees

that she is addicted to drugs, Rachel is still convinced that everything is perfectly all right with her. The following quote gives an example of Rachel's subjective point of view: "They said I was a drug addict. I found that hard to come to terms with – I was a middle-class, convent-educated girl whose drug use was strictly recreational. And surely drug addicts were thinner" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 1)?

By contrast, *Sushi for Beginners* uses a third person omniscient narrator, probably due to the fact that there are three main characters, namely, Lisa, Ashling and Clodagh. In this case, the choice of an omniscient narrator is helpful as the reader can get access to the thoughts, emotions and feelings of all three characters, which is important for the development of the plot line.

As has already been stated in previous chapters, another typical feature of chick-lit is the rather informal, conversational and often colloquial language. Thus, the use of slang and swearwords is not avoided (Pérez-Serano 138). This feature can also be identified in the three selected novels, as the language is extremely informal and Irish slang words can also be found. Moreover, references to typical Irish terms are sometimes included. An example for a Gaelic term can be found in *Rachel's Holiday*: "Through my convulsions I vaguely heard someone complain in an Irish accent, 'Christ ALMIGHTY! Is there a banshee⁹ on the premises'?" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 36) Moreover, Keyes argues that all of her novels are written in a humorous tone, since this is a "non-negotiable element" for her (qtd. in Pérez-Serano 138).

The characters of the chick-lit genre are typically white, educated, belong to the middle class and are aged between 20 and 40 years (Pérez-Serano 138). The main characters are often surrounded by supporting stereotypical characters, such as "the gay best friend, the awful flatmate, the pushy boss [or] the overprotective parents" (Pérez-Serrano 138).

In their guide on how to write your own chick-lit story Jacobs and Mlynowski provide a list of recommendations on how to put together a typical chick-lit character:

⁹ Banshee: Gaelic term for a specific kind of fairy, Irish legend, "a female spirit whose wailing warns of a death in the house", recorded from the late 17th century, term comes from "Irish *bean sídhe*, from Old Irish *ben síde* 'woman of the fairies'" (Baldick s.v. 'banshee', online dictionary).

You have to create a character sketch that will work for you [...]. To get you started, here are some preliminary details for you to figure out [...]. Name; Age; Physical description; Education; Five words that describe her personality; Where does she work? Is she good at her job? Why? Why not? Her dream job, or dream life; Things that annoy her; Her bad habits; What people like about her; Her roadblock to happiness; The person she trusts most (and why); The person she should trust most (and why); Her dream guy; What she does to relax; Before the book began; The best day of her life; The worst day of her life (Jacobs and Mlynowski 70)

The majority of chick-lit characters live in big cities such as London or New York and they usually work in media-related jobs (Pérez-Serano 138). In the case of Keyes' novels, the characters live mainly in big cities like New York or London. But as the characters are usually Irish, they tend to return to Dublin. The focus on Ireland is surely a result of Marian Keyes being an Irish author. Thus, the main setting of *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday* is Dublin.

Moreover, the main protagonists of chick-lit novels are usually well educated and often hold university degrees in the humanities as, for example, in English or philosophy (Smyczyńska 149). Chick-lit novels are about women growing up, learning to take responsibility for their actions and figuring out "who they are and what they need versus what they think they want" (Jacobs and Mlynowski 10). Most of the main characters in *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday* are academics and work hard in their jobs. Claire (*Watermelon*) has a degree in English literature, Ashling and Lisa (*Sushi for Beginners*) work in media-related jobs and Rachel (*Rachel's Holiday*) makes plans to study psychology at the end of the book.

3.4) Methodology and Research Strategy

The aim of this thesis is to analyse Keyes' novels *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday* with a focus on gender issues. Three aspects, namely struggles, female relief strategies and happy endings will be analysed and the question will be raised whether women are represented and behave in a stereotypical way in different contexts. In order to do so, the gained background knowledge from the theoretical part of this thesis will be incorporated into the analysis of the female main characters of the novels. A theoretical framework and the

methodological approach for the practical part of this thesis will be presented in the following chapter.

The first framework presented below has been developed especially for this diploma thesis and it perfectly exemplifies the aim of this thesis. Three aspects, namely struggles, female relief strategies and happy endings will be analysed in regard to gender issues. Each aspect consists of three sub items, which will be addressed in more depth.

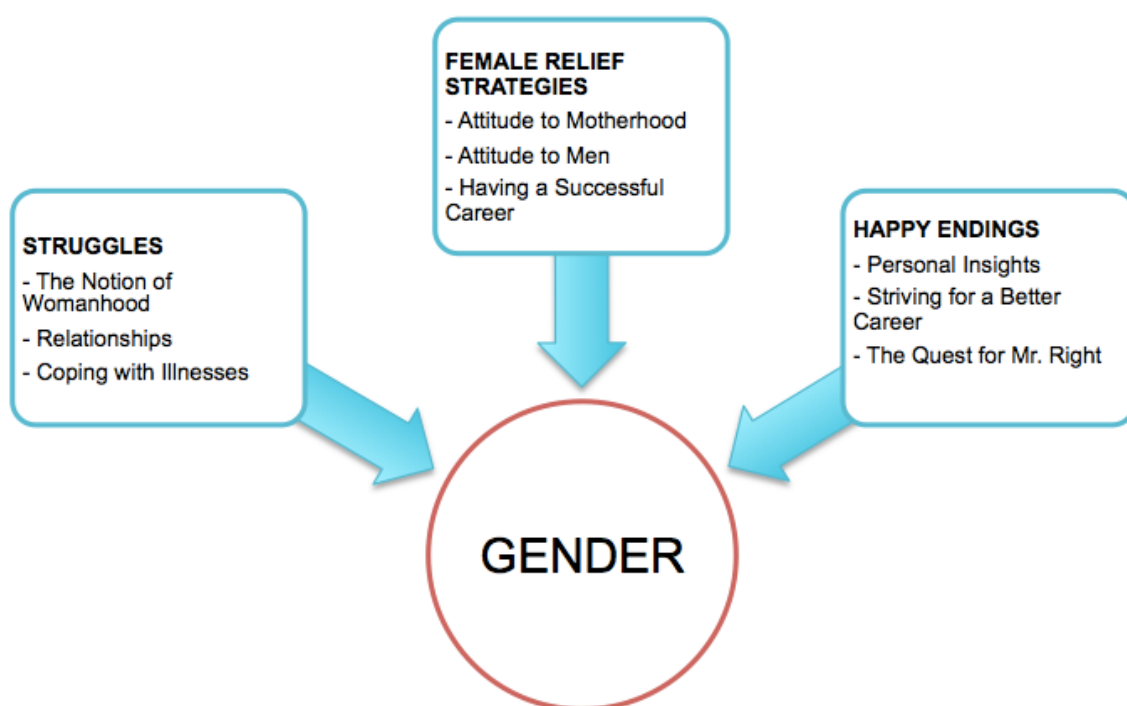


Figure 3: Theoretical Framework: Struggles, Female Relief Strategies and Happy Endings

Firstly, a closer look will be taken at prominent struggles female main characters have to face throughout the novels' story developments. There are struggles concerning the notion of womanhood, which include all problems regarding the main characters' appearance, looks and emotional imbalances, such as jealousy or insecurity. The second area deals with struggles that appear in relationships including mostly the ones women experience with male characters. Moreover, some women in Keyes' novels have to deal with illnesses, such as depression, alcoholism or drug abuse. These illnesses will be identified and analysed in all three novels and then compared with each other.

All of the problems listed above will be linked to gender issues, which means that questions will be raised whether these struggles are gender specific and happen more frequently to women rather than men.

The next focus will be put on typical female relief strategies, which include women's attitudes towards motherhood, men and their careers. The question raised in this context is what women do to find solutions for their struggles. Do they use men as a relief strategy to feel better? Is the only possible way for women to feel better to find a new man and fall in love or make up with the person they are in a relationship with?

Another relief strategy used by some female characters in the novels is to fully commit to the role of being a mother and to enjoy the new and exciting experience of motherhood. Female characters sometimes tend to use motherhood to forget their struggles and sources for their unhappiness and to become a more independent person. Furthermore, women usually enjoy the feeling of being needed by another human being. More reasons for using motherhood as a relief strategy by some female characters in the books will be explored in the section "3.6.1) Motherhood".

The third prominent relief strategy of some women in the novels is their career. In order to become more independent from others and find a passion in their lives, female characters choose to work hard and build up a career. This aspect will also be analysed in connection with gender issues.

The last theme, which will be analysed in greater detail, is the topic of happy endings in the three selected novels by Keyes. This aspect will again be analysed in all three novels and put into a comparative frame. Following up, the question will be raised whether women can experience a liberating happy ending, which will leave them as independent females or whether they will still be dependent on a male character who affects their inner emotions. Personal insights, the quest for finally finding Mr. Right, and possible career chances are the main plotpoints involved when it comes to a positive closure of a novel by Marian Keyes. Can the happy endings presented in Keyes' novels be identified as typically female, which means that they tend to happen to female individuals?

For a detailed analysis of the novels, the circuit of culture will be applied to the framework presented above. As stated by Woodward, the circuit of culture is needed in order to gain full understanding of a cultural text or artefact (3). In order to find out whether the characters in chick-lit stories are solely represented in a stereotypical way, it is crucial to incorporate some aspects of the circuit of culture in the analysis of the selected books. While the focus is mainly put on processes of identity and representation, the other moments of the circuit are essential as well, due to the fact that they are all intertwined in complex ways and thus inseparable:

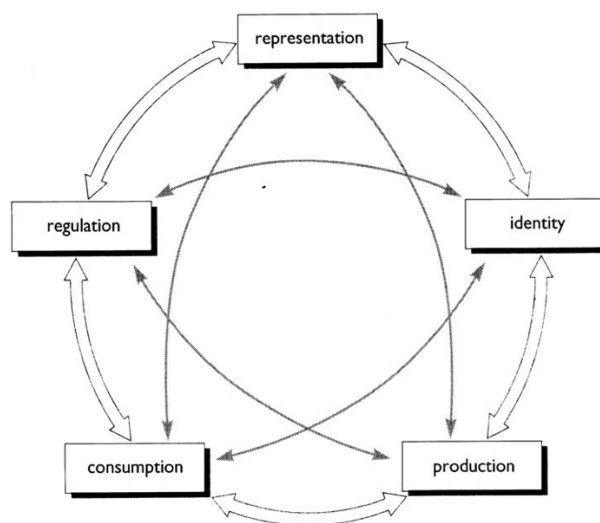


Figure 4: Circuit of Culture according to Du Gay (qtd. in Woodward 3)

Before taking a closer look at the circuit of culture, the concept of culture will be explained in order to provide a better understanding of this field of study. Culture is concerned with “questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world” (Barker 7). These meanings, however, are not “simply floating ‘out there’; rather, they are generated through signs, most notably those of language” (Barker 7). Language is an important concept in cultural studies as it “gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us in terms that language delimits” (Barker 7). Moreover, cultural studies is concerned with questions of representation which focus on “how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways” (Barker 7). As stated by Barker, cultural representations are “produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts” (7). In addition, identities are “contingent, culturally specific productions”, which means that they are “social

constructions and cannot 'exist' outside of cultural representations" (Barker 216). The concept of identity is personal and social and it shows people how they are similar or different to other individuals (Barker 216).

The Circuit of Culture includes processes of "representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation" (Woodward 2). In this model, cultural meaning is "produced and embedded at each level of the circuit" (Barker 7). The work on each level is essential but, however, "not sufficient for or determining of, the next instance in the circuit" (Barker 7). Each moment in the model produces meaning and is linked to the next moment, but this does not determine "what meanings will be taken up or produced at that level" (Barker 7).

A look will be taken at how the main characters in the novels are represented and whether they conform to typical gender roles practiced in Western societies. It is also important to ask how concepts of identity can be grasped, because they raise important questions about "how individuals fit into the community and the social world and how identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations" (Woodward 1). Moreover, it can be stated that identities are "produced, consumed and regulated within culture – creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about identity positions which we might adopt" (Woodward 2).

In addition to the circuit of culture, feminist theory has to be kept in mind when it comes to analysing aspects of Keyes's novels. Feminist theory is used to understand literature by asking various gender-related questions and can be applied to any kind of literary work (Tyson 40). As can be seen in the following, feminism asks important and interesting questions which are extremely useful for the analysis of this diploma thesis. According to Bressler, the following general questions are essential when feminist criticism is applied to a text (156):

Is the author male or female?

Is the text narrated by a male or female?

What types of roles do women have in the text?

Are the female characters the protagonists or secondary and minor characters?

Do any stereotypical characterizations of women appear?

What are the attitudes towards women held by the male characters?

What is the author's attitude towards women in society?
How does the author's culture influence her or his attitude?
Is female imagery used? If so, what is the significance of such imagery?

More questions relating to feminist theory that can be useful for the analysis of this thesis are raised by Tyson (140):

Do the characters conform to patriarchal gender roles? To choose the simplest example, is the role of the strong, rational protector given to a male character while the role of the submissive, emotional nurturer is given to a female character? Or to put the question another way, are the female characters depicted according patriarchal stereotypes of women? These include, for example, virginal angels and selfless caregivers (which are patriarchal stereotypes of women who conform to traditional gender role) as well as nags, gossips, seductresses, and "bitches" (which are patriarchal stereotypes of women who violate the traditional gender role) (Tyson 140).

Lastly, the concept of the active audience has to be mentioned which "suggests that audiences are not cultural dopes but are active producers of meaning from within their own cultural context" (Barker 326). A text does not only belong to the writer but also to its readers and, thus, it can be read and understood in various ways. Keyes' novels have been read by many people and different opinions about these novels have been formed and exist in the literary community. This thesis focuses on some aspects of the novels and provides a possible point of view. However, this does not mean that this analysis presents some form of truth, but instead possible interpretations of the three texts selected. According to Barker, audiences are "active creators of meaning" and, therefore, they might form another opinion on Keyes' three selected books (326).

To sum up, the methodological approach for the practical part of the thesis consists of three parts. Struggles, female relief strategies and happy endings in Keyes' novels will be analysed in regard to gender issues. Moreover, these aspects will be interpreted with the help of the circuit of culture and, additionally, questions of feminist theory will be kept in mind. Lastly, it has been mentioned that a text can be read in various ways, due to the fact that the audience are active producers of meaning.

3.5) The Female Main Protagonists' Struggles – Typical of Chick-Lit?

In the following, prominent struggles of the female main characters in *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday* will be identified, analysed and compared with each other. With the gained knowledge of this analysis, the question can be answered whether the females' struggles in Keyes' work are gender specific and whether certain issues around being depressed are represented as typically female.

3.5.1) The Notion of Womanhood – The Concept of Female Identity

Almost all main characters in Marian Keyes' novels struggle with their appearance and their bodies. They either just had a baby or struggle to lose weight in general. Moreover, they often envy their friends or other women because of their perfect looks and feel insecure about themselves. Therefore, the first struggle concerning 'womanhood' focuses on the main characters' appearance.

The main character of *Watermelon* is Claire, who has just given birth to her first child in the beginning of the novel. Her husband James has left her and, thus, she is faced with the reality of being a single mother. When she returns home to Ireland to live with her family, she falls into a serious depression, as she is not able to deal with her current situation. In addition to her life crisis, Claire feels extremely uncomfortable in her own skin because of her post-pregnancy body. Her strong concerns about her appearance can be identified in the following statement:

I hardly brought anything for myself apart from a handful of baby books. Why would I bother, I thought, now that my life is over. And besides nothing fitted me any longer. I could almost see them elbowing each other and saying 'Look at her, the size of her. Does she honestly think that dainty little size tens like us would have any truck with that size fourteen body she's dragging around? Small wonder that her husband ran off with another woman.' I knew what they were thinking. 'You've let yourself go. And you always said that you wouldn't. You've let us down and you've let yourself down' (Keyes, *Watermelon* 27).

Claire hates herself for the way she looks and is afraid that others will judge her based on her appearance. She realizes that her whole wardrobe does not fit her anymore and, thus, she has "a choice of wearing [her] maternity clothes or a pair of jeans that James had left behind in his haste to get going" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 27). She finally decides to put on James' jeans and is shocked when she sees her

reflection in the mirror. “God, I was horrific! I looked as if I was wearing my big sister’s Michelin Man suit. Or worse again, I looked like I was still pregnant” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 28).

This incident reminds Claire of her body a few weeks before she gave birth to her daughter. She says about herself that she was “absolutely enormous” and the only thing that fitted her was her green wool smock. In addition to this smock, her face was also extremely green due to the fact that she constantly felt sick. This look gave her the “appearance of a watermelon who had put on a pair of boots and a bit of lipstick” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 28). Since this scene inspired the title of the book it can be argued that the image of Claire as a watermelon is of great importance to Keyes and her main character. Claire’s identity is closely linked to her appearance, which supports the claim made within the circuit of culture that identity and representation are closely linked or even at times inseparable.

Now Claire is not pregnant anymore and she does also no longer have a green face, however, in her opinion she “still looked like a watermelon in every other aspect. Like a watermelon that could have done with a course of iron tablets” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 28). James left Claire because he had an affair with another woman and decided to live with this new woman instead. Claire is now torn apart by jealousy and all she can do is think about this other woman. She constantly asks herself what this woman has that she does not have. However, Claire mostly focuses on the outside appearance when comparing herself to the woman who has supposedly destroyed her marriage. “Is she different from me in bed? Is she better? What’s her body like? Has she a smaller bum, bigger tits, flatter stomach, longer legs? Is she really adventurous and does she drive him crazy with passion?” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 90). She is even convinced that her appearance is the main reason why James does not want to be with her anymore. Claire believes that she knows what he is thinking when they look into each others eyes for the last time: “It’s all your fault. If only you had been as attractive as my Denise, your husband might have stayed with you and I would still be happily married. But no, you had to go and ruin everything, you fat ugly cow” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 29).

Later in the book, appearance and weight loss are still important topics to Claire and she often thinks back at the times when she and her sisters were in their teenage years and not happy about their body weight. Rachel, Claire's sister (and the main character of *Rachel's Holiday*), often used to say that she wished she had lived around the time of the famine because she once mentioned to Claire "Imagine how skinny we'd be if we had to live on stones and grass for a few months" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 100). Claire thinks about this statement and realises that she would pay a lot of money to have the body that she had back then. This fact makes her think in alarm "Jesus, will a day come when I look back at the body I have today and wish that I still had it?" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 100). Thus, she realises that "maybe [she] should have started to enjoy the way [she] looked, bad and all as [she] thought it was. Because one day [she'd] wish [she] looked like that again" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 100).

Although Claire has this realisation she cannot let go of thinking about her weight throughout the whole novel. This can also be seen in the scene when Claire goes to the gym with Adam, her new crush. "We got to the gym and he tersely signed me in. I went off to the women's changing rooms and eventually sidled out, as self-conscious as a virgin bride in my leotard and leggings, hugging the wall for fear that anyone would catch a twenty-twenty, full-on, four-square view of my bum" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 219). Claire is self-conscious and afraid to show her body to Adam or anyone else in the fitness club.

In contrast to Claire, Ashling, who is one of the main characters in *Sushi for Beginners*, has not just given birth to a child. However, she is also not happy with the way she looks and often envies other women for their bodies, especially her best friend Clodagh. "Ashling continued to protest '...and you look fantastic! Two children and you've a better figure than me – and I've had no children, nor am I ever likely to, if my luck with men doesn't turn soon'" (Keyes, *Sushi* 29). Clodagh is Ashling's best friend who seems to have everything – the man, the house, the children – all these things are on Ashling's wish list. In addition to this, Clodagh does also look much better than Ashling and is the first to make her aware of this fact. "It had been Clodagh who'd broken the news to Ashling about her waistless condition. It was also Clodagh who'd enlightened Ashling on other aspects about herself by saying, 'You're so fortunate to have your personality. Me, all I have is my looks'" (Keyes, *Sushi* 26).

As stated above, Ashling is not only jealous of her best friend Clodagh, but also often compares herself to other women. One day, for example, Ashling goes to the supermarket to buy food. While waiting in the queue she sees a woman ahead of her and immediately recognizes her stylish look. In admiration, Ashling leans back to get a better look at this female stranger. The woman wears sweatpants, trainers and a cardigan like Ashling. However, in contrast to Ashling, everything looks perfect and lustrous on her. “Her trainers were pink Nike ones that Ashling had seen in a magazine, but that you couldn’t get in Ireland yet. Her pink, parachute-silk rucksack matched the pink gel in the heel of her trainers. And her hair was lovely – shiny and swingy, thick and glossy – in the way you could never achieve yourself” (Keyes, *Sushi* 31).

Another female main character in *Sushi for Beginners* is Lisa, an ambitious career woman who also supposedly has everything that Ashling wants. Lisa has just moved to Dublin to work at a new upcoming magazine called *Colleen*. Her appearance is perfect; she wears stylish clothes, has smooth hair and a perfect body. Moreover, she is not the kind of woman who moans and spends too much time thinking about the things she wants but is not able to have. Instead she works extremely hard to maintain her physique and spends hours in the fitness club and a lot of money on her appearance. Lisa’s opinion is that “[n]one of us are Born [sic] with smooth, processed hair, it’s something you have to work at” (Keyes, *Sushi* 65). Lisa knows that without all the effort she puts into her appearance she would only be a “pretty enough girl” (Keyes, *Sushi* 95). However, with huge amounts of effort

she knew she’d upgraded herself from attractive to fabulous. As well as the usual attention to hair, nails, skin, make-up and clothes, she popped huge amounts of vitamins, drank sixteen glasses of water a day, only snorted cocaine on special occasions and every six months had a botulism injection in her forehead – it paralysed the muscles and gave a lovely wrinkle-free appearance (Keyes, *Sushi* 95).

Moreover, Lisa also focuses on eating healthy foods, because she is aware of the fact that it is important to be thin in the fashion industry. “For the past ten years she’d been constantly hungry. So hungry that she barely noticed it now” (Keyes, *Sushi* 95). One of her rules is that she is only allowed to indulge in foods at publicity events like the one she is going to attend soon. “In fact, Lisa dearly hoped there would be food because she’d started a new eating plan – instead of the Seven Dwarves diet she’d

moved on to the Publicity diet. She could eat and drink what she liked, but only at publicity events. Lisa knew the importance of being thin, but she refused to be a traditional diet slave” (Keyes 136).

Appearance and body weight are also an issue addressed in the novel *Rachel's Holiday*, where the female main character is obsessed with her weight and thinks that she is abnormally heavy when in reality she is not. In the beginning of the novel, Rachel lives in New York and strongly believes that it is a necessity to be thin in order to be able to become a respectable member of the social community in this city. Rachel enjoys going out and always envies the good looking and extremely thin women at parties. Rachel's appearance is so important to her that she already addresses this issue on the first page of the novel. “I wasn't thin. Although it wasn't for the want to trying. I spent plenty of time on the stairmaster at the gym. But no matter how much I stairmastered, genetics had the final say” (Keyes, *Rachel's* 1).

Rachel is strongly convinced that she is too fat and additionally does not believe anyone who tries to tell her otherwise. An example of this is given when Rachel returns home to Ireland and sees her sister Helen for the first time after a long time. Helen is surprised when she sees Rachel and says surprised ““God, you've got thin. Emancipated looking, you skinny bitch”” (Keyes, *Rachel's* 21). Instead of thanking Helen, Rachel remembers the usual scenario when she would ask ““Really? Have I?”” and Helen would answer ““No! Nah haaah! You fall for it every time, don't you? You big thick”” (Keyes, *Rachel's* 21). Thus, Rachel does not make the same mistake again and does not believe her this time although it might actually be the truth.

These insecurities stay with Rachel for a long time and haunt her even at the rehabilitation clinic. In the clinic, a staff member mistakenly thinks that she is here because she has an eating disorder and refuses to exchange her food for something healthier. Rachel's reaction to this is unusual as can be seen in the following statement: “The warm glow of being mistaken for an anorexic momentarily overrode my anxiety” (Keyes, *Rachel's* 74). Instead of being alarmed by the fact that someone assumes that she has an eating disorder the first-person narrator is happy, because all she wants is to be thin.

The female main character plans on winning back Luke, her ex-boyfriend, after leaving Cloisters. She promises to herself that she wants to start exercising during her time at the clinic so that she can look her best when she sees Luke again. "Once I was making myself skinny and beautiful I'd feel more hopeful about winning Luke back" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 179). Rachel strongly believes that the end of their relationship is a result of Rachel's appearance, which is why she is determined to lose weight until she sees Luke again. As stated above, Claire shares the same opinion and is convinced that her marriage is about to end because of her looks.

All these examples from the novels show that the female main characters are slaves of their appearance and looks. While Claire, Ashling and Rachel are extremely self-critical and insecure about their appearance and would do anything to lose weight, Clodagh and Lisa are beautiful and supposedly have the perfect body but still think about their appearance on a daily basis. All female characters have in common that they feel the pressure of Western societies, which dictate women how they should look and behave in order to be respected and become successful. Lisa works in the fashion industry and is aware of the necessity to look good. Thus, she puts huge amounts of time into her appearance. Her constant efforts to look good have a positive impact on Lisa's life: She is extremely successful in her job and supposedly can have any man she wants.

In conclusion, it can be said that this aspect of the women's lives in the novels is based on a female stereotype as the importance of a woman's appearance is more inspired by their desire to please the men in their lives, than to meet their own expectations of beauty. The female characters blame their looks and weight for the struggles they face in their relationships, because they either believe that they cannot find a man because of their appearance or are convinced that their boyfriend/husband has left them because they are not attractive enough. This motif is repeated throughout Keyes' novels and suggests a strong link between identity and representation as described in the circuit of culture. The women's appearance (representation) strongly influences their perception of themselves (identity).¹⁰

¹⁰ See chapter "2.2) Gender Issues" for a theoretical background on gender roles in Western societies.

Another struggle concerning womanhood focuses on the mothers in Keyes' novels. Being a mother brings many joys but it can also be extremely challenging. Mothers often have to deal with difficult situations and are unable to cope with the new situation of having to raise a child. Motherhood is a prominent topic in two of the selected novels by Keyes, namely, *Watermelon* and *Sushi for Beginners*.

The novel *Watermelon* starts out with the fact that Claire has just given birth to a daughter in London. On the same day, James, Claire's husband, decides to tell her that he wants to separate from her. The female main character is surprised and shocked and does not understand why he wants to leave her and their child. "But what about the baby?' I asked, stunned. He couldn't possibly leave me but he especially couldn't leave me now that we had had a baby together. 'You've got to take care of the two of us'" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 14). Now Claire is left alone and has to take care of her daughter by herself. Claire is madly in love with her baby, however, she also realizes quickly that taking care of a newborn can be extremely exhausting. "After she cried for about eight hours solid on the first day and I had changed her nappy a hundred and twenty times and fed her forty nine thousand times I became slightly hysterical and demanded that a doctor look at her" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 24).

Claire is devastated and realises that she cannot stay in London and, therefore, she decides to leave the city and return home to her family in Dublin where she will be relying on their support. As already mentioned, Claire falls into a depression back in Ireland and is not able to take care of her baby Kate properly. Later in the book, Claire feels better and realises that she has neglected her little daughter and has been selfish during her illness. "Mum and Dad had taken her for her check-ups when I had been behaving like an anti-Christ. My God I can't tell you how ashamed I know felt. How could I have neglected my beautiful child in such a terrible way" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 265)? She promises to herself that this will never happen again and that she will take better care of Kate in the future (Keyes, *Watermelon* 265).

A major concern for Claire is also that Kate has to grow up without her father, but instead of calling James to figure out the next steps, she is paralysed with fear of what he is going to say. "My child was growing up without a father but, instead of getting on the phone and ringing a family lawyer and trying to sort something out, I

stood in front of a mirror holding my stomach in, checking my profile [...]” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 215). Claire promises to her child that everything is going to be fine and that she will call her father, however, she avoids to call James for as long as possible.

