

EMBEDDED FEMINISM TO RETREATISM: UNRAVELING POSTFEMINIST DISCOURSE IN EMILY GIFFIN'S *HEART OF THE MATTER*

Firdous Irshad Khan

PhD Scholar, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Email: firshad@numl.edu.pk

Dr. Shaheena Ayub Bhatti

Foundation University, Islamabad

Email: shaheena.ab@fui.edu.pk

Abstract

Chick lit fiction, with its representation of ostensibly empowered women navigating their way in the complex postfeminist scenario, is often criticized for its ambivalent entanglement with second wave feminism. Postfeminism is perceived by feminist scholars as a group of ideas that simultaneously endorse and disclaim feminism, creating a complex contradictory terrain. Susan Douglas identifies two complementary phenomena: Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism as integral components of postfeminism that work in tandem to undo gains made by second wave feminism. Using Braun & Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis as the research method, this paper extends Douglas's theorizations by using Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism as critical frames to examine how exaggerated representation of female achievement is employed to obfuscate the continuation of gender inequality in Giffin's Heart of the Matter. The findings of the study reveal that female characters in the selected chick lit novel, under their arguably perceived empowerment, use their agency and choice to ignore persistent sexism, and try to find individual solutions for collective issues by espousing retraditionalization in the form of retreatism and uncritical acceptance of gendered roles. The study highlights the exigency of identifying and addressing new impediments to achieving true gender equity.

Keywords: *Chick lit, postfeminism, Enlightened Sexism, Embedded Feminism, 'retreatism', retraditionalization*

Introduction

Chick lit which is a short form of 'chick literature' gained popularity with the publication of Helen Fielding's 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary* resulting in a plethora of similar narratives written mostly by women for predominantly female readers. It is not only the time period of its emergence that coincides with postfeminism, but this genre is perceived as the most representative of postfeminist ethos and ideologies (Baloria, 2014; Harzewski, 2011; Mazza & DeShell, 2000). Ferris and Young (2013) state that from a literary criticism perspective, chick lit can be defined as "as a form of women's fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style" (p. 3). Simply put, chick lit novels are narratives centering on female protagonists, featuring the conquests and calamities of women typically in their twenties and thirties (Ferriss and Young, 2013; Genz and Brabon, 2017; Smith, 2007). The subject matter of these novels mostly clusters around everyday concerns of the modern western woman, that is, romantic love, marriage, friendship, and balancing career and familial responsibilities. Because of its relatable content and conversational style of writing female readers readily identify with the protagonist and the narrative thus becomes the narrative of 'Everywoman'. Moreover, humor is considered an essential characