
A Feminism of Their Own?: Irish Women's History and Contemporary Irish Women's Writing

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Abstract. For a long time, Irish women's lives were strictly confined to the private domain, and women's issues were largely silenced and hidden from public knowledge. Additionally, both Church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction. As a result, until relatively recently, Irish women's issues remained largely ignored and therefore unremarked upon. This paper will examine two major areas in which Irish women's lives have traditionally been repressed: women's sexuality and domestic violence, both issues which were once considered taboo for open discussion. This paper will also discuss how these same issues are being represented in Irish chick lit novels, thus providing a frank and positive voice for these largely female issues and for the everyday experiences of women in Ireland.

Key Words. Feminism, gender, Irish Chick Lit, sexuality, domestic violence.

Resumen. Durante mucho tiempo, la vida de las mujeres irlandesas estuvo estrictamente limitada al mundo privado, y las cuestiones relativas a la mujer permanecieron en gran parte silenciadas y escondidas del conocimiento público. Además tanto la Iglesia como el estado mantenían que las mujeres debían observar un alto grado de moralidad, en particular en todo lo relacionado con la sexualidad y la reproducción. Como resultado, hasta época relativamente reciente, las cuestiones concernientes a la mujer irlandesa han permanecido prácticamente ignoradas y por ende desapercibidas. En este trabajo se examinan dos áreas principales en las que las vidas de las mujeres irlandesas han sido tradicionalmente reprimidas: la sexualidad femenina y la violencia doméstica, dos cuestiones que en épocas anteriores fueron consideradas tabú para ser tratadas en público. En este trabajo también se analizará cómo se representan estas mismas cuestiones en la novela sobre jóvenes irlandesas, proporcionando así una franca y positiva voz a estas cuestiones primordialmente femeninas y a las experiencias diarias de las mujeres en Irlanda.

Palabras clave. Feminismo, género, novela sobre jóvenes irlandesas, sexualidad, violencia doméstica.

It is possible to recognise the “foundations of Irish culture – state control of women's reproduction, and the nationalist and religious mythologies, Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland – that have framed and, therefore, limited Irish women” (Moloney 2003: 198). This emphasis

on both the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland has resulted in women occupying a unique position in Irish society; women have been recognised, not as subjects with their own identity, but have instead “been reduced to symbols of the nation” (Meaney 1991: 203).

Because of this objectified status of Irish women, their “contribution to Ireland’s cultural and literary heritage has not often been acknowledged or, indeed, recognised” (Hill 2003: 214).

Moreover, as Ireland moved towards the twentieth century, a series of laws were imposed by both the state and the Catholic Church which served to confine Irish women to the private domain, such as the marriage bar which required women to resign from work upon marriage, and women’s issues were largely silenced and hidden from public knowledge. Domestic violence, for instance, was considered an issue to be discussed privately, and the silencing of female sexuality, which was often equated with “sin”, meant that single mothers and other women who were seen to flaunt their sexuality were ostracised for their supposedly “deviant” behaviour. Both Church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction. This paper will examine two primary areas in which Irish women’s lives have traditionally been repressed: women’s sexuality and domestic violence. Additionally, it will discuss how these same issues are being represented in Irish chick lit novels, which are providing a truthful and positive voice for these largely female issues.

Sexual Experience

Despite the fact that “ancient Irish laws were remarkably liberal in their attitude to women” to the extent that a “woman could divorce a sterile, impotent, or homosexual husband, could marry a priest, and could give honourable birth to a child outside of wedlock” (Kiberd 1995: 215), this liberal climate was to change after colonisation. Later on, the increasingly conservative and sex-repressing mores in society arising from the pressures of a subsistence agrarian economy in post-Famine Ireland meant that women’s sexual desire had to be denied or ignored; for any woman to admit to sexual needs, or to suggest that sex was a desirable aspect of a woman’s life, presented “a significant challenge to traditional morality” (Joannou 2000: 58). Not only was the topic of sex left for men to discuss, but sex scenes in novels, even those by and about women, were described from a solely male viewpoint. *Mary Lavelle* (1936), a novel by

Irish writer Kate O’Brien, received criticism for this very occurrence:

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

Therefore, sexuality was traditionally “based on male experience, desires and definitions” (Corcoran 1989: 6). Similarly, female sexuality was “masked and deformed ... Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity” (Greer 2006: 17). This notion of ‘passivity’ has long been linked to the prototype of the ideal woman, and, from it, evolved the double standard which said that sex “was edifying for a man, immoral for a woman” (Levy 2005: 59). Traditionally, women could only be categorized in two distinct ways – as angels or as monsters. The so-called “angelic” women were those who abided by this idea of passivity, and, without question, allowed themselves to be treated as objects by men. All others were “monsters” and, as such, had to be punished for refusing to conform to societal expectations. Even a lot of feminist work has been criticised for primarily focusing “on the ‘negative’ side of sexuality at the expense of considering ways in which women may explore their own desires in the will for a utopian future for female sexuality” (Whelehan 1995: 142). In this sense, feminism was often viewed as spoiling women’s fun, particularly for contemporary women who are “dissatisfied with perspectives which seem to tell them only what is wrong with female sexuality, rather than what is right, [and] may choose to dub feminists old prudes” (Whelehan 2000: 30).

For Irish women, in particular, such attitudes regarding women’s sexuality confirmed “the impossibility of escaping the Irish puritan morality that pervades everything” (Barros del Río 2000: par. 19). Irish society, its social standards and its legislations, has “never embodied principles and behaviours that respect the sexual rights of women” (Corcoran 1989: 18). Irish writer Nuala O’Faolain has described Irish communities as being

“savagely punitive” which were, for many years, “fully in the grip of an institutionalized fear of women; that is, of sexuality” (O’Faolain 2006: 294). How, then, would such a community react to the publication of material which contains content not deemed ‘suitable’? Until the late twentieth century, Ireland’s answer was for the material to be banned by the Irish Censorship Board. Edna O’Brien was one such writer whose “early work was banned by the Irish government and vilified by her local community” (Moloney 2003: 197). In particular, all three books in her *Country Girls* trilogy were banned; the third book, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, was banned specifically because of an apparently explicit sex scene, which today’s readers would probably find decidedly tame (Imhof 2002: 73). Writers and feminist theorists at this time would undoubtedly have been “largely pessimistic about the possibility of there being a sexual revolution that would benefit women equally” (Whelehan 1995: 158). Speaking specifically in Irish terms, women’s sexuality is a subject which is not easily or readily discussed; it has been noted that, while “the feminist literature of other countries has endless dissertations on sexuality, discussion of the subject among Irish feminists was never able to surface into the public domain” (Viney 1989: 64). Much of this censorship was related to the issue of women’s sexuality and the female body, which was considered a source of sin. This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider how:

The dominant Catholic ideology of the newly established Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s in a sense desexualised women to such an extent that even sex within marriage was considered too risqué for public and often even for private discussion. One consequence of this taboo was that little historical attention was directed towards unearthing the sexual activities of Irish women (Hayes 2001: 79).

As a result, delayed “sexual intimacy for women until marriage was thus to emerge as a most important social [norm] that was vigorously enforced in almost every aspect of life” (McLoughlin 1994: 85). Of course, this situation was once widespread throughout the world, as female desire presented a challenge to the concept of female morality and sexual purity. However, the feminist movement and the “Permissive Society” of the 1960s was supposed to change this situation, and women

“were to gain the ‘right’ to choose sex before marriage with more than one partner ... and the ‘right’ to enjoy sex” (Whelehan 1995: 148). In Ireland, however, the influence of the Permissive Society took longer to be accepted:

While sexuality came out into the open in other societies, here it remained in the closet. Irish women (and men) have not involved themselves to any great extent in the agonising over sexuality which has occurred in other Western countries. While the feminist literature of other countries has endless dissertations on sexuality, discussion of the subject among Irish feminists was never able to surface into the public domain (Viney 1989: 64).

Ireland was clouded by a strict sense of morality which equated sin almost exclusively with sex. As a result, “Irish social standards and Irish legislation have never embodied principles and behaviours that respect the sexual rights of women” (Corcoran 1989: 18). Women’s sexuality was censored and controlled more severely than men’s:

The taboo on sex outside of marriage was so strong that even discussing it was forbidden in most Irish families. It would appear that most girls were not even prepared for the onset of their periods. Only two respondents [in a survey of Irish women] were told about them, one by her mother and the other by a female cousin. The overwhelming memories of the rest of the women were of being shocked and frightened when their first period occurred and feeling ashamed by the secrecy of the monthly rituals of soaking and washing soiled cloths and towels which had to be kept hidden from male family members. Given this taboo, it is perhaps not surprising that most women reported that they were ignorant of sexual matters during their youth (Lambert 2000: 183).