Another struggle concerning motherhood is when a mother has to leave her child alone for a short period of time. Claire has met a young man, called Adam, who wants to go out with her. In order to do so, her parents tell her to leave Kate with them for some hours so that she can engage in some other activities instead of just staying at home. However, Claire finds it difficult to leave Kate because while she is away she is convinced that she “could hear Kate crying for [her], always faintly, nearly out of earshot” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 192). In fact, Claire almost decides to bring Kate with her, but then she realises that Kate will “be spending enough time in noisy smoky pubs when she’s older, so no call for her to just start yet” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 191).

In *Sushi for Beginners*, Clodagh also has to face some struggles when it comes to dealing with motherhood. In contrast to Claire, Clodagh is married and a mother of two young children. While her husband Dylan works and takes care of the family financially, Clodagh is a housewife whose main job is to take care of her children and the house. In her current situation it is hard for her to see the positive aspects of motherhood because being a mother is mostly just exhausting to her. “There were some benefits to having children, Clodagh thought wearily, dragging herself from the bed – for instance, she hadn’t had to set an alarm clock for five years” (Keyes, *Sushi* 145). Her children are extremely demanding and want to have attention from her mother all the time. The main character would have never thought that a life as a mother could be this exhausting and nerve wrecking sometimes. “Contrary little bastards, Clodagh thought, as she sped down the road. They spent most of the week telling her that they hated her, that they wanted their daddy, then the minute she tried to have a couple of hours for herself, she suddenly became flavour of the month and immersed in guilt” (Keyes, *Sushi* 146).

The following quote from the novel exemplifies even better what Clodagh thinks about motherhood and how it affects her life: “‘But the exhaustion was beyond belief,’ Clodagh insisted. ‘Whatever you hear about the agony of labour, nothing prepares

you for the hell of sleepless nights. I was forever shattered and waking up was like coming round from an anaesthetic. [...]” (Keyes, *Sushi* 150). Moreover, Clodagh articulates her life as a mother in the following way: “My day is filled with ferrying Craig to school, Molly to playgroup, Molly home from playgroup, Craig to his origami lessons ... I’m a slave” (Keyes, *Sushi* 151). Clodagh feels overburdened with her role and feels like she does not have a life of her own anymore but is only living for her children. Thus, she often envies Ashling who can still go out and have fun. Furthermore, Ashling is single and is starting a new job which is completely different to Clodagh’s life. “‘But I really envy you!’ She suddenly exploded. ‘Single, starting a new job, all that excitement’” (Keyes, 29).

However, similar to Claire, it is also hard for Clodagh to leave her children alone, even if it is just for an evening. This fact annoys her a little bit because the two of them “drive [her] mad all week” and when she finally has a chance to be away from them, she immediately misses them (Keyes, *Sushi* 258). Ashling and Ted, who are Clodagh’s friends, accept to take care of her children for one evening so that the married couple can go out for dinner for the first time in a long time. However, while they are in the restaurant Clodagh cannot stop thinking about their children:

‘Would you say they’re all right?’ Clodagh asked, suddenly anxious.
‘Of course! And Ashling and Ted have the mobile number. They’ll ring if anything goes wrong.’
‘Like what? What could go wrong?’
‘Nothing.’
‘Give me your mobile and I’ll make a quick call.’
Dylan’s eyes pleaded with her. ‘Can’t you just leave it for one night? We’ve only been gone an hour.’ (Keyes, *Sushi* 258).

In general, it can be argued that Claire’s struggles as a mother are more about having to raise her newborn without her husband. In the beginning of *Watermelon*, she is so devastated that she is not able to take care of Kate properly. Moreover, Kate is her first child and she has to adapt to these new life circumstances. Clodagh, on the other hand, has the financial and physical support from her husband Dylan. However, she feels overburdened by her role as a mother of two little children and often does not handle this situation well. Both mothers have in common that they love their children and although they might be stressed out at times they still do not feel comfortable leaving them with someone else.

It can be concluded that the mothers and fathers in the novels are portrayed according to typical gender roles of Western societies. While Claire and Clodagh stay at home and take care of the children, the fathers James and Dylan go to work and take care of the family financially. This is even the case in *Watermelon*, where the couple is separated from each other. When James breaks up with Claire he does not promise to take care of their daughter physically, but he mentions that he will provide them with the necessary financial support. In this sense Keyes' novels reinforce Western gender roles as defined in feminist theory.¹¹ It can also be said that these reinforcements are pushed towards extremes that somewhat ridicule the stereotypes that are portrayed and thus Keyes' novels are, at points, crossing the fine line between reinforcement and ridicule of gender roles.

3.5.2) Relationships

Relationships are a key element of chick-lit novels as the story lines often evolve around a young woman in her 20's and a male character, who is the main attention of the female protagonist. Women in chick-lit stories often lead 'singleton' lifestyles and their main goal in life is to find the perfect man. If they are not single but are in a relationship or married, they may have found their Mr. Right. However, they still usually do not live happily ever after but they have to face problems in their relationships with their boyfriend or husband.¹² All these features apply to Keyes' three selected novels, as all of the characters featured in the books are in their late twenties and have to face struggles concerning their relationships.

In *Watermelon*, James leaves the main character Claire on the day she gives birth to their daughter. As can be seen in the following quote, the main protagonist did not see this coming: "I didn't quite expect to be dumped within twenty-four hours of giving birth to my first child, when my energy levels were at an all-time low and my vulnerability levels at an all-time high" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 22). Being left alone, Claire has to face the reality of being a single-mother and, thus, she decides to return to Ireland to live with her family. Claire is one of those characters whose main goal in life is to find the perfect man, get married and have children. She felt safe when she

¹¹ See chapter "2.2.2 Feminist Theory" for a definition of typical gender roles in Western societies.

¹² See chapters "2.1.1) Defining Chick-Lit" and "2.1.6) Typical Features of Chick-Lit" for more information on the chick-lit genre and typical chick-lit characters.

was with James, but now she feels worse than ever before. She has a child and is going to be divorced and this combination is the worst-case scenario for her. Her opinion on marriage and her current situation is shown in the following quote:

It was so awful. That was one of the things I really liked about being married. For a couple of years I was off that horrible merry-go-round of trying to meet the right man, finding out that he was already married, or living with another man, or pathologically stingy, [...] or any one of the thousands of character flaws that weren't immediately obvious the first time you shook his hand [...]. Now I was back in the situation where every man is a potential boyfriend. I was back to a world where there are eight hundred exquisitely beautiful women to every one straight single man (Keyes, *Watermelon* 30).

Nowadays, it is more common that women in Western societies lead emancipated and independent 'singleton' lifestyles than it was some years ago. However, in reality, many women still feel the pressure to get married and have children. By following these wishes, women often make themselves dependent on a male person and do not see themselves as full human beings if they are not in a relationship. Claire is a perfect example of a female stereotype as her most important goal in life is to find the right man who can give her security. This female character defines herself through her relationship and, as can be seen from the quote above, she hates to be back on the 'single-market'. She states herself that it is hard for her to admit it, but she "felt less of a human being without [her] husband and his fat salary" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 168).

Later in the book Claire also mentions that she does "feel a lot more comfortable with a man around" because for Claire being with a man is "as though it validated her in some way" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 201). In some ways Keyes' novels promote the idea of women relying on men to reinforce and strengthen their womanhood. The characters feel lesser (less beautiful, less desirable, less sexy, less comfortable) without a man by their side, which supports the claim made in feminist theory that women are still depending on men to feel whole.¹³ Their identity is based on the approval of the men in their lives, which is also represented in their behaviours.¹⁴

¹³ See chapters "2.2.1) Identity and Culture" and "2.2.2) Feminist Theory" for more information on cultural programming and stereotypes in Western societies.

¹⁴ See chapter "2.2.1) Identity and Culture" for background information on the concept of identity and the Circuit of Culture according to Paul DuGay.

The main protagonist is extremely dependent on her husband and, thus, it is no wonder that her world seems to break apart when James tells her that he does not want to be with her anymore. She is fully aware of the fact that she is relying on James and she hates herself for being in this situation. The following quote presents the main protagonist's opinion on her lack of independence:

I hated myself for being so insecure and so dependent. I should have been a strong, sassy, independent, nineties woman. The type of woman who has strong views and who goes to the pictures on her own and who cares about the environment and can change a fuse and goes for aromatherapy and has a herb garden and can speak fluent Italian and has a session in a flotation tank once a week and doesn't need a man to shore up her fragile sense of self-esteem. But the fact is I wasn't. I would like to have been (Keyes, *Watermelon* 168).

Moreover, Claire defines herself according to different aspects of her life as, for example, her relationship to others, her profession or also her marital status. She says about herself that she has been many things in her life: "I had been Claire the dutiful daughter [...] I had been Claire the student [...] I had been Claire the administrator. I had been Claire the wife. And now here I was being Claire the deserted wife. And the idea did not sit comfortably with me at all, I can tell you" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 30). This quote exemplifies perfectly that Claire is unhappy with her current status of being a 'deserted wife' and she would do anything to have a man who can take care of her.

The struggles with James continue when Claire is back in Ireland. She falls into a depression because of these difficult circumstances and, thus, she makes the decision to fight for her relationship with James. She wants to contact him but is unable to, because it is difficult for her to deal with the fact that he has left her and is now living with another woman. "I often felt like ringing him. But it always happened in the middle of the night. I would be gripped by terrible panic at the enormity of my loss" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 85). The first few weeks are extremely difficult for Claire, as she is unable to properly take care of her child, feels tired and sad all the time and even turns to alcohol to numb her feelings. Furthermore, she is melancholic and thinks back to the good times she had with James. In this phase of her life, Claire is unable to see that James did unacceptable things to her and although he had hurt her, she still would do anything to get him back. "In the shower I couldn't stop thinking about James. Not in a maudlin or bitter way. Just remembering how great it

had been. Really, even though he had hurt me in a way I never thought he would I couldn't forget just how brilliant it was with him" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 171).

In her depression, Claire is unable to see the negative aspects of her relationship and only remembers the good moments. "Anyway, I still couldn't make sense of it. I loved him. [...] I didn't have to try hard at all to make things beautiful. They just were beautiful effortlessly. Well I'd thought they were" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 172). For her, James is the perfect man even though he has negative character traits. She idealizes him because she does not want to be independent from him. She wants to be in the safe haven of marriage.

In *Watermelon*, the main protagonist is devastated because of the end of her marriage. Moreover, she feels that she is less of a human being due to the fact that she is not in a relationship anymore. In the novel *Sushi for Beginners*, the three main protagonists also have to deal with struggles concerning relationships. The struggles differ from the ones Claire has to face in *Watermelon*, however, some similarities can be found. The three main protagonists also have to deal with struggles concerning their friendships to other women, however, the main focus will only be on the problems they have to face in romantic relationships with a male partner.

Lisa, Ashling and Clodagh are three character types that do not share any similarities with each other due to the fact that they lead completely different lives and each of them has a different relationship status. Whereas Ashling is still on the 'single-market' and desperately tries to finally find Mr. Right at the age of 31, Clodagh is already married to Dylan and has two children. Lisa, on the other hand, is a business woman who is also married but planning on getting a divorce from her husband. At the moment Lisa and her husband Oliver are separated and do not even live in the same country as Lisa is moving from London to Dublin throughout the story.

In the beginning of the novel it is not obvious that Lisa is married, because she does not mention it and she seems rather cold when it comes to talking about relationships in general. At the starting point of the story, her only goal is to make the new Irish magazine *Colleen* successful, because she does not want to ruin her good reputation. Throughout the book, however, the reader learns more about Lisa's past and her

previous approach to the topic of “men”. When Lisa first started going out with boys, she only dated strategically and chose her men wisely. She never went out with a man who did not have a good job or could not help her to climb the career ladder. She fancied men that she could not take seriously as, for example, “Dave, the sweetest plumber” or “a charmingly grave court clerk by the name of Frederick” and sometimes she allowed herself to have a little fling with them (Keyes, *Sushi* 170). However, she was always aware of the fact that she would never start a serious relationship with guys like them. In the past, her real relationships were with a “different calibre of men” (Keyes, *Sushi* 171). Back then and still today Lisa has “a weakness for men with six-figure salaries and the power to promote her when she didn’t really deserve it” (Keyes, *Sushi* 130). In her current situation Lisa wants “nothing to do with families” but she wants to be “surrounded by other singles and to bump into attractive men at her local Tesco Metro buying Kettle Chips and Chardonnay” (Keyes, *Sushi* 129).

Moreover, Lisa also does not understand how women as, for example, Ashling can get so emotionally attached to men. “Ashling seemed like one of those pathetic women who took heartbreak hard and the last thing Lisa needed at this busy time was an assistant editor going off the rails. She couldn’t understand weak people who cracked up. It was the sort of thing she’d never do” (Keyes, *Sushi* 167). However, throughout the development of the story, Lisa’s husband is introduced and it can be seen that Lisa is not as cold as she always pretends to be. In fact, the separation from Oliver is extremely difficult for her and she keeps herself busy so that she does not have to think about him. When Lisa goes out with Ashling and some other people Lisa gets drunk and has a hangover the next morning, which results in her becoming emotional: “She’d enjoyed herself had fun, and something had been triggered by the high-spiritedness of the night before, because she just couldn’t stop thinking about Oliver” (Keyes, *Sushi* 169).

Until this stage, Lisa thinks that she has been doing well, because she has been able to block out any thoughts of her marriage. However, when she does not resist thinking of Oliver, she realises that she even knows how many days it has been since they broke up, suggesting a deep on-going connection to the guy she before claimed

not to care about anymore. "One hundred and forty five. It's easy to keep track when someone chooses New Year's Day to leave you" (Keyes, *Sushi* 169).

Throughout the book, Lisa and Oliver meet up a few times and spend some nights together. However, at one point he returns to Dublin to finalize their divorce, which is a difficult day for Lisa. "This wasn't a date, this was a meeting about their divorce" (Keyes, *Sushi* 496). They sit down at the kitchen table and realise how hard it is to separate their belongings and financial lives. Lisa states that "it was as delicate and complicated a process as separating Siamese twins" (Keyes, *Sushi* 496). Lisa is always represented as a strong, independent businesswoman, but this divorce reveals that she might not be as confident as she might look to others. Being divorced is a nightmare to Lisa and all her self-confidence seems to be gone as can be inferred from the following statement: "*I'm a failure, she acknowledged. I'm a big fat failure. My marriage is over*" (Keyes, *Sushi* 465).

