

Reading Sarai Walker's *Dietland*: Body Positivity and Power Feminism Through Chick-Lit Narratives

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Abstract

Sarai Walker's *Dietland* foregrounds the issues of Body image, beauty and Body positivity while portraying the difficult process of self-actualization undertaken by the protagonist. The paper seeks to explore how Walker has critiqued representations in the media and its role in circulating a beauty myth which has been engendered by patriarchy. The paper also tries to establish that contrary to the motifs of the chick lit genre, contemporary women have the power to create separate standards of beauty and foster body-positivity by working as a cohesive sisterhood. Female subjectivity must be negotiated from a position of power rather than from the position of being a victim.

Keywords: body image, chick lit, beauty myth, media, sisterhood.

Post feminist texts have consistently negotiated the tricky terrain of female subjectivity poised as it is between body shaming and body positivity. The classic example is Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary*, where Bridget in her bid to find Mr. Right keeps trying to get into shape and is eternally trying out new diets and always watching her weighing scales in dread. Bridget's singleton state is one of constant anxiety as she sees herself as a loser in the dating scene and her weight issues are compounded by her eating and drinking binges. She is also portrayed as a woman who is a total failure in terms of style and her fashion statements backfire all the time, causing her constant embarrassment. Body image, styling, wearing the right brands and patronizing the right labels have now become integral components in the process of negotiating urban female subjectivity. Post feminist chick-lit, especially the cult 'Sex and the City' has created an entirely new yet legitimate discourse where a woman's sexual needs are as important as owning Jimmy Choo shoes, Prada bags or Hermes scarves. The popularity and power of these stereotypes of the 'fat single girl' and the 'stylish and sexually active single girl' pose a threat to the post feminist discourse of liberating femininity from stereotypes.

Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon in their *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* have cited Susan Faludi's 'backlash' theory while observing that post feminist chick-lit texts have endorsed the postfeminist backlash to second wave feminism, identified by Faludi as early as the 1980s. Faludi had most pertinently observed:

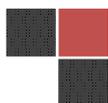
'Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s ... and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that "post-feminism" was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement' (14).

Genz and Brabon have noted that this backlash has been perpetuated in characters like Bridget Jones:

In fact, 'to be unwed and female' comes to be seen as an 'illness with only one known cure: marriage' – tellingly, these backlash fears continue to circulate in popular culture well into the 1990s when thirty something Singleton Bridget Jones is told by her 'Smug Married' friends that she is an 'old girl' whose 'time's running out' and biological clock is ticking away. (Faludi, *Backlash* 122; Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* 40–1). (55)

Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young in the Introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* have expressed concern over the regressive concerns of chick-lit. The genre which could have charted new trajectories for self-growth and self-refashioning has become stigmatized by issues which do not in any way aid women's subjectivity. They have observed:

Chick-lit's concern with shopping, fashion, and consumerism leads to an arguably obsessive focus on skin-deep beauty. From the moment of Bridget Jones's opening diary entry- "29lbs. (but post-Christmas)"- chick lit has emphasized women's appearance and, more specifically, weight. The intimate connection between a woman's appearance and the chances of her (real and perceived) success in bedrooms and boardrooms is an issue that has long been central to discussions of feminism. (11)



Dietland, is an intimate exploration of the difficult process of negotiating one's subjectivity in a world where the media and the beauty industry are acting as an insidious nexus to undermine a woman's self-worth. A woman struggling with weight is inevitably body-shamed and her fashion and wardrobe choices are all criticized. The pervasive power of the beauty myth reduces women to the status of victims and any possibility of feminist solidarity and a cohesive sisterhood is undermined in the process. Naomi Wolf had cautioned women to be wary of the beauty myth. In her *The Beauty Myth* she had remarked:

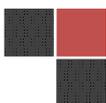
We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth...