One would wonder whether Ireland was ready for any amount of openness regarding sexuality. Irish chick lit, however, did not wait for Ireland to be ready. Chick lit burst onto the scene with its “girly gab about shoes, shagging, and shedding pounds” (Rogers, in Freitas 2005: i) and, in doing so, it has worked wonders towards positively voicing issues of female sexuality and sexual desire. Instead of “presenting their protagonists as subordinate to male advances, chick-lit authors present women as sexual agents” (Ferriss 2006: 10). In this sense, the traditional depiction of women “‘anticipating pleasure’ has largely been superseded by actively seeking and

experiencing pleasure” (Kiernan 2006: 208). Additionally, while “delayed sexual intimacy for women until marriage was thus to emerge as a most important social [norm] that was vigorously enforced” (McLoughlin 1994: 85), another sign of positive development in terms of representations of female desire shows how “contemporary [and, in this case, Irish] chick lit often presents the heroine in sexual relationships with men other than the narratives’ intended hero, but without ‘punishing’ her or questioning her actions” (Mabry 2006: 201).

Irish chick lit is successful in portraying how society is radically changing in terms of women’s new-found sexual freedom. Until very recently, “the rule was that you had to hold off sleeping with a man for as long as possible. But now the rule seemed to be that if you wanted to hold on to him you’d better deliver the goods asap” (Keyes 2007: 228). Indeed, waiting until the wedding night has become such a rarity that women tend to wonder if something is drastically wrong if a man tries to be a gentleman and does not expect them to sleep with him straight away. As Anna, in Marian Keyes’ *Anybody Out There?* (2006), recalls:

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

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

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

Caddle’s *Forever FM* (2002) tackles the topic in the form of a guest speaker on the radio talk show that the novel revolves around. The speaker, a young woman, describes how she contracted HIV as a child when she pierced her skin on a needle belonging to her drug-addict mother. She discusses the potential implications of this accident that she now faces every day, such as rejections by her friends, and the need to always ensure proper precautions are used when sleeping with her boyfriend (see Caddle 2002: 282-292). Keyes’ *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996), alternatively, presents a kind of utopian vision for HIV-awareness, in the form of its being so embedded in people’s minds that proper care is automatically exercised by sexually-active adults, without the need for discussion: “We hadn’t mentioned birth control, but when the time came we were both responsible adults living in the HIV positive nineties” (Keyes 2003a: 731).

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

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

As Levy states that sexuality is a complicated, fundamental part of what it is to be human, she urges us to remember that “different things are attractive to different people and sexual tastes run wide and wild” (Levy 2005: 44), rather than adhering to the myth that “sexiness needs to be something

divorced from the everyday experience of being ourselves” (Levy 2005: 44). The problem, as Levy and other like-minded theorists, see it is that we seem to have forgotten “that there is a category of people, most people in fact, who actually quite like sex, and that it is possible to do so without being a sex fiend” (Levenson 2009: 39). Far from wanting to partake in sexual gymnastics every night of the week, Claire Walsh in Keyes’ *Watermelon* (1995) could well be speaking for the Everywoman when she makes this “shocking” revelation:

While we’re on the subject of sexual shenanigans I’ve got a confession to make.
 Wait for it.
 Here it comes.
 I enjoy the missionary position.
 There! I’ve said it.
 I’m made to feel so *ashamed* of myself for feeling that way.
 As if I’m terribly boring and repressed.
 But I’m not. Honestly.
 I’m not saying that it’s the *only* position that I like.
 But, really, I have no objection to it whatsoever
 (Keyes 2003b: 363).

It is interesting that Keyes chose the missionary position for Claire to admit a particular fondness for, as it is the position often associated with women’s passivity in sexual intercourse, the idea often being that the woman has no choice but to “lie back and think of England” (or, in this case, Ireland!). However, when Claire reveals that she *prefers* this position, its cultural signification changes as it is blatantly stated that this is Claire’s *choice*; by expressing what she chooses, she therefore becomes active in the situation, again helping to equate Irish chick lit with feminism’s assertions for women to achieve progress by taking control of their own lives and voicing their concerns, aspirations, and desires.

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

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

The sexual revolution, and the separation of intercourse from reproduction, indeed brought new freedom to women; however, it also, as extracts such as this show, “brought benefits to men by releasing them from some responsibility for their sexual acts. Women soon realised that it was freedom only to say ‘yes’, not to say ‘no’; they were ‘frigid’ if they said no” (Viney 1989: 61). In *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Greer reminds us that feminism urged women to embrace the right to express their own sexuality; this, however, “is not at all the same thing as the right to capitulate to male advances” (Greer 2006: 10).