While Lisa is still struggling with the end of her marriage, Ashling is desperate to find a man who wants to be in a relationship with her. In the beginning of the novel Ashling has just come out of a five yearlong relationship and is now back on the 'single-market'. She is sad and angry with herself because she has realised that she has wasted so many years on a relationship with no future prospects. Now Ashling is alone again at the age of 31 and she goes out with her friends almost every weekend to find the perfect man for her. Later in the book, Ashling has a boyfriend, called Marcus, but they do not stay together for long. As can be seen, Ashling's life revolves around the question of how long she has to lead a "singleton" lifestyle or date the wrong men until she finally finds her Mr. Right with whom she can make future plans.

Clodagh, on the other hand, is married to Dylan and, in Ashling's opinion, leads the perfect life. However, Clodagh is not happy in her marriage because for her, "everything feels old. Especially with Dylan" (Keyes, *Sushi* 29). Clodagh does not have a job and spends the majority of the day with her children. In her free time she loves to redecorate the different rooms in their house. Clodagh is bored and not in love with Dylan anymore. Thus, she starts an affair with Marcus, Ashling's boyfriend, and does not feel entirely guilty about it. Ashling and Clodagh have been best friends since they were young and since then Ashling has always compared herself to

Clodagh. When Ashling finds out about what has happened she is shocked. She accuses Clodagh by saying: “‘You’ve done this to me before [...] Dylan was my boyfriend first’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 452). Ashling realises that she was able to forgive Clodagh for stealing one of her boyfriends in the past, but there is no way that she can forgive her for doing it again now. Thus, she tells her friend Clodagh angrily: “‘Let’s get one thing straight. I forgave you for Dylan. But I will never forgive you for this’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 453). Both Ashling’s and Clodagh’s lives focus primarily on their difficult relationships with their men. It even goes so far that their long friendship comes to an end, because they fell in “love” with the same male characters. This fact reinforces the claim that the female characters are indeed dependent on the men in their lives. They even give up friendships because their main aspiration is to be in a relationship with a man.

Clodagh is especially keen on having a man in her life and, thus, she chooses to be with Marcus and hopes that she can start a new life with him. However, her optimism about this whole situation changes when she has struggles in her new relationship as well. “And he [Marcus] needed so much attention. She found it distasteful the way he resented it whenever she focused on Craig and Molly. Sometimes it was just like having three children” (Keyes, *Sushi* 532). Marcus does not only want to have all the attention, he also wants to go out extremely often and is not ready to settle down:

And lately he wanted to be out every night. Simply refused to understand that she couldn’t keep leaving her two children. It was hard to get babysitters. It was even harder to afford babysitters on what Dylan was giving her. But more than that, she didn’t want to be out every night. She missed Craig and Molly when she was away from them (Keyes, *Sushi* 533).

Moreover, Clodagh has to deal with the fact that Dylan does not give her the financial support that she used to have. She does not have a job and does also not have the qualification to ever get one and, thus, she is dependent on Dylan even though they are not together anymore. Dylan is hurt and, therefore “‘he made [Clodagh] give back all [her] credit cards. And he’s closed [their] joint account and instead he’s going to give [her] an allowance every month’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 510). Clodagh’s case provides an example for emotional and financial dependency on a man.

Relationships and men are also an important topic in *Rachel’s Holiday*, as the main protagonist uses men to become more self-confident. Rachel is extremely insecure,

self-critical and unhappy with the way she looks. She lives in New York in an apartment with her friend Brigit and they go out every weekend to meet new guys. Even though the women meet new guys all the time and they find it difficult to find a decent man who is looking for a stable relationship instead of only affairs and one-night-stands. "New York was a poor hunting ground for boyfriends. You couldn't get one for love nor for money. (Naturally, I was prepared to offer both)" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 39). The opinion of other people is extremely important to Rachel and, therefore, she wants to have a boyfriend who looks good, is successful in his work and has a good reputation. When Rachel falls in love with Luke she is worried that people would talk badly behind her back. "Of course, I realized, I'd have to do something about the way he looked. What would people think of me if I was seen with the likes of him? I wondered. Wasn't it a pity? Because if he didn't dress like such a fool he could be nearly attractive" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 55). Rachel is never sure whether she wants to be with Luke or not, because she likes him but is also embarrassed by his appearance and behaviour sometimes. Brigit does not understand Rachel's philosophy at all and is annoyed from time to time. "'You're too contrary,' she complained. 'If he treated you like shite and broke it off with you, then you'd decide you were mad about him'" [sic] (Keyes, *Rachel's* 422).

Moreover, it is common for people in Rachel's environment to occasionally take drugs and, thus, Rachel and Brigit also enjoy taking them when they go out. However, Rachel's drug usage gets out of control and she almost dies from taking an overdose. During this time, the main protagonist has found a boyfriend and lives with him. After this incident Luke cannot handle the whole situation anymore and breaks up with Rachel. The main protagonist is unable to see what she has done wrong, because in her opinion she is not addicted to drugs. "I was devastated. It wasn't the first time a man had ditched me for no obvious reason, but I hadn't expected it from Luke Costello. We'd had a relationship for over six months. I had even begun to think it was a good one" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 13).

Luke and Brigit worry about her and, thus, call her family to get help. All of them try to convince Rachel to come back to Ireland and to go to a rehabilitation clinic there. After some discussions, Rachel finally gives in and agrees to join her family to go back to Ireland with them. However, her motives are different and she thinks that

going to rehab can be compared to spend some time in a wellness hotel. “It would be great to have time to spend on myself. So when I returned to New York, I’d look fabulous and Luke would be on his knees begging me to take him back” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 16).

In Ireland, Rachel has to go through many struggles during her time at the rehabilitation clinic, but she never loses her focus on Luke and misses him terribly. “I closed my eyes and unwelcome thoughts of Luke came barging in. The initial pain of rejection has shifted slightly to make room for the pain of missing him. He and I had practically been living together and I felt his absence like an ache” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 18). Rachel tries to keep herself busy but “whenever [she] wasn’t actively involved in doing something, thoughts of Luke overwhelmed [her]. The pain of his rejection increased from a background hum to acute misery” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 111).

As has been stated above, Rachel needs the attention from men to be less self-critical and even though she loves Luke and desperately wants to have him back, she develops a crush on a patient at Cloisters. Chris becomes the centre of Rachel’s focus because she “was desperate to wipe out the hurt that Luke had caused and what better way than to become fixated on someone else” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 101)?

These examples show that all characters experience struggles in relationships with male characters and also make their happiness dependent on them. While Claire is devastated that her husband has left her with a little child, Clodagh is unhappy in her marriage even though Dylan loves her. Lisa seems to be independent in the beginning, however, she also has some struggles with her husband as they are in the process of getting divorced. The female characters Claire and Rachel have in common that their main quest in life is to find a man who can take care of them and they make themselves deliberately dependent on their male counterparts. These findings show that the behaviour of the female protagonists is indeed gender specific, as the women are not emancipated at all. This analysis demonstrates that this aspect in Keyes’ novels exposes stereotypical female behaviour.¹⁵

¹⁵ See chapter “2.2) Gender Issues” for more consideration on gender roles in Western societies.

3.5.3) Coping With Illnesses

Marian Keyes incorporates experiences from own real life into her novels and, thus, illnesses such as depression or related to alcoholism and drug abuse are prominent topics in her books. She claims that her fiction is an “incredible database of pain”, which is not common in the chick-lit genre (Vallely). Keyes’ life is reflected in her novels and even though all her novels have happy endings she also likes to address serious topics¹⁶. Almost all female characters in Keyes’ three selected novels struggle with their mental health due to various life circumstances. In the following chapter, illnesses of all female protagonists will be explored, examples will be given and the novels will be compared with each other.

In *Watermelon*, depression is a prominent topic especially in the first half of the novel when Claire struggles to deal with her situation of being a single-mother after being left by her husband James. In Ireland, her family tries their best to support their daughter because she feels extremely miserable. Claire knows that she should be strong and independent but still falls into a deep depression, which makes her unable to do anything. In order to numb her feelings, she turns to alcohol. In the middle of the night, Claire is still awake and realises that a good drink would make her feel better. “I continued to sit on the cold floor in the dark hall. I really felt as if I needed a drink. I would even have drunk the banana schnaps if I’d know where to find it” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 66). Claire gets up and walks into her sister’s room to find something to drink. Her reaction to her discovery of alcohol is that she “nearly cried with relief when [she] found a bottle of white whine in [Anna’s] bag” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 69). When she takes the bottle downstairs to the kitchen and opens it she realises immediately that she “would feel better after having a drink” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 69).

In the following pages of the novel, the main protagonist describes in a detailed and extensive manner in which ways she experiences her depression in the first weeks back in Ireland. Claire is not able to do anything and, in the same way, does not care about anything. “I was the only one who didn’t mind the torrential rain. It suited my mood perfectly. I didn’t care if I couldn’t go out. I would have been happy never to

¹⁶ See “3.1 Marian Keyes’ Life and the Connection to her Novels” in order to find out more about Keyes’ illnesses.

have gone out again. I spent hours just lying on my bed, staring at nothing” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 78). She is not even able to take care of her daughter Kate who is only a few weeks old at this point in the novel. Claire realises that her mother supports her, who takes over almost all of the work. She is extremely ashamed of this situation but is not able to change anything about it because she feels too weak. “To my eternal shame Mum brought her to the baby clinic. Mum drove to the supermarket and bought mounds and mounds of disposable nappies and baby formula and Sudocreme and talc and bottle steriliser and everything else that Kate needed” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 79).

However, Claire tries to justify her behaviour and lists the things that she does for Kate: “In fairness to me, I didn’t abandon Kate entirely. I did take care of her in lots of ways. I fed her and changed her and washed her and worried about her. Sometimes I even played with her. I just couldn’t seem to do anything that involved leaving the house for her” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 79). Furthermore, Claire argues that the reason for her not taking proper care of Kate is not that she does not love her, but that her behaviour is a result of her illness. In fact, Claire mentions that she loves Kate “more than anything else in the universe” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 79).

Moreover, the first person narrator describes that even normal daily activities such as getting dressed are almost impossible undertakings for her. Thus, she never manages to accomplish these easy tasks (Keyes, *Watermelon* 79). She explains that “on the rare occasions that [she] did get out of bed [she] put one of Dad’s golfing jumpers on over Mum’s nightdress and wore a pair of hiking socks” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 79). Next to the inability to get dressed and engage in everyday activities Claire cannot remember either the last time she has eaten, since she is unable to feel hunger anymore. For her only the “thought of eating something scared the life out of [her]. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to swallow anything” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 82).

Claire’s illness is addressed in greater detail throughout the first half of the novel and it takes some time until she starts to feel better. Depression is also addressed in *Sushi for Beginners*, but not to the same extent as it is dealt with in *Watermelon*. Lisa is a career woman and rarely just relaxes and lets go of herself. Being depressed is something that she would never allow herself to experience. However, at some point

later in the novel Lisa allows herself to think about her husband and their break up. She went out the night before and the next morning she does not only have a hangover but is also extremely emotional. Lisa has enjoyed herself and “something had been triggered by the high-spiritedness of the night before, because she couldn’t stop thinking about Oliver” (Keyes, *Sushi* 168-169). In this context she also starts to think about what a depression is and whether she could have one:

Depression was a feeling other people got when their lives were insufficiently fabulous. Same as loneliness. Or sadness. But if you had enough nice shoes and ate in enough amazing restaurants and had been promoted over someone who deserved it more than you, there was no need to feel bad. That was the theory, in any case. But as she lay in bed she was shocked by the extent of her depression (Keyes, *Sushi* 168).

In her misery, Lisa starts to hate everything around her: “She blamed the curtains and the plethora of pine – it was enough to send any style conscious person over the edge. She hated the stillness beyond the gauzy light of the room” (Keyes, *Sushi* 168). Lisa does not want to be in Dublin anymore and is annoyed by the small and rather quiet city. “*Fucking garden*, she thought savagely. What she wanted was the purr of taxis, the slamming of car doors, the sounds of well-dressed people coming and going. She wanted *life* outside her window” (Keyes, *Sushi* 168). It can be argued that Lisa’s depression is a result of her upcoming divorce with her husband, which also makes it almost impossible for her to get used to her new life circumstances in Dublin.

In contrast to Lisa, Clodagh is unhappy with her life because she is bored. From the outside, she seems to have everything, but Clodagh is not satisfied. Being a mother is more exhausting than she has ever imagined and she also envies Ashling because of her new job and her single-life. Clodagh never mentions that she might have a depression, but her husband Dylan is worried about her and asks Ashling for help. “‘I’m ...’ Big, long pause. ‘...kind of worried about her. She never seems happy, she’s often snappy with the children and sometimes even ... slightly irrational. Molly accused Clodagh of slapping her and we’ve never slapped the kids’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 191).

Moreover, he addresses Clodagh’s obsession with redecorating their house: “‘This is probably going to sound stupid, but she’s always doing the house up. No sooner are we finished one room than she’s talking about redoing another. And trying to talk to

her about any of this is getting me nowhere. I was wondering ... I thought that maybe she might be depressed” (Keyes, *Sushi* 191). Ashling does not have an answer to his question, but she also has realised that Clodagh has been behaving in a weird way over the last few weeks. However, when Dylan asks her about her mother, who had a severe depression when Ashling was a child, she refuses to compare Clodagh and her mother to each other. Not because Clodagh does not have a depression, but because it is hard for Ashling to talk about this difficult time in her childhood.

Rachel's Holiday is a rather atypical chick-lit novel as the main protagonist is a drug addict who is sent to a treatment centre in Ireland to recover from her illness. Keyes' had been a drug addict and an alcoholic in her twenties and it can be argued that the author addresses serious issues that she has experienced in real life. In contrast to *Watermelon* and *Sushi for Beginners*, Rachel does not primarily have to face depression but she has to deal with drug addiction that almost kills her. Even though Rachel's relationship to men is also a prominent topic in the novel, her journey to recovery is equally as important; a great part of the novel is set in a treatment centre.