The contemporary backlash is so violent because the ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable: It has grown stronger to take over the work of social coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity and passivity, no longer can manage. It is seeking right now to undo psychologically and covertly all the good things feminism did for women materially and overtly. (10-11)

The protagonist Plum Kettle works in the correspondence department of a fashion magazine. Her days are spent answering the emails of hapless teenagers who complain about their diet, their depression and lack of self-esteem. As an employee of a successful fashion magazine she has to make the politically correct replies to these young girls, knowing full well that their problems were far from over. Plum herself is fighting a losing war against her body weight. She orders dresses from an online fashion store in sizes too small for her. At the beginning of the novel she is on a diet and plans to have a bariatric surgery and is saving money to that effect. Her life, as she herself observes at the beginning of the novel is one where her sense of self has been completely erased. She tells the readers: My daily activities kept me within a five-block radius and had done so for years: I moved between my apartment, the café, Waist Watchers. My life had narrow parameters, which is how I preferred it. I saw myself as an outline then, waiting to be filled in.(5) Plum has been on anti-depressants for years since she had had an attack of depression while she was at college. One day she discovers a girl who is following her and she directs her to a book called "Dietland" which systematically chooses to dismantle the beauty myth by exposing the fraud perpetuated by one Eulayla Baptist who founded a billion-dollar empire by running a diet clinic chain. It is from this point in the novel that Plum's refashioning starts as she gradually navigates her weight issues and moves from being a victim to a subject.

At this point it may be pertinent to examine Wolf's thesis on victim and power feminism: the twin concepts propounded by her in her book *Fire with Fire* (1993) which Genz and Brabon cite to elucidate the legitimacy of new feminism:

According to Wolf, women who flaunt victim status – a realisation crucial for second wave feminist politics and its emphasis on collective activism and 'consciousness-raising' – have made themselves impervious to the power actually available to them. She distinguishes two traditions of feminism that she designates 'victim feminism' and 'power feminism': one tradition is 'severe, morally superior and self-denying' while the other is 'free-thinking, pleasure-



loving and self assertive' (180). As she explains, victim feminism is 'when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness. This feminism takes our reflexes of powerlessness and transposes them into a mirror-image set of "feminist" conventions' (147). Casting women as 'sexually pure' and 'mystically nurturing', victim feminism stresses 'the evil done to these "good" women as a way to petition for their rights' (xvii). While useful and necessary in the past, these victim feminist 'assumptions about universal female goodness and powerlessness, and male evil, are unhelpful in the new moment', for they exalt what Wolf calls 'trousseau reflexes' – 'outdated attitudes women need least right now' (xvii). In effect, it is feminism's adherence to a victim focused stance that has made women turn away from the feminist movement. (68-69)

As an antidote to 'victim feminism', Wolf proposes 'power feminism' which would be a movement foregrounded on equality. Wolf's prescription is upheld by Genz and Brabon as the most effective kind of 'new feminism':

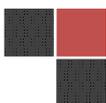
power feminism sees 'women as human beings – sexual, individual, no better or worse than their male counterparts – and lays claim to equality simply because women are entitled to it' (xvii). Power feminism means identifying with other women through shared pleasures and strengths, rather than shared vulnerability and pain. As such, it is 'unapologetically sexual' and 'understands that 'good pleasures make good politics' (149). (69)

Plum Kettle's journey towards self hood involves transcendence from her status as a victim to that of an empowered woman, comfortable with her body issues. Plum recounts her experiences as a young girl and remembers episodes from her adolescence, especially the times when she became self-conscious of the gaze: in her case a critical one which made her conscious of herself as a fat and ugly girl. The beauty myth invades her psyche insidiously and manifests the power of the patriarchal gaze. In the next stage she inevitably becomes a victim of the dieting fads, as she reaches out to the diet clinic which guarantees to give her a new body and self-esteem. Having internalized the gaze she denies the reality of her body to such an extent that she feels herself to be invisible and consciously tries to erase her presence. She is found wearing black most of the time and the mirror in her apartment is covered so that she does not have to encounter herself. The process of internalizing the gaze has made her believe in the beauty myth to the extent that she sees herself as a victim, avoiding human contact and withdrawing from society.