It has been said that a “chick lit novel without a few satisfying – or, alternatively, ridiculous – sex scenes is hard to find” (Wells 2006: 50). One thing that Irish chick lit does – and does well – is describe its sex scenes from the woman’s perspective. In Kate Thompson’s novel, *Sex, Lies and Fairytales* (2006), one of the characters is a chick lit writer who cheekily declares that her “sex scenes should be prescribed reading for men” (Thompson 2006: 402), alluding to the idea that sex has traditionally been on men’s terms and to men’s preferences, and so men now need to be “taught” how to please a woman. Feminists have noted how “in almost all literature that the sexual protagonist is the male” (Hayes 1994: 117-118), and that, at no stage in romantic fiction, does the woman take the sexual initiative with a man (Hayes 1994: 132). Chick lit has reversed these claims by depicting the *female* as the sexual protagonist, and as portraying women who are happy to take the initiative. It is huge progress for feminist thought that chick lit has developed as a genre of fiction that shows women as seeking and deserving pleasure as much as men, a concept that would have been unheard of until very recently.

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

It’s very difficult to discuss having sex without being so crude that I sound like a pornographic book or without being so discreet that I sound

like a repressed, uptight Victorian novelist who suffers regularly from Vaginismus and still calls her husband Mr Clements after twenty-seven years of marriage (Keyes 2003b: 378).

Added to this, theorists such as Greer have criticised the “implication that there is a statistically ideal fuck which will always result in satisfaction” (Greer 2006: 49, labelling such attitudes as “depressing” and “misleading”). Traditional romance novels, in particular, are often noted for their unrealistic sex scenes, which often present readers with overly idealistic expectations. Irish chick lit strikes the ideal balance here. Its sex scenes – far from being overly extensive, graphic, crude, or erotic past the point of believable – are realistic, witty, matter-of-fact, and, above all, easy for every modern woman to identify with.

Domestic Violence

“If you ever tell anyone,” he said, “I’ll kill you. Okay? Okay?” he said, louder this time.

She was mopping the blood off her face, astonished at its quantity and redness. “Okay” (Keyes 2008: 227).

Despite the supposed sanctity of marriage and the home in Irish society, many women soon began to realise that their “natural” place in the home could also be filled with limitations, stresses and struggles; that even though “women who married and had children were conforming to their gender role, this did not leave them immune from unhappiness” (McCarthy 2000: 105). While much of this unhappiness stemmed from feelings of loneliness and isolation, one of “the most common, yet least discussed, causes of marital unhappiness, and indeed of relationship problems in general, was abuse, mental or physical, usually inflicted by men on their female partners” (Hill 2003: 148). Research has shown that domestic violence has long been – and continues to be – a serious issue in Irish society, a problem made even more worrying by the knowledge that so many domestic violence cases have gone unreported. In the Republic of Ireland alone, it has been estimated that a staggering one-fifth to one-third of all women have, at some time, experienced violence within a relationship, though it is thought that these figures may not cover the full extent of violence, due to so many cases remaining unreported:

Concern has been expressed about the often lenient sentencing of offenders, but even more worrying is that so many of the cases are not brought to court. A range of factors may prevent women from taking action – concern for the welfare and safety of their children, embarrassment, fear of reprisals, insecurities about finance and housing, and for many, the feeling that they themselves are to blame for their situation. But evidence suggests that even when they are willing to take action against their partners, abused women find it difficult to be taken seriously and have little confidence in the police (Hill 2003: 192).

Women suffered so much in the private domain largely because there were very few laws in Ireland which protected them in the home, and, indeed, within society in general. In fact, until the early 1970s, the family law statutes in Ireland were the same since the Victorian period, a time when women were received little legal recognition, and crimes such as domestic violence were silenced and hidden from the public:

Laws based on the premise that women’s rights were inferior to those of men survived in, and indeed even appeared on, the statute books. Despite the constitutional adulation of marriage and motherhood, the legislature preferred to keep women in the home by foul rather than fair means. Contraception was effectively illegal. The economically powerless homemaker was denied access to free legal aid. No financial aid was available as of right to unmarried mothers, deserted wives or prisoners’ wives, even when they were fulfilling their “duties” in the home. The battered wife and mother could not exclude her violent husband from the home (which was almost invariably his) except by resort to the most cumbersome procedures. If she fled the home, her husband had a right to damages from anyone who enticed her away, or who harboured her or committed adultery with her (Scannell 1988: 73).