The female main protagonist is, however, extremely unreliable and it takes a long time until Rachel realises that she actually has a problem:

“How did I end up like this? Surely I was living in New York, young, independent, glamorous, successful? And not twenty-seven, unemployed, mistaken for a drug addict, in a treatment centre in the back arse of nowhere with an empty Valium bottle on my knickers” (Keyes, *Rachel's* 68)?

Rachel is strongly convinced that she does not have a problem and, thus, she agrees to go to Cloisters to recover from her illness. She thinks that she will have an enjoyable time and that it will feel like a wellness holiday. However, in reality, Rachel has to go to group meetings, sleep in a room with another person and has to take over some tasks concerning the household. She realises that there are no celebrities, no swimming pool and no fitness room. Everything at Cloisters is held extremely simple. After some time at the rehabilitation clinic Rachel starts thinking about drugs and how much she wants to take them. “Then I wanted a drug. Or twenty. I would have given anything for a couple of handfuls on Valium. Or sleeping tablets. Or heroin. Or anything really. All contributions gratefully received” (Keyes, *Rachel's* 125).

The reader only gets to know Rachel's point of view and the reality only comes out when Brigit and Luke, Rachel's best friend and ex-boyfriend, come to a group meeting at the treatment centre to tell the therapist and the audience what had happened in New York. This interrogation is important and necessary, because Rachel is still unable to see the truth. Brigit gives some insights of what it was like to live the same apartment with a drug addict in. "We've tried to get her to stop for ages.' [...] 'Everyone has. Everyone knows she has a problem..." (Keyes, *Rachel's* 439). Furthermore, Brigit tells the following about Rachel's behaviour in New York:

'...very aggressive when we tried to talk to her ... getting worse and worse ... took drugs on her own ... stole other people's ... and before going to work ... always out of it ... lost her job ... always telling lies, not just about drugs, but about everything else [...] mad paranoid ... accusing me of flirting with Luke ... more and more irrational ... couldn't talk to her ... not just cocaine ... big jars of Valium ... joints ... tequila ... never wanted to do anything that didn't involve drugs ... stopped washing her hair ... getting really thin ... said she wasn't' (Keyes, *Rachel's* 440-441).

Rachel is stunned that Brigit would do this to her and would lie to everyone about what has happened in New York. She is still not able to realise that what Brigit is saying might actually be the truth. Instead she defends herself and accuses her "best" friend of incorrect behaviour "And what about you?' I howled. 'Since when were you such a goody two-shoes? It's only since you lickarsed your way into your new, think you're great promotion that you've gone all uptight about drugs'" (Keyes, *Sushi* 440). When it is Luke's turn he also confirms what Brigit said about Rachel. In the beginning Rachel still does not realise that she might actually be a drug addict. When Luke reveals what kind of drugs he is aware that Rachel uses, namely, "cocaine, crack cocaine, ecstasy [...], speed, hash, grass, magic mushrooms, acid heroin ..." Rachel is still not shocked and does not understand why everyone else is. (Keyes, *Rachel's* 449). "Someone gasped at the 'heroin' part. For God's sake, I thought angrily. I'd only smoked it" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 449).

This aspect has been included in this diploma thesis as the question is raised whether certain issues around being depressed are represented as typically female. As can be seen from the given examples, the female characters Claire, Clodagh and Lisa experience what it feels like to be depressed. By taking a look at the reasons for their depressions, it can be identified that in all cases depression is caused directly or indirectly by a male character. Claire and Lisa are unable to deal with the break up of

their respective marriages while Clodagh is not happy in her marriage anymore. By contrast, Rachel's reason for her illness can be traced back to her general insecurities and issues with her family in her childhood. However, even though men are not the primary reason for her addiction, it can be seen that she always had issues with men in the past as she strives continuously for attention from them in order to feel less insecure. Luke seems to be the main focus of her attention and she later realises that he had come to Ireland for her to speak in this meeting in order to get better. He can be considered as Rachel's "prince" who rescues her.

In conclusion, it can be said that typical gender roles are also present when it comes to illnesses in Keyes's novels as the female characters are depressed because of difficult relationships with the male characters. These depressions exemplify that the women are not independent characters but are dependent on the male characters' behaviours. If men treat them nicely, they experience happiness and are satisfied. However, if men are mean to their girlfriends/wives, the female characters feel sad and some of them even fall into a depression. Even though reasons for depressions are multi-faceted, it seems that the females' main reason for their emotional imbalances is a consequence of their difficult heterosexual relationships.¹⁷

3.6) Female Relief Strategies

The next chapter deals with female strategies that women make use of in order to find solutions for their problems and improve their current situation. Sometimes women focus on their new and fulfilling role as a mother, work harder for their working careers to eliminate negative thoughts or fall in love to replace negative feelings and thoughts with positive ones. Keyes' three selected novels will be compared with each other with the focus on this specific aspect and afterwards the question will be raised whether the women's behaviour leads to female emancipation and self-determination or whether it is gender specific and makes them dependent on men.

¹⁷ Chapter "2.2 Gender Issues" provides more information on gender roles and female stereotypes.

3.6.1) Attitude to Motherhood

Whereas many women often struggle with their new role as a mother, it also provides an opportunity for females to use their new situation and responsibility for another human being to turn their lives around in a positive way. Both Claire and Clodagh, who are the main characters of *Watermelon* and *Sushi for Beginners*, struggle with motherhood, however, their roles also give them an opportunity to grow as women. In Claire's case, her baby Kate gives her a reason and the power to get back on her feet and start over after her depression.

Shortly after James left Claire and she is on her way back to Ireland, her little baby is the only thing in her life that gives her hope in her miserable situation. She is aware of the fact that her child will change her whole life due to the fact that there is someone who needs her. "A perfect, beautiful wonderful child. I wouldn't have changed a thing for anything" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 33). Just the knowledge of having Kate makes her feel better and, moreover, more important.

After weeks of feeling hopeless and weak, Claire slowly starts to heal from inside and makes the first step into the right direction by counting all her blessings while she is lying in bed. "I decided to relaunch myself on the world with the minimum of fanfare. As I drifted off to sleep I counted my blessings. [...] I had a beautiful daughter. I had a loving family. [...] I was still youngish. I had somewhere to live. I had a job to go back to in five months" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 114). Claire decides to finally take responsibility for Kate and she realises that this is something that she should already have done much earlier. She is grateful that her parents have supported her throughout this difficult time and that they have cared for Kate's needs when she was unable to. Claire goes to the supermarket and buys a lot of things for Kate, all of which she pays for with James' credit card:

I bought another twenty tons of Pampers for Kate. Mum and Dad had been so good buying all the baby provisions while I had been prostate with either grief or alcohol. But it was time for me to be responsible. I would be the one who took care of Kate from now on (Keyes, *Watermelon* 121).

Moreover, as time goes by Claire also has the realisation that being a mother has changed her tremendously. In the past, she never understood how mothers could talk about nothing else but their children. However, now being a new mother herself,

her main focus is her daughter Kate and she is happy to tell everyone how wonderful she is. This is, for example, the case when Claire goes out with her friend Laura whom she has not seen in a long time:

Laura wanted to know all about Kate. And I was only too happy to tell her. When I was younger I promised myself that I would never turn into a baby-bore. You know, the kind of person who goes on and on about their baby and how she smiled at them for the first time today [...] while all around them people are twitching and going into spasm with boredom. And I was a bit alarmed to find that that's exactly what I was doing (Keyes, *Watermelon* 193-194).

Claire struggles extremely with the break-up of her marriage and wants to win James back. However, after few weeks back in Ireland James has neither called nor has shown any other sign that he wants to fight for their marriage. Claire feels sad about this situation, but as she starts to feel better and tries to see the positive aspects about her life, she acknowledges the fact that at least one good thing happened in this marriage: "For the first time, I realised, *really* realised that my marriage was not a failure. James and I might not be together anymore but we had created this wonderful little person" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 225). Furthermore, motherhood gives Claire the opportunity to focus on different tasks in her life and thus she is able to forget or at least to avoid thinking about the negative aspects in her life. As can be seen in the following statement, being a mother makes Claire a happier person: "Every day I was finding out more good things about Kate. She continued to enhance every aspect of my life" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 289).

Motherhood does not only make Claire feel better, it also forces her to be active and to sort things out with James. She understands that she has to start acting because she is not alone anymore and cannot continue to be selfish and careless. She wants her daughter to have a normal family life, which involves both herself and Kate's father. In order to achieve this, she knows that she has to contact her husband and to arrange a meeting. "'I missed you darling,' I told her as she struggled for breath. 'On Monday I am going to ring Daddy and I'll try and sort things out for us. Everything's going to be fine, I promise'" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 214).

In *Sushi for Beginners*, Clodagh seems to experience more problems with her children than Claire and thus is not able to enjoy motherhood in the same positive

way as the *Watermelon*'s female main protagonist does. Most of the time she is stressed out, exhausted and even annoyed of her children. At some point in the novel, she even states that she sees herself as a slave of her children because each and everyday she spends the majority of her time taking care of them. "My day is filled with ferrying Craig to school, Molly to playgroup, Molly home from playgroup, Craig to his origami lessons ... I'm a slave" (Keyes, *Sushi* 151). However, after Clodagh has broken up with Dylan and now lives in a new relationship with Claire's ex-boyfriend Marcus that her former life has not been as bad as she thought it was.

In this new situation, Clodagh finds out that she enjoys being a mother and she would rather stay at home with her children than to go out every night. Moreover, she cannot afford a babysitter every evening because Dylan closed their joint bank account:

It was even harder to afford babysitters on what Dylan was giving her. But more than that, she didn't want to be out every night. She missed Craig and Molly when she was away from them. Staying in at home was nice. There was no shame in watching *Coronation Street* and having a glass of wine (Keyes, *Sushi* 533).

Through the dramatic changes in her life, Clodagh has become calmer and more peaceful with her life and starts to value motherhood. The lives of Claire and Clodagh are completely different from each other. However, both of them experience highs and lows in their roles of motherhood. It is recognizable that in both novels the men are not prominent when it comes to raising their children. Whereas James does not take any kind of responsibility except for providing financial support, Dylan does care about his children, but due to the fact that he has to work during the day Clodagh spends far more time with their offspring. The families portrayed in the novel represent typical examples of traditional families in Western societies, which means that Keyes again makes use of societal stereotypes.¹⁸ Additionally, the representations of the characters and family roles in the novels are reflected in Western societies. To some extent, the situations in the novels mirror real life, however, people also mirror and adopt what they know from media (which includes

¹⁸ Traditional family roles are discussed in chapter "2.2.2 Feminist Theory".

books as well), which shows that representations in books can regulate identities of people living in Western societies.¹⁹

3.6.2) Attitude to Men

Women often experience struggles in their lives because they have to face difficult and unsatisfying relationships with a male partner. These relationships often end with a break-up and women try to find strategies to feel better afterwards. In order to get over an ex-husband or ex-boyfriend many females choose to fall in love with another man. This pattern of women's behaviour is often presented in Western societies and can also be found in Keyes' three selected novels.

Claire is devastated that her husband James has left her and is now living with another woman. However, after weeks of feeling depressed Claire decides to get back on her feet and "to take a deep breath, face [unpleasant situations] fairly and squarely, look them in the eye, stare them down and show them who's the boss" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 161). In addition to Claire's newly found motivation, she also meets Adam, who is a colleague of her sister. He turns her insecurities into self-confidence and Claire admits that "I felt good because Adam was making me feel good. But did it matter who it was making me feel good?" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 205). This statement shows that Adam is used as a relief strategy for Claire to make her feel better and more joyful about life. In fact, it seems that it is not important who the man is who takes care of her, if at least there is someone who is there for her.

Nevertheless, Claire falls in love with him and from that moment on her head is "full of Adam, Adam, Adam" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 285). All she can think about is this new younger male character and she even goes into town only because she thinks that "maybe, just maybe, [she] might run into Adam" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 291). After some "accidental" meetings Claire and Adam finally decide to go on a real date. Adam also falls in love with Claire and constantly tells her that she is special and that he is so happy to have met her. However, Claire finds this hard to believe, because she has big issues with her own self-confidence. Thus, it is extremely important to

¹⁹ The Circuit of Culture represents processes of identity, representation, regulation and production and is discussed in chapter "2.2.1) Identity and Culture".

her to have a man who supports her and makes her feel special. As can be seen by the following quote from the novel, Adam is, therefore, the perfect man for her: “‘I’m so glad I met you,’ he continued. ‘You’re so special.’ ‘I’m not,’ I protested. ‘I’m very ordinary.’ ‘You’re special to me’” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 316). Claire’s insecurities have already been considered under the chapter “3.5.1) The Notion of Womanhood” of this diploma thesis.

Ashling is also determined to find Mr. Right and is extremely nervous about the fact that she is over thirty and not married yet. The fact that she meets a comedian in a bar and is going on a date with him makes her extremely happy and nervous at the same time. Ashling ignores the fact that he might not be the perfect man for her, because she badly wants to be in a relationship. When she tells her good friend that she is going on a date she is excited and shocked at the same time: “‘Oh my God, I’m going out with freckly Marcus Valentine on Monday.’ She was frothy with excitement and shock. ‘I haven’t been on a date for years [...]’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 238).

Finding a boyfriend is the main priority in Ashling’s life and can be seen by the fact that she uses affirmations on her way to her first date to make sure that everything will turn out the way she wants to: “*I will like Marcus Valentine and he will like me, I will like Marcus Valentine and he will like me ...* As she affirmationed her way along Grafton Street in her mince-inducing sandals, her Louise L. Hay-type chant was interrupted by a wolf-whistle” (Keyes, *Sushi* 281). The female protagonist is obviously relieved when he calls her on Tuesday night and asks for another date on Saturday night.