Niall Richardson and Adam Locks in their book *Body Studies: the basics* have used Foucault's panopticon metaphor to convey the insistent surveillance of the society when it comes to bodies. They observe:

The effects of this panopticon gaze in contemporary culture cannot be underestimated in relation to body image and performance. First, this gaze "normalizes". Through establishing what is considered appropriate and inappropriate, a standard of normal is created...

Second, the gaze homogenizes. Through the process of standardization/normalization, there is little room for any variation outside of this 'norm'... Finally, this gaze idealises. (22-23)



Women like Plum Kettle become victims of society's cultural norms as they jeopardize their subjectivity in an attempt to be the 'normal' and aspire to be the 'ideal'. Her job at Daisy Chain brings her into contact with media personnel who run entire cosmetic and print empires perpetuating the feeling of victimhood which afflicts women of contemporary culture.

Plum Kettle does not have the wherewithal to resist this three-pronged attack of society and the route to power feminism is all but lost to her. However Walker saves this novel from just a run of the mill Chick-lit by mapping a resistance narrative whereby Plum becomes a part of a movement, a sisterhood which is dedicated to reverse this ideological tyranny of having perfect bodies and to reclaim women's power of their bodies. Verena Baptist and the feminist commune, attacks the media and capitalist organizations who are perpetuating the Beauty myth. Their efforts represent the 'genderquake' theorized by Wolf in her work *Fire with Fire* and is the first step en route to power feminism. Wolf had theorized, that women had reached 'an open moment' when they can begin to 'balance the imbalance of power between the sexes' (xvi). Wolf's book published in 1993 demarcates the end of the twentieth century as that proverbial 'open moment'. In the new millennium women are required to address not only the question of equality of sexes but also patriarchal discourses perpetuated by media and other capitalist industries to keep women subjugated to their position as 'victims'.

The dehumanizing impact of believing in a beauty image is brought out with alarming clarity in one or two instances in the novel. Verena Baptist in her bid to encourage Plum to acquire self-esteem first makes her do all the things she aspires to do in future after having the surgery. Thus Marlowe, one of Verena's associates takes her to a surgeon's clinic. The surgeon examines her with cold precision and gives her a detailed account of the kind of surgery she was going to undergo. He uses a black marker all over Plum's body to give her an idea of the amount of flesh she had to lose in her quest to become Alicia. She recounts:

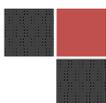
He moved behind me and placed his hands on my butt. "The last big thing you will need is a complete lower body lift. We'll remove the sagging skin from your thighs and your behind and then lift everything, giving you a smoother tighter appearance. He turned me around and gave me a handheld mirror so I could see my reflection in the large mirror behind me. He bent over and continued to draw on my skin with the marker, long smooth lines and smaller dotted lines all over the back of me. I pictured him with a pair of scissors cutting my flesh as if it were cloth. (147)

At the end of the appointment Plum sees herself in the mirror, marked as she is by those black lines:

There was Plum's body with the black lines showing how Alicia would be carved out. I'd look like Frankenstein by the time it was over. I turned full circle, trying to take in all the black marks. No matter what I did there was no escaping the body that trapped me. I could see that now.(148)

It is perhaps a moment of epiphany for Plum when she realizes that being Alicia would involve being trapped in a cosmetically corrected body.

J.Robyn Goodman has listed some of the more problematic aspects of cosmetic surgery which are propounded by the media in a manner so as to normalize the process

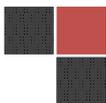


of transformation and minimize the risks for those desiring a more perfect body. Goodman observes that society idealizes traits such as a thin body, big eyes, full lips, flawless skin as integral to the ideal of female beauty, well knowing that this is an unattainable ideal. Cosmetic surgery, or rather the media's depiction of cosmetic procedures fosters the fallacy of such a beauty ideal as 'attainable'. He remarks:

The media's current cosmetic surgery coverage, with its emphasis on entertainment and increasing sales rather than information on risks and complications, thus does the public a disservice. Because the media normalize cosmetic surgery, disseminate a specific (Caucasian) beauty ideal, and present youthful beauty as a way to get a better job, attract a romantic partner, and attain happiness, cosmetic surgery ultimately becomes an investment or even a necessity rather than a personal choice...This renders cosmetic surgery another form of social oppression not a source of personal empowerment. (359)

Plum hates to think of herself as fat and her collaboration with Verena Baptist makes her understand that she has to accept herself and her fantasy of seeing herself as a slim and beautiful Alicia is actually a denial of her body. To this purpose she introduces Plum to a number of women who in their own way are activists and try to resist society's failure to foster body-positivity and self-esteem.

Walker, however is a realist and tries to underscore the fact that any process of self-actualization is fraught with problems. Fat-shaming often leads to gender-related violence and the incident at the subway when Plum is attacked and sustains injuries when she retorts to a particularly nasty comment on her body and dress, is a case to point. To give Plum's struggle a certain resonance, Walker uses a strategic narrative device of a subplot which runs as a parallel to Plum's transformation but is more of a counter-narrative directed to rescue women from their position as victims in a society which has a prominent gender-bias. While Plum is negotiating the process of reclaiming her body, the media is busy covering the murders of men who have a criminal history of gender-related violence. The murders are attributed to a certain "Jennifer" but it is clear that a network is at work. The murders are all perpetrated with violence but the women in America applaud Jennifer for punishing those men who have perpetrated the sex crimes. The coming together of women to avenge the gruesome crimes of the men is perhaps an instance of 'gender quake'. Read in the context of the #Metoo movement in the social media, the Jennifer sisterhood may clearly be defined as a movement which signifies female solidarity and retaliation against patriarchy's worst crimes. Plum's decision to stay with Verena in her feminist commune –Calliope House, also starts her on the road to self-knowledge and body positivity. While she is an inmate in the house she comes into contact with several other women who have made the difficult transition from being victims to being empowered. While in Calliope House, Plum goes into a kind of retreat. She meets an acid attack survivor who has been rescued by Verena and has been sheltered at the house. Marlowe, Verena's friend also works from this house. She is shown to have authored a book on society's implicit subjugation of women. Called 'Fuckability Theory', the book is a powerful and subversive attempt to critique a culture which has made women victims of patriarchy by telling them they need to have a certain body image which men would desire. The book, according to Plum, scans contemporary cultural mores and tries to educate young girls to resist a system which sees them solely as bodies designed to pleasure male fantasies. On her part, Plum tries to spread the same



message by distributing the books to girls who are facing a crisis of confidence in their peer group as they fail to conform to a particular image of womanhood or femininity.

The Calliope House is thus a safe space, a site where victim feminism is modified to power feminism. Plum also sees a room in the house where there is an endlessly streaming footage of a girl who is being sexually abused. The violence of the images unsettle Plum but she also learns that it is Marlowe the writer who watches the footage to embolden herself because she believes that women need to confront the ugly reality of sexual objectification before they learn to navigate or overthrow it. Julia is another woman who is in Verena's circle. She works for Daisy Chain and is a top executive who oversees the company's beauty needs. Her agenda is to dismantle the Austen Corporation from inside. To that effect she keeps careful footage of meetings and minutes and her other sisters also supply information on other such corporations. She hopes to write a book with all the collected information. Thus Plum's healing is aided by the presence of these power-feminists. The individual narratives of resistance of these women testify the fact that the pervasive beauty myth of the society can be counteracted.

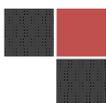
Walker makes the book a contemporary parable on the need to transcend stereotypes inherent in our culture. Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* had written about the necessity to interrogate a culture which tries to place a limit on women's bodies. Wolf also states that a model for positive change should emerge from the media, perhaps the most important component in our contemporary culture. She writes:

In transforming the cultural environment, women who work in the mainstream media are a crucial inside vanguard...Perhaps debate renewed in more political terms about the beauty myth in the media, and the seriousness of its consequences, will forge new alliances in support of those women in print and TV and radio journalism who are ready to battle the beauty myth at ground zero...