Irish feminists eventually realised that the Irish family was, for many women, a far from perfect place; that women were afforded few rights and were often trapped in damaging and unhappy situations, from which they could see little escape. It was noted how “the depiction of male violence, rape, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, marital violence or pornography as ‘not that serious’ erodes women’s sense of their own bodily integrity and ultimately their sense of their own value” (O’Connor 1998: 14). With the help of

feminist activism in Ireland, which worked relentlessly to protect women in family life, eventually women's situations were brought to public attention and laws began to reflect this new knowledge. Most controversially, Irish feminism shattered the view of the "idyllic" Irish family, and proved that the family could potentially be a dangerous and damaging place:

Since the 1970s, feminist theory has been extremely influential in highlighting the scale of both physical and sexual violence. Until the recent past, both the law in Ireland and the Catholic Church tended to regard domestic violence as a private matter to be dealt with within the private sphere of the family, and this invisibility was mirrored in academic writing and research and in other areas such as the law and policing. In this area in particular, Irish feminists have struggled for decades to achieve social and political recognition for the nature and extent of physical, psychological and sexual violence against women and children in society. In the process, important services were established (Connolly 2005: 98).

An example of such services was the Dublin AIM (Action, Information, Motivation) group, "which, among other things, offered advice on how to have a violent husband barred from the family home, [and] went on to establish the Irish Women's Aid Committee, opening the first refuge for battered women in Ireland in April 1974" (Hill 2003: 156).

Traditionally, "any nod to the popular in [a novel's] style or tone is to sacrifice the author's credibility ... because marketability and political credibility are conventionally seen as incompatible" (Whelehan 2005: 68-69). When popular fiction and women's fiction, then, are combined, they are automatically "scorned by the male intellectual elite because of their 'low-brow' appeal" (Rakow 1998: 282). Critics' disdain of women's popular culture has "prevented them from seeing how it speaks to the real problems and tensions in women's lives" (Rakow 1998: 284). Although it is a topic rarely broached in typical chick lit, Irish chick lit tackles issues such as domestic violence and rape at full force, creating strong ties between Irish chick lit and feminism.

This ignorance and silencing of women's concerns was not unusual or extraordinary. Particularly in terms of issues regarding women's health, and women's safety and protection, "quiet dissatisfaction was more common than open dissent ... intelligent

women routinely internalised their misery" (Joannou 2000: 19). It is a sad fact that men's issues have typically been deemed more important and, so, have taken precedence over any matter which is specifically related to women. As Grace Gildee, a journalist in Keyes' *This Charming Man* (2008), discovered:

I wanted to do this [report on breast cancer] well. I wanted to do all my stories well, but the slapdash, penny-pinching approach to women's health sometimes made me want to cry with frustration. If such a high number of false negatives had happened with testicular cancer – man cancer – there would be pandemonium (Keyes 2008: 131).

If chick lit, and popular fiction in general, were once dismissed as silly and superficial, then Irish chick lit writers are breaking that mould. Irish chick lit writers are by no means afraid to forcefully address issues affecting women. *This Charming Man*, for instance, is a frighteningly realistic and no-holds-barred tale of domestic violence. Its account of the shocking cruelty many women are subjected to in relationships is portrayed in alarming extracts such as the following:

'You're a stupid, useless bitch and this is your own fucking fault.' He was panting from exertion as he stood over her, curled in a ball beneath him. 'Say it. You're a stupid, useless bitch and this is your own fucking fault.'

He was pulling his leg back for another kick. No. She didn't think she could take another one and still live. The toe of his boot slammed her stomach against her spine. She retched, retched, retched, retched, nothing but bile left.

'Say it!'

'I'm a stupid, useless bitch,' she whispered, tears streaming down her face. 'And this is my own fault.'

'Own *fucking* fault. Can't you get anything right?' (Keyes 2008: 315).

Rather than merely skirting around topics as serious as this, as chick lit is often accused of doing, Keyes discusses domestic violence as honestly as she can, giving equal attention to the brutality of the perpetrators, the pain of the victim, and the ignorance of the people around her as to what is going on. She shows how women often, initially, make excuses for violence, claiming it is a sign of the love and passion in the relationship:

Passionate disagreements were routine, practically mandatory. It was like a game, this ritual of dramatic accusations, followed by tearful reunions; their way of demonstrating how much they loved each other. ...