When Ashling talks to her friend Joy about him again she states that she could see herself being with him. “‘I could really come to like him. We get on well and he’s attractive but not too attractive. People like me never get off with male models or actors [...]’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 328). Furthermore, Ashling feels confident and proud when she realises that he has many female fans who approach him before his comedy gig. “As she watched the girls go up to him, she swelled with pride that he was her boyfriend. She couldn’t help being pleased with herself for bagging him. *He could have had anyone*, she thought, *and he picked me*” (Keyes, *Sushi* 374).

While Lisa uses mainly her work to overcome her struggles, Clodagh starts an affair with Ashling's boyfriend Marcus because she is unhappy in her marriage. Clodagh needs a change in her life because she cannot bear it anymore. When Dylan and Ashling find out what has happened, Clodagh goes to Ashling's workplace to apologize to her. Her best friend is shocked and angry and asks her why of all men she had to choose her boyfriend:

"I did think of you, Ashling," she said humbly. "I did, it's been so difficult. But you think only people in soap operas have affairs. Ordinary people do, it just happens."

"But to me? How could you do it to me?"

"I don't know. But you hadn't been going out with him long, it's not like you were married or anything, and I've been so unhappy, I've felt so trapped and like I was going mad –" (Keyes, *Sushi* 451).

Clodagh is a selfish person and does not care if she hurts other people by her actions. The only thing she knows is that she has been unhappy in her marriage for a long time and that is the reason why she has looked for affection by another man. She uses Marcus to feel better about herself.

In addition to Claire and Clodagh, Rachel also seems to be a woman who needs a man in her life to feel better about herself. When Luke has left her because of her drug addiction, Rachel immediately looks for a replacement. At Cloisters she meets Chris, who tells her that he is at this treatment centre because of a drug addiction. The next quote exemplifies perfectly that Rachel wants to have another man in order to forget her ex-boyfriend:

A little voice protested that it still preferred Luke, but I immediately silenced it. I intended to fancy this Christy whether I liked it or not. I was desperate to wipe out the hurt that Luke had caused and what better way than to become fixated on someone else? It was just random good fortune that Christy was so attractive I couldn't take an eye off him" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 101).

Moreover, Rachel compares the two guys so that she can make Luke look bad which raises her self-esteem. "He's cool, I thought in admiration, much cooler than Luke. Luke just thought that he was cool and dangerous and living on the edge. But he had nothing on Chris. I mean, Chris was a drug addict. Beat that, Luke Costello! (Keyes, *Rachel's* 107)

Female relief strategies in these three selected novels consist of focusing on motherhood and finding new men who can make the female characters feel more

confident. As already stated in the theoretical part of this thesis, men are often likely to perceive women as fragile and vulnerable and are not seen as “independent human beings with their own goals, needs, and desires” but they are evaluated “only in terms of their usefulness to patriarchal men” in patriarchal societies (Tyson 142). Taking the knowledge from the theoretical part of this thesis into account, it can be stated that Keyes’ female characters do not perceive themselves as independent human beings but constantly look for a man in order to feel safe. It seems that in order to free themselves from a male character they need to find a new man who can take care of them.²⁰

3.6.3) The Importance of a Successful Professional Career

In addition to having the wish to find Mr. Right who is supposedly the solution for all female problems, some female characters also put more focus on their professional careers as a strategy for achieving happiness. However, to some main protagonists the job is more important than to the others.

In *Watermelon*, for example, Claire mentions in the beginning of the novel that she has a degree in English literature and has moved to London after finishing it to live her life to the fullest and escape from being a grown-up a little bit longer. However, having a successful career is not one of her priorities throughout the novel as she is more concentrated on her difficult life circumstances and her role as a new mother. However, one hint that she cares about her job can be identified rather in the end of the novel when the female protagonist makes the decision to go back to London: “But I had to go back to London. After all my job was there. And I hadn’t noticed anyone in Dublin breaking down my front door to offer me a job. Although I hadn’t applied for any jobs, to be fair” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 489). Even though Claire has not applied to any jobs in Dublin, it is important to her to keep the job she has in London.

By contrast, having a successful career is extremely important to Lisa, who is one of the main characters of *Sushi for Beginners*. Lisa’s life evolves around her work and she strives to be better everyday. Therefore, the female protagonist is devastated when she finds out that she does not get a new job in New York, but is sent to Dublin

²⁰ See chapter “2.2.2 Feminist Theory”.

to become the chief editor for the new magazine *Colleen*. She has no choice but to take the offer because her current job position has already been given to someone else. In Dublin, she realises that “she’d have to make *Colleen* a sure-fire success before anyone else would employ her” (Keyes, *Sushi* 85).

Even though her work puts a lot of pressure on her, she still would never give it up because it gives her the power to forget about other struggles in her life. Moreover, she does not want anyone to think that she cannot handle her new job and the pressure that is put on her:

She’d always been a survivor, and had never before contemplated suicide – and she was only doing so now because dying seemed the most appropriate way to survive. But the more she thought about it, the more killing herself wasn’t an option: everyone would simply think she’d cracked under the pressure and they’d gloat like mad (Keyes, *Sushi* 85).

This quote might rise the question whether Lisa’s work actually does make her happy, however, in the following examples are given that show how important her work to her is. In fact, Lisa preferably wants to work all the time because it helps her to stop thinking about her ruined marriage. She needs to work in order to survive because otherwise she would become depressed. The upcoming longer weekend freaks her out and she hates the fact that she cannot go to work on a bank holiday:

“Worse still, she couldn’t go into work on Monday because the building wouldn’t be open. As soon as she’s heard on Friday morning, she’d marched straight into Jack’s office and kicked up a right stink. ‘Can’t the porter [...] come to let me in and then go straight home again?’ [...] ‘Why don’t you take it easy?’ Jack had advised. ‘You’ve achieved so much in such a short time, you deserve a rest’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 266). “But she didn’t want a rest, she was too hyper. Three entire days, how was she going to fill them?” (Keyes, *Sushi* 266).

Lisa has always worked hard, even when she still was together with her husband Oliver. Her dedication to her job was, however, also often a topic of discussion between the married couple, because Oliver thought that she worked too hard. One of their discussions about Lisa’s career can be seen in the following:

‘Lisa, I think you’re the business. I always did. I...’ he paused as he searched for the right word. ‘I admire you, I respect you...’
‘But?’ Lisa questioned sharply.
‘But there’s more to life than being the best.’ A scornful laugh.
‘No, there isn’t.’
‘But you are the best. You’re so young and successful, why isn’t it enough?’

‘That’s the trouble with success,’ Lisa muttered. ‘You’ve got to keep doing better.’ (Keyes, *Sushi* 385).

Clodagh’s life is entirely different to Lisa’s, due to the fact that she is a housewife, has two children and is married to Dylan. Even though many people envy her for her supposedly perfect life Clodagh is not content. In order to change her situation for the better, Clodagh makes the decision that “the time has come [...] for [her] to go back to work” (Keyes, *Sushi* 224). She opens up to Ashling and says: “‘I’ve been thinking about it for a while. It probably isn’t healthy to pour all my energies into my children’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 224). As soon as these words leave Clodagh’s mouth she realises that this is probably the reason why she does not feel happy any more. “Privately [she] reckoned that that was where the terrible, itchy uncomfortable feelings of dissatisfaction were coming from” (Keyes, *Sushi* 224). Her whole life revolves around her children and thus she wants to have a break from them.

However, Clodagh does not have a proper education but has unrealistic goals for her working career, as can be seen in the following:

She was always reading books where housewives started their own business. Where they turned their great baking skills into a cake industry. Or set up a health club for women. Or channelled their pottery hobby into a thriving enterprise, employing, oh, at least seven or eight people. They made it sound so easy” (Keyes, *Sushi* 224).

In reality, Clodagh never enjoyed working in the past and she was quite happy when she got married and did not have to worry about money anymore. Now she has the idea to go back to work, but she realises quite soon that it will not work out because with her little education it is difficult to get a good job. Moreover, she does not enjoy working and is lazy and not motivated. Thus, she starts an affair to get a change from her boring life.

Rachel’s biggest struggle is her drug addiction and her first step to recovery is done by leaving New York and going to a treatment centre back in Dublin. However, her real recovery starts after leaving Cloisters, when she has to take responsibility for herself in the real world. In the first months, her strategies for feeling better consisted of going to meetings, going to psychotherapy sessions with an addiction counsellor

regularly. By making use of this help that is offered to her, Rachel slowly starts to feel better:

Slowly my internal landscape altered. [...] My view of my past also changed as my counsellor demystified childhood situations, in the same way that Josephine had pointed out that I wasn't to blame for my mother's misery after Anna was born. Repeatedly, it was pointed out to me that I hadn't been a bad child, that I wasn't a bad person" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 574).

Going to work is not part of Rachel's rehabilitation process, however, Rachel starts to see the working life in a different light and actually feels guilty for not having a job. In the beginning of the novel Rachel never cared about her job and often skipped going to work. Now she does not only feel guilty but also starts to consider what she might want to do and in what field of work she might be interested in. "But,' I shifted uncomfortably, 'shouldn't I get a job? I feel so guilty not working.' [...] 'And what would you do? You don't know what you want to do with your life,' [Nola] said, as if that was something to be proud of. 'You will eventually'" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 573).

Rachel thinks about what she wants to do with her life and how she can incorporate her life experiences into her work and make something good out of it. Thus, she decides to go back to university and to start studying psychology.

A typical feature of chick-lit is that it depicts "the personal, social and professional lives of young women working in cities" (Smyczyńska 23). The professional life is an important factor for Lisa in *Sushi for Beginners* as one of her main goals in life has always been to climb the career ladder and to be the best at her job. The other characters also think about their professional lives but not to the same extent as Lisa does. Thus, Lisa seems to be the only one of all five characters who manages to be emancipated in at least some kind of way. However, her happy ending is also not only career related but is connected to her reconciliation with her ex-husband Oliver.

It can be argued that the problem of the female characters in these novels is not really that they want to be in a relationship but that they allow themselves to be defined over their relationships to men. A woman can indeed be emancipated and in a heterosexual relationship but the women in Keyes' novels mostly want to be in a relationship because they would not know who they are without one. Their identity is linked to their relationship status. However, there are more things in life, such as the

career that define who people are as persons. People's identities are not solely based on the relationships they are having.²¹

3.7) Happy Endings

As has already been mentioned, Keyes would rather stop writing altogether before writing a downbeat ending to her novels. The question that can be raised in this context is what kind of message these endings send to the female readers. Do the characters in the book discover a liberating feminist consciousness, which make them independent human beings or do they rather send the implicit and explicit message that all women can do is hope for a "happy ending" that will primarily please the men that are involved?

Moreover, it is interesting to ask whether the moments of insights female main protagonists experience in the novels can be seen as epiphanies in the Joycean sense since these personal insights tend to make female readers reflect on their life. Originally, the term "epiphany" was used in a Christian context for the "revelation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi (Matt. 2: 1-12)" (Baldick s.v. 'epiphany', online dictionary). The Irish author James Joyce adapted the term for his literary purposes in order to describe a "sudden revelation of the whatness of a thing, the moment in which the soul of the commonest object seems to us radiant" (Baldick s.v. 'epiphany', online dictionary).

To put it in other words, Joyce describes an epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments" (Baldick s.v. 'epiphany', online dictionary). A number of epiphanies can be found in Joyce's *Dubliners*, as well as in *Ulysses*. Similar moments of spiritual manifestations can be identified in a number of poems by W.B. Yeats as, for example, in "Vacillation". *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* by

²¹ See chapter "2.2.2 Feminist Theory" for more information on the feminist theory and the role of women in Western societies.

Virginia Woolf also include intense revelations experienced by the characters which can be defined as epiphanies (Baldick s.v. 'epiphany', online dictionary).

In the following, aspects of happy endings in Keyes' three selected novels will be presented and compared to each other. Afterwards, it can be identified what kind of happy endings Keyes uses to end her novels and whether they promote patriarchal gender roles.

3.7.1) Personal Insights

In *Watermelon*, Claire does experience a happy ending with the man she loves. However, before she can get to this point she has to make a decision between two men in her life, namely, her husband and her new boyfriend. During this process she gains essential insights about her whole situation, which help her to make important decisions in her life.

Claire is torn apart between her marriage and the new man in her life. First, she feels that it is her responsibility to get back together with James because of the fact that they have a child together. When James comes to Ireland and they meet up to talk she is surprised about his opinions about their marriage. Claire is shocked by his accusations and has no idea that he had experienced their marriage in such a negative way. However, she does believe him when he says that it is all her fault and that he would have never left her if she had behaved in a different way.

In his opinion, Claire had behaved like a grown-up child who did not want to take any kind of responsibility. "I'm saying that living with you was a bit like living with a demanding child. You always wanted to go out. As though life was one big long party. And it was, for you. You were always laughing and enjoying yourself. So I had to be the grown up one. I had to worry about money and bills" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 384). James goes on and on with his accusations for Claire's behaviour, but at some point she manages to ask "James,' I said in a little voice. 'I'm sorry to ask this, but you wouldn't be trying to avoid the blame for leaving me? You know, by blaming me and making it all my fault'" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 387). James only gets angrier and

answers: “‘That’s exactly the kind of childish, selfish response I should have expected from you’” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 388).

Claire is devastated and for a short time she actually believes that James is right. Thus, she breaks up with Adam and tells him that she will get back together with her husband. Even her mother tells her that this is the best choice. “‘After all this is the father of your child we’re talking about. If you can’t swallow the anger on your behalf, think about Kate. Do it for her. Are you going to deprive your child of her father just because you’re angry’” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 405)? However, during her conversation with her mother Claire also realises how she really feels. “‘I’ve got to be perfect all the time or else he’ll leave me again. I can’t say a word against him because it’ll just prove that I’m only thinking of me. I feel I should be so grateful to be back with him that I can never dare complain about anything ever again’” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 413). This realisation is the first step into the right direction, as she starts to understand what James is doing to her.

When the married couple meets up again in London Claire continues to listen to him. “‘Look, I know you’ve been very difficult. Bloody difficult,’ he said. [...] ‘But I can see that you’re making an effort. I can see how hard you’re trying to convince me that you’re responsible and grown-up and considerate now’” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 399). While listening to him, she slowly realises what he is trying to do. James completely exaggerates and by doing so, he tries to undermine Claire so that she feels like an insecure, dependent person. Claire figures out that he had never “‘liked [her] confidence. He had been frightened by it’” (Keyes, *Watermelon* 437).