To protect our sexuality from the beauty myth, we can believe in the importance of cherishing, nurturing and attending to our sexuality as to an animal or a child...We can stay away from gratuitously sexually violent or exploitative images-and, when we do encounter them, ask ourselves to feel them as such. We can seek out those dreams and visions that include a sexuality free of exploitation or violence, and try to stay as conscious of what we take into our imaginations as we now are of what enters our bodies. (278-'79)

Plum, when surrounded by this affirmative sisterhood finds her own self and relinquishes her infatuation with the beauty myth. After having faced a number of dating disasters she finds her own voice when a boy accosts her at a pub and she retaliates when she understands that the boy is simply trying to feign interest as a part of a dare. She refuses to accompany the boy and calls him ugly only to find his carefully crafted mask of civility and polite interest disintegrate. He calls her fat and tells her he was trying to win a bet, but is unprepared for Plum's next move. She overturns his table and as Mason slips down she holds him hostage under her boots. As she stood there, Mason became the embodiment of all those voices and people who had negated Plum's identity and seen her as a fat, ugly girl. This moment becomes a moment of genderquake, there is shift in her consciousness as she realizes that she is not a victim any more. She observes:

I leaned over and looked at him closely. He wasn't Mason anymore; he was *them*.



Looking at him, looking at *them*, the behaviour of my whole life was suddenly inexplicable. The years of Waist Watchers of Baptist Weight Loss and plans for surgery, the hours and hours that added up to years of my life spent sitting at home afraid to go outside, afraid to be laughed at and shunned and rejected and stared at by faces like the one looking up at me now, one of the generic mass-produced, ordinary, follow- the- crowd hateful faces. At another time, at home alone, I would have wept to think about it. I wish I could go back to the beginning of my life and start again. (284)

Plum attains closure and walking out of the pub is the moment of her transcendence. She no longer sees herself as a victim. Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* had noted that women in order to create an empowered discourse for themselves needed to evolve ‘female ritual and rites of passage’ (279) to celebrate ‘female life cycle’(279). Plum celebrates her new found self by inviting all her co-inmates of the Calliope House to a party where she burns all the delicate lingerie which she had shoplifted from various stores wanting to wear them, while having a body which disallowed her to do so. She had called this thin self of hers Alicia while she went by with the name of Plum. In this redemptive moment when she burns the stacks of lingerie she reclaims Alicia to be herself, not the thin shadow self to which she had given away her Christen name earlier on. She refashions herself in her new skin by forfeiting her fantasy of living as Alicia. She admits to her friends at the Calliope House that her shadow self was gone and now Alicia was herself:

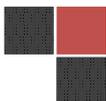
That perfect woman, that smaller self was only ever an idea. She didn’t really exist, so she doesn’t need a name. Alicia is me. Alicia is me...I had crossed over and would never go back. (292)

Written in 2015 Sarai Walker’s *Dietland* is a novel with a radical message. In *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty had theorized certain possible trajectories for the development of feminist methodologies. She had opined that the ‘Feminist Solidarity’ or the ‘Comparative Feminist Studies Model’ was the most effective for contemporary culture. Discourses employing the Feminist Solidarity Model would emphasize ‘relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity’. (242) Such a methodology would focus on ‘individual and collective experiences of oppression and exploitation and of struggle and resistance.’ (242)

It is to Walker’s credit that she uses the tropes inherent in the Chick Lit genre to emphasize that such a model of feminist solidarity can effectively dismantle patriarchal power discourses while providing a blueprint for resistance to other cultures facing the tyranny of the beauty myth. Plum becoming Alicia is a power narrative and endorses Wolf’s hope that a better tomorrow was possible where women ‘will forget to elicit admiration from strangers’ (291) and will be ‘unable to see our bodies as a mass of imperfections’ (291).

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