From time to time the emotional game-playing spilled over into the physical; a shove here, a slap there, on one overwrought night, a punch in her face (Keyes 2008: 527).

As the violence escalates, Keyes shows how women feel confused that this could be happening in *their* relationship – surely domestic violence only happens to other people? People often ask how and why a woman stays in a volatile relationship; in *The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism* (2009), Ellie Levenson outlines the numerous excuses that women may make for their situation:

What would you do if your partner hit you? It's easy to say, when not in this situation, that you would leave any such partner immediately. Or to say that once may be because you provoked him, or because he saw red, or because he didn't know what he was capable of doing and is truly shocked at himself, and that you'll forgive once but not twice so if it ever happens again then you'll definitely leave him (Levenson 2009: 164).

In this extract, Levenson is outlining how easy it is for people to believe that it will never happen to them but, as Keyes points out, “when you're in the middle of it, there's a world of difference” (Keyes 2008: 547), until eventually even the once-strong woman has no fight left in her: “My indignation had died and the time when I was strong enough to leave him had passed” (Keyes 2008: 549).

Keyes is cleverly reminding us how abuse and violence can affect the victim over a period of time, until they feel that they can no longer seek help or advice. In doing so, authors such as Keyes are helping to show how such feelings can result in many domestic violence victims not seeking help until it may be too late:

It may be easy to say that [a woman should leave a violent relationship], but we know for most women, leaving is not as easy as that. We know that women with abusive partners do not tend to leave them after being hit once or even after being hit twice. No, on average a victim is assaulted thirty-five times before contacting the police, and many more never report is at all – other research (by Victim Support) suggests that

as little as two per cent of domestic violence is reported (Levenson 2009: 164).

Writers such as Marisa Mackle and Kate Thompson also address similar issues in their novels, and show how women in these situations are often shamed in silence, feeling somehow at fault for the violence they are subjected to. This may be largely related to the knowledge that it is often impossible to account for all cases of domestic violence as so many of these cases go unreported:

A range of factors may prevent women from taking action – concern for the welfare and safety of their children, embarrassment, fear of reprisals, insecurities about finance and housing, and for many, the feeling that they themselves are to blame for their situation. (Hill 2003: 192)

In Kate Thompson's *Sex, Lies and Fairytales* (2005), Hazel is almost raped by her lover's brother. When she is advised to press charges against her attacker, Hazel is quick to refuse, thereby demonstrating the fears often felt by many women in real-life:

'Hugh. I know this is cowardly of me, but I couldn't hack it. I couldn't hack the humiliation. I feel so dirty. I feel so – I feel that I was partly to blame...' ...

The prospect of having to stand in a dock and testify against the stranger who'd tried to rape her filled her with horror. And oh, God – it filled her with shame, too (Thompson 2006: 489-491).

On the other hand, what if Hazel, or any woman in her situation, *had* testified? Unfortunately, in a lot of cases, outsiders are slow to intervene, dismissing such instances initially as “‘only’ a domestic” (Keyes 2008: 591). It has also been suggested that, even when women “are willing to take action against their partners, abused women often find it difficult to be taken seriously and have little confidence in the police” (Hill 2003: 192). Such were the choices many women had: suffer in silence, or speak up and risk being ignored. If more writers continue to address such serious issues, they will be helping to “highlight the serious nature and widespread prevalence of violence experienced by women” (Hill 2003: 148), hopefully resulting in it becoming an issue which is increasingly difficult to ignore.

Ireland and the future of feminism?

The role of women's lives in Ireland has changed considerably in recent decades, and "in modern Ireland things which were once hidden are now being told" (Hill 2003: 218). Although the place of women has "not always been recognised, and the extent to which they will make an impact in the twenty-first century is by no means clear" (Hill 2003: 218), this exploration of the importance of Irish chick lit to Irish women's history has shown how these novels are speaking loud and clear about *all* Irish women's issues, particularly those which were once hidden and silenced.

Feminism encouraged women to seize any occasion to reject the silence so often imposed on them and to instead find the courage to voice their fears, concerns, and desires. That Irish chick lit is tackling these serious issues is a huge step forward for the genre. Even when discussing issues such as domestic violence and sex, the characters are not merely represented as nothing more than helpless victims at the hands of patriarchal brutality and domination. Instead, these characters are feisty and strong – they take what life throws at them, and, most importantly, *they cope*. Is that not what feminism wanted, after all?

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