Finally, Claire can use all the personal insights that she has gained and comes to the realisation that it is not solely her fault that their marriage is ending. James also has to take some of the responsibility instead of accusing her and blaming her for what she has supposedly done:

‘You had an affair with another woman, you left me the day I gave birth to your child, then you decided that you wanted me back. But, instead of telling me that, you had to manufacture a whole pack of lies, and malign me and call me selfish and childish and inconsiderate and stupid’” (Keyes 453).

And by finally articulating these issues she realises that James no longer had the power to make her feel insecure or dependent. Claire decides to leave James and fly back to Ireland with the next plane. Claire's personal insight cannot be seen as one big epiphany as her realisation happens slowly to her and takes a few days.

An eye opening revelation does not explicitly happen to Lisa, but to her soon-to-be-ex-husband Oliver, who calls her one night because he wants to talk to her. In his opinion Lisa has changed since she has moved to Ireland and this appeals to Oliver. Their biggest issue was that Lisa worked too hard and had changed her mind on having children:

Before she got to the phone, the answering machine picked up and someone began to leave a message. Oliver. [...] 'Excuse me, Lisa Edwards [...] you have changed.' She picked up the phone. 'What?' [...] 'That day in Dublin when you were playing football with those kids, I said you'd changed and you told me you hadn't. You lied to me, babes. [...] You're different, babes – not working so hard, being so sweet to those kids – why tell me you're not'" (Keyes, *Sushi* 521)?

Lisa is not able to tell him the truth about her new view on life, because she thinks that it would not make any sense since they are about to get divorced. However, her change in her attitude has opened Oliver's eyes so that he is not sure anymore whether he wanted to get divorced.

In contrast to Claire and Lisa, Clodagh's revelation is not necessarily only about men, but about her terrible behaviour in general. She was extremely unhappy in her marriage, even though no one has ever been able to fully understand the reasons for her unhappiness. Clodagh started an affair with Ashling's boyfriend to feel more alive. By doing so, she did not only hurt her husband Dylan, but also her best friend Ashling. Back then, she was not able to see her mistakes and was behaving in an extremely selfish way. However, a few months later Clodagh can finally see that what she has done has destroyed not only her life but also hurt people who are important to her. Thus, she goes to Ashling's work and asks her if she has time to talk. The two women sit down together and Clodagh gets a chance to apologize:

'I've come to apologize,' Clodagh said awkwardly. 'I've grown up an awful lot over the past few months. I'm different now. [...] I see how selfish and self-obsessed I was and how cruel I've been,' Clodagh spilled. 'My punishment is having to live with all the damage I've caused. You hate me and I don't know if

you've seen Dylan lately, but he's ruined. He's so angry and ... hard' (Keyes, *Sushi* 557).

Clodagh's new self is not a result of a sudden epiphany but a process that has been going on for the past few months. Ashling decides to forgive Clodagh but also explains to her that she is not able to be friends with her again. Moreover, she asks Clodagh whether she was able to come to any conclusions about what has happened in her marriage and why she has made these terrible decisions. Clodagh is not really sure but she did realise some things: "I should never have married Dylan. This is probably hard to believe but I don't think I ever really fancied him. I just thought he was the kind of man you married – he was so good-looking and charming and had a good job and was responsible [...]" (Keyes, *Sushi* 557).

Rachel's experiences differ partly from the main characters' experiences in *Watermelon* and *Sushi for Beginners*, as she has to deal with her drug addiction throughout the whole novel. When Rachel is allowed to leave the treatment centre she still has some unresolved issues and is told to continue going to meetings and that she should stay away from men for about a year. Only a few weeks after having left Cloisters she relapses after having slept with Chris, who is also a former patient of the treatment centre. When she wakes up in the hospital, she realises that she had "failed [her] first test in the real world" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 558). Her sisters are at the hospital as well and visit Rachel. They talk about what has happened and Rachel explains to them that she still has unresolved issues with her mother and that she has the feeling that her mother was always only picking on her. When her sisters reveal to Rachel that they also have issues with their mother and that they simply do not take her too seriously, Rachel has her first realisation:

I felt the black, smoggy cloud of misery lift from me. It was a wonderful revelation to find out that my sisters felt as picked on by Mum as I always had. That the only difference between us was in our attitudes. They regarded it as amusing sparring, but I'd taken it far too much to heart. And I'd better stop. 'Do you feel better now about Mum?' Anna asked gently. 'She only lost her head when you didn't come home. That night she was hysterical thinking you might take drugs with that Chris' (Keyes, *Rachel's* 559).

Rachel also has a healing talk with her mother and when she gets out of the hospital she decides that she will not make the same mistake twice. She calls Nola, a former drug addict, who helps her on her journey back into life. Moreover, she starts to visit group meetings on a regular basis and also sees her psychiatrist continuously to

work on her unresolved issues. After a few months, around Christmas time Rachel has her next even more important realisation. “Something changed. I found I wasn’t angry with Luke or Brigit anymore. I couldn’t pinpoint when it happened, because brotherly love and forgiveness don’t wake you up in the middle of the night and do grand-prix laps in your head, the way vengeance and hatred do” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 582). Her revealing realisation can also be found in the following quote:

For the first time I realized how selfish and self-centred I was. How horrendous it must have been for Brigit and Luke, living with me and the chaos I’d created. I felt unbearably sorry for them, for all the misery and worry they’d been put through. Poor Brigit, poor Luke. I cried and cried and cried and cried. And for the first time in my life it wasn’t for me (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 582).

Not only does she realise that it must have been extremely difficult for them to deal with her behaviour back in New York, but she also sees with terrible clarity “what an ordeal it must have been for them to get on a plane and come to the Cloisters and say what they’d said” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 583). Her friends and family have tried to tell her that Brigit and Luke must really love her if they were willing to do all this for her, but this is the first time that Rachel is able to see this as well (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 583).

All in all, it can be said that these revelations are processes that do not happen within one moment but take many days or even several months. Therefore, they cannot be classified as typical epiphanies in the Joycean sense. Furthermore, this conclusion supports the fact that epiphanies are a typical feature of high literature but do not occur in popular fiction. In contrast to personal insights of chick-lit characters, epiphanies in the Joycean sense describe divine and sudden spiritual manifestations.

Moreover, it can be concluded that all realisations in the novels are about the female’s heterosexual relationships which supports again the claim that Keyes’ novels are about women whose main quest in life is to find their better male half.

3.7.2) Striving for a Better Career

The working life is an important part of some main characters’ lives, however, it is usually not as important as the females’ relationships. In addition to having found Mr. Right, three of the main characters in Keyes’s novels also strive for having a better career.

In *Sushi for Beginners*, Lisa has been a career woman from the outset of the novel. After ten months in Dublin, she has achieved what she wanted, namely, successfully launching the new Irish fashion magazine *Colleen*. After these intense months in Ireland, Lisa now starts to think about her future when she “was offered a job by Randolph Media’s main rivals” (Keyes, *Sushi* 542). *Colleen* magazine is now “where she wanted it in terms of circulation and advertising revenue” and thus she realises that “it was time to go” (Keyes, *Sushi*, 542). Moreover, the main character already knows that London is the place where she belongs and where her family lives (Keyes, *Sushi* 542).

Before leaving the magazine she wants Ashling know that she “put her name forward to be the editor and [she] sang [her] praises to the board” (Keyes, *Sushi* 555). Even though Lisa has supported her, Ashling does not get the job and her reaction is the following: “‘It doesn’t matter, I’d hate to be editor,’ Ashling insisted. ‘I’m one of life’s second-in-commands, and we’re just as important as leaders’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 555). Even though Ashling stays in her current job as an assistant, she is determined to continue doing a good job in her work. Throughout the novel, her new job at the magazine has become an important part of her life.

Rachel also starts to think about her future a few months after having left the treatment centre and she admits that she feels guilty for not working. “‘But,’ I shifted uncomfortably, ‘shouldn’t I get a job? I feel so guilty not working.’ [...] ‘And what would you do? You don’t know what you want to do with your life,’ [Nola] said, as if that was something to be proud of. ‘You will eventually’” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 573). A few months later Nola suggests that she could go back to university and start studying. At first, this suggestion scares Rachel and she does not know whether she can actually do this because she thinks that it would take her too long. “‘A degree?’ I was appalled. ‘But it would take too long. Maybe four years. By then I’d be thirty-two. Ancient!’” (Keyes, *Rachel’s* 599). After consideration, Rachel realises that she can actually use her time by doing a degree and she even figures out that she wants to use her gained experiences from her illness and study psychology. When she meets Luke after over year she is proud of herself that she has achieved so much in this year and opens up to him about her future plans: “‘I haven’t had a drink or a drug for a year and four months,’ I boasted. ‘Fair play to you Rachel to you Rachel.’ Luke smiled with

admiration. I pulsed with pleasure. 'And I'm going to un-i-ver-sit-y,' I spelled out slowly, for maximum effect, 'in October.' [...] 'To do psychology.' (Keyes, *Rachel's* 619).

As can be seen by these three examples, in addition to having found Mr. Right these three female characters also make plans to pursue professional careers. However, the quest for a successful working career is less important than their happy ending with a male character.

3.7.3) The Quest for Mr. Right

In Keyes' novels, men are always an important part when it comes to happy endings. Their significance can also be identified in the endings of *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday*. Except for Clodagh, who is one of the main characters in *Sushi for Beginners*, all women get together with their dream guy.

The ending of *Watermelon* is probably the most unrealistic one of all three novels, because Claire does not only get her younger perfect man Adam, it also turns out that he also has a daughter and that he is going to move to London with her. Thus, he suggests that they could meet up and start seeing whether they could have a possible life together. First, Claire believes that there is no possible future for the two of them because they will be living in different countries. "'No,' he said thoughtfully. 'You're right. There would be no point jetting over to London for an evening out when I'm already there.' For a moment I thought I'd misheard him. But I looked at him, at his smiling face and knew that I hadn't" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 514).

Adam is in love with Claire and suggests that they could meet up in London and find out whether their relationship has a future. "'But do you think it would be possible for us to meet each other some time in London? Perhaps we could share a baby sitter? And, of course any time you need a baby sitter, I'll be happy to oblige'" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 517). Claire is beyond happy about the sudden change of events and is content about her new relationship status. When her sister asks her whether she loves him, Claire answers "'I don't know,' I said awkwardly. 'I don't really know him enough to say. But I like him a lot. Will that do?'" (Keyes, *Watermelon* 520) She

cannot speak about love yet but she is extremely positive that she will be able to say these three words soon.

In *Sushi for Beginners*, two of the three main characters experience a typical happy ending by finding their Mr. Right. Since the beginning of the novel, Ashling fancies Jack Devine, who is a handsome man who also works for *Colleen*. However, she would never have imagined that he would like her back, because he has been unfriendly to her in various situations throughout the story development. In reality, he is surprised when he finds out that he actually likes Ashling and is not in love with Lisa, although she looks much better than her. Ashling goes through a terrible break-up in the novel, because she finds out that her boyfriend has cheated on her with her best friend. However, in the end everything turns out perfectly for her as Jack decides to tell Ashling that he is in love with her. Finally, she is the one who gets lucky in life. “‘I can’t think of nothing else apart from you,’ he said. He sounded quite matter of fact. ‘It’s affecting everything.’ Her head filled up, up, up with air and she couldn’t speak. Couldn’t locate a suitable syllable. She’d suspected he liked her, but now that he’d said it ...” (Keyes, *Sushi* 545)

Not only Ashling, but also Lisa who is presented as rather cold in the beginning of the novel, gets her happy ending with her true love. She has just signed the divorce papers and spends the whole day trying to avoid thinking about Oliver, when he suddenly stands in front of her door. Lisa is astonished and does not understand what he is doing in Ireland:

‘What are you doing here?’ she called in astonishment. ‘I’ve come to see you,’ he called back. [...] ‘I’ve come to win you back, babes.’ ‘Why?’ [...] She was confused – and oddly resentful. She’d put a whole day’s effort into ‘moving on’ and he’d scuppered it. ‘Because you’re the best,’ he said simply. ‘You’ve left it a bit bloody late,’ she said snippily. ‘We just got divorced’ (Keyes, *Sushi* 560).

Oliver opens up to Lisa and tells her that he feels bad about what has happened and that he still loves her. “‘You know,’ he said, thoughtfully, ‘I feel so shit about that. It has messed with my head like you would not believe! Anyway, nothing to say we can’t get married again’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 560). At first Lisa is shy and does not know what to say but Oliver emphasizes again “‘I still love you. Now that we’re older and wiser [...] I can see it working out’” (Keyes, *Sushi* 561). When she explains to him that she will move back to London to start a new job he says that the only thing he

needs to know is whether she is interested in starting a new life together and Lisa agrees.

By contrast, Clodagh does not get a typical happy ending as she has messed up her life throughout the novel all by herself. She is separated from Dylan, her husband, and also not together anymore with Marcus, Ashling's ex-boyfriend, because he has cheated on her and has left her afterwards. Clodagh and Dylan sold their house and Clodagh now lives with her two young children in a small apartment. Clodagh often asks herself if better times will come: "Sad and lonely and still burdened with the fruits of her destruction, she wondered if she's ever be able to fix all that she'd broken. Would anything ever be normal again" (Keyes, *Sushi* 559)? However, the last scene of Clodagh shows that she still has a glimpse of hope and that everything will be good again:

As she passed Hogan's a crowd of boys noticed her and began whistling and shouting compliments. At first she ignored them, then on a whim tossed her hair and gave a dazzling over-the-shoulder smile which elicited whoops of wild appreciation from them [sic]. All at once her heart lifted. Hey, life goes on (Keyes, *Sushi* 559).

Even though Rachel has faced serious struggles throughout the whole novel she still gets to experience a positive closure for her story. After Rachel has gone to New York over the summer to apologize to Luke she is now back in Ireland and about to start her new life as a psychology student in Dublin. She still feels extremely sad and weak because of her break up with Luke, when he suddenly turns up at her work to tell her:

'I LOVE YOU.' [...] 'Say it again,' I called down to him in a shaky voice, as he clambered to his feet. [...] 'I love you [...] You're amazing and beautiful and I can't get you out of my head, 'We can work it out [...] I'll come home to Ireland and get a job. It was good with us before and it can be even better now'" (Keyes, *Rachel's* 625).

The research question raised in this context is whether the female protagonists are able to experience a liberating feminist consciousness when it comes to happy endings. The examples presented above show that even though some of the female characters strive for better careers they all end up with their supposedly "perfect" man. These endings send readers of chick-lit fiction the implicit and explicit message that their life is only fulfilled if they find their special Mr. Right, which is one of the

reasons why feminists have criticised this genre in the past and today. After having analysed various aspects of Keyes novels, it can be stated that her novels indeed address serious topics, however, she still includes superficial stereotypes of women whose main goal in life is to please the men involved in their lives and find someone who can take care of them.²²

4) Conclusion

This thesis has investigated prominent gender issues in the three selected novels *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel's Holiday* by the Irish author Marian Keyes. A special interest is taken in the female main characters' representation, namely, whether the female protagonists are represented in a stereotypical way and conform to patriarchal gender roles. As stated by Tyson, it can be asked whether "the role of the strong, rational protector is given to a male character while the role of the submissive, emotional nurturer is given to a female character" (140). Can female patriarchal stereotypes, such as "virginal angels and selfless caregivers" be identified? (Tyson 140) This diploma thesis has aimed to identify and analyse gender issues with the focus on the main protagonists' struggles, female relief strategies and happy endings.

The chick-lit genre is relatively young and since the publication of the widely successful novel *The Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding in 1996, the genre has often been the subject of debates with feminist writers and other critics (Wilson 215). The biggest opponent of the genre is Chris Mazza who originally used the term "chick-lit" in an "obviously sardonic" sense in order to make aware of the "damaging lingering stereotype(s)" of gender roles in Western societies (Mazza, *Who's Laughing* 18). In this context, it is also interesting to raise the question whether chick-lit "is a useful medium for understanding the experience of women within contemporary culture or is pointless fluff that exacerbates gender stereotyping and inequality" (Wilson 215).

²² See chapter "2.2 Gender issues" for more information on female representations in Western societies.

The interest in analysing novels by Marian Keyes is a result of the fact that the author has claimed in various interviews that she rejects the criticism of superficiality in her novels due to the fact that her books reflect real problems of modern women “including serious illness, domestic violence, rape, bereavement, alcoholism and depression” (Vallely). In this respect, this thesis has explored whether female stereotypes are prominent in Keyes’ novels, regardless of the fact that the author has taken a more serious approach to telling her stories.

In order to being able to answer the proposed research questions a look at cultural studies has been taken, including the Circuit of Culture according to Paul du Gay. This model facilitates understanding of a cultural text or artefact and includes processes of “representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation” (Woodward 2-3). The Circuit of Culture is important for the analysis of the novels as the question has been raised how women are represented within these literary texts.

Moreover, feminist theory has seemed appropriate for this undertaking as it asks the right questions, such as whether the characters conform to patriarchal gender roles. Feminists examine in which ways “our personal identity is formed by our culture’s definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman” (Tyson 139). Furthermore, feminist theory focuses on the “situations and ways in which men and women are treated differently depending on their sex and on how men are socialized to be masculine and women to be feminine” (Tyson 139). Thus, Marian Keyes’ novels are analysed from a critical feminist perspective.

After having analysed and compared all three selected novels, it can be stated that the general quest for finding Mr. Right is prominent in all books and the story lines revolve around this theme. The male characters play essential roles when it comes to the female characters’ struggles, relief strategies and happy endings as the quest for a permanent relationship with the perfect man seems to be the ultimate aim in life. Even Lisa (*Sushi for Beginners*), who is presented as a cold business woman and who claims to have always only dated strategically, ends up getting a marriage proposal from her true love at the end of the book.

Even though women have to face serious struggles throughout the novel, the novels have happy endings, which is typical of the chick-lit genre. Additionally, the understanding of happiness in these novels appears to be trivial as most of the happy endings are inextricably linked to the successful quest for and union with Mr. Right. Moreover, some female main characters claim to have become emancipated women throughout the novel and that they do not need a man in their life to be happy. However, in reality all female protagonists seem to be dependent on a love relationship with a man and only experience happiness in the end of the novels because they believe to have found their Mr. Right. Claire (*Watermelon*), for example, was able to break free from her self-destructive relationship with her husband but starts almost immediately a new relationship with her new crush Adam, who has been the main focus of her attention since their first meeting.

The females' personal happiness is fully dependent on the fulfilment of being in a love relationship with a man. Their independent lifestyles, fulfilling roles as mothers and successful careers are part of the narrative but not the focus, as their main quest is to find the perfect man. Their desired happy ending is consequently usually marked by the reconciliation with Mr. Right.

Thus, it can be concluded that Marian Keyes makes use of traditional gender roles in her novels and includes stereotypical representations of female main characters. The mothers Claire and Clodagh in Keyes' novels are responsible for raising their children while being dependent on their male partners financially, even though they are not necessarily in a relationship with them anymore. The protagonists Ashling and Rachel lead 'singleton' lifestyles at the outset of the novels but their main quest is to finally find their Mr. Right. Lisa is presented as a career woman who supposedly cares about nothing else than her work in the fashion industry. In fact, even she is beyond happy when she is reconciled with her ex-husband in the end of the novel.

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8) Abstract

The chick-lit genre is nearly two decades old and it has continuously gained popularity within the literary world. The term describes a genre of popular fiction mainly written by female authors for a female audience. Chick-lit quickly became extremely successful and publishing houses earned a great amount of money with the publication of these books. However, since the publication of the widely successful novel *The Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding in 1996, the genre has also often been the subject of contemporary debates with feminist writers and other critics, as they claim that chick-lit novels tend to present a stereotypical image of females (Wilson 215).

The interest in analysing novels by Marian Keyes is a result of the fact that the author has claimed in various interviews that she rejects the criticism of superficiality in her novels due to the fact that her books reflect real problems of modern women “including serious illness, domestic violence, rape, bereavement, alcoholism and depression” (Vallely). In this respect, this thesis has explored whether female stereotypes are prominent in Keyes’ novels *Watermelon*, *Sushi for Beginners* and *Rachel’s Holiday*, regardless of the fact that the author has taken a more serious approach to telling her stories.

In order to being able to answer the proposed research questions a look at cultural studies has been taken, including the Circuit of Culture according to Paul du Gay. This model facilitates understanding of a cultural text or artefact and includes processes of “representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation” (Woodward 2-3). The Circuit of Culture is important for the analysis of the novels as the question has been raised how women identify themselves and are represented within these literary texts. Moreover, feminist theory has seemed appropriate for this undertaking as it asks the right questions, such as whether the characters conform to patriarchal gender roles (Tyson 139).

After having analysed and compared all three selected novels, it can be stated that Keyes makes use of female stereotypes in her novels even though the author chooses a more serious approach to tell her stories. In the three selected novels, the

male characters play essential roles when it comes to the female characters' struggles, relief strategies and happy endings, as the quest for a permanent relationship with the perfect man seems to be the most important aim in the women's lives. Ultimately, the females' personal happiness is fully dependent on the fulfilment of being in a love relationship with a man. Thus, their independent lifestyles, fulfilling roles as mothers and successful careers are part of the narrative but not the focus. Their desired happy ending is consequently usually marked by the reconciliation with Mr. Right.

9) Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Diese Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit Gender-Aspekten in den drei ausgewählten Werken *Watermelon* (Wassermelone), *Sushi for Beginners* (Sushi für Anfänger) und *Rachel's Holiday* (Rachel im Wunderland) von der irischen Erfolgs-Autorin Marian Keyes. Ein spezieller Fokus wird auf die Repräsentation der weiblichen Charaktere in den Werken gelegt und die Frage untersucht, ob Frauen als Stereotype dargestellt werden und mit patriarchischen Geschlechterrollen übereinstimmen. Wird die Rolle des starken Beschützers dem Mann zugeschrieben und die unterwürfige, emotionale und abhängige Rolle der Frau? Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es Gender-Probleme mit dem Fokus auf verschiedene Aspekte in den Werken zu analysieren. Die Analyse beschäftigt sich vorrangig damit welche Schwierigkeiten die weiblichen Protagonistinnen erleben, welche Strategien sie anwenden, um ihre Situation zu verbessern und welche Happy Ends sie am Ende der Romane erleben.

Das Chick-Lit Genre ist noch relativ jung, denn es feierte seine Anfänge erst mit der Publikation des Romans *The Bridget Jones Diary* (Bridget Jones – Schokolade zum Frühstück) von Helen Fielding in dem Jahr 1996. Seit damals steht das Genre unter starker Kritik. Feminist/innen behaupten, dass dieses Buch und das daraus entstandene Genre die feministischen Errungenschaften der Emanzipation der letzten Jahrzehnte zerstört, weil die oberflächlichen Themen in den Werken die großteils weiblichen Leserinnen dazu verleiten falsche Ziele der Selbstverwirklichung zu verfolgen. Themen wie der weibliche Körper, Schönheit und Heterosexualität wurden schon vor der Publikation des Romans als Institutionen von patriarchaler Unterdrückung identifiziert. Doch nun hatten die Feminist/innen, welche in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren für Gleichheit in der Gesellschaft kämpften, Töchter, welche sich Büchern zuwandten, die genau das Gegenteil unterstützten.

Chris Mazza ist eine Vertreterin des Feminismus und publizierte die Anthologie *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* im Jahr 1995. Sie ist eine große Gegnerin des Chick-Lit Genres, obwohl sie den Namen ursprünglich ins Leben rief. Sie verwendete den Begriff „Chick-Lit“ allerdings in einem offensichtlich sarkastischen Sinn, um auf die zerstörerischen, andauernden Stereotype der Geschlechterrollen in westlichen Gesellschaften aufmerksam zu machen. In diesem Kontext sollte deshalb die Frage

gestellt werden, ob dieses Genre ein nützliches Medium zum Verstehen von Frauen in unserer Kultur ist, oder ob es zwecklose Lektüre ist, welche Geschlechter Stereotypisierungen und Ungleichheiten in unserer Gesellschaft unterstützt.

Das Interesse, Werke von Marian Keyes auf diese Aspekte hin zu analysieren entstand dadurch, weil die Autorin in verschiedenen Interviews die Kritik, ihre Bücher seien zu oberflächlich, zurückweist. Sie gibt an, dass ihre Romane echte Probleme von modernen Frauen wiedergeben und zusätzlich die harsche Realität widerspiegeln, wie zum Beispiel ernsthafte Krankheiten, häusliche Gewalt, Alkoholismus, Drogensucht oder Depression. In dieser Hinsicht ist es spannend in Erfahrung zu bringen, ob weibliche Stereotype ein typisches Merkmal in ihren Werken sind, obwohl die Autorin angibt einen ernsthafteren Ansatz für ihre Romane zu haben.

Um die angegebenen Forschungsfragen beantworten zu können, muss zuerst ein Blick auf Paul Du Gay's „Circuit of Culture“ geworfen werden. Dieses kulturwissenschaftliche Modell erleichtert das Verständnis eines kulturellen Texts oder Artefakts, indem es Prozesse der Repräsentation, Identität, Produktion, Konsumation und Regulation inkludiert. Des Weiteren wird die feministische Theorie für die Analyse der Bücher gewählt, da diese angemessene und brauchbare Fragen stellt, wie zum Beispiel, ob die Charaktere in den Büchern mit patriarchischen Geschlechter-Rollen übereinstimmen. Simone de Beauvoir war eine überzeugte Feministin, welche sich zu Lebzeiten mit diesem sozialen Phänomen auseinandergesetzt. Von ihr stammt das berühmte Zitat „One is not born a woman, one becomes one“ („Man wird nicht als Frau geboren, man wird es.“). Die feministische Theorie untersucht in welcher Hinsicht unsere persönliche Identität von den kulturellen Definitionen der westlichen Gesellschaften geformt wird und wie Männer dazu sozialisiert werden sich „männlich“ zu verhalten und Frauen dazu sozialisiert werden sich „weiblich“ zu verhalten. Drei ausgewählte Romane von der irischen Autorin werden miteinander verglichen und von einer kritischen feministischen Perspektive aus analysiert. Mithilfe dieser Art der Analyse kann man feststellen, dass die allgemeine Suche nach dem perfekten Mann in allen drei Romanen allgegenwärtig ist. Die männlichen Charaktere spielen in den untersuchten Aspekten der Romane eine wichtige Rolle und die Handlung dreht sich vorrangig um die Suche einer Frau nach einer festen Beziehung mit dem richtigen Mann. Dies

lässt den Anschein erwecken, dass es das ultimative Lebensziel der Frauen ist sich zu verlieben und die Liebe ihres Lebens zu finden. Obwohl auch noch andere Themen in den Werken angesprochen werden, wie zum Beispiel Krankheiten, Mutterschaft oder Karriere, läuft es am Schluss dennoch darauf hinaus, dass die weiblichen Charaktere sich hauptsächlich nur mit ihren heterosexuellen Beziehungen auseinandersetzen. Ein typisches Merkmal von Chick-Lit Büchern ist das positive Ende, welches auch in Marian Keyes' Werken zur Verwendung kommt. Obwohl alle weiblichen Hauptcharaktere ernsthafte Probleme durchleben müssen, erfahren auch sie ein triviales Happy End, dass meistens einen männlichen Part einschließt. Dies bedeutet, dass diese Frauen ihr persönliches Glück von einem Mann abhängig machen.

Die Analyse der Bücher zeigt, dass Marian Keyes sehr wohl typische weibliche Stereotype in ihren Werken inkludiert, obwohl sie auch ernsthafte Themen, welche in normalen Chick-Lit Büchern normalerweise nicht vorkommen, anspricht.

10) Curriculum Vitae

PERSÖNLICHE DATEN

Name: Stephanie Winkler
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SCHULISCHE AUSBILDUNG

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WS 2009	Studium der Humanmedizin in Regensburg, Deutschland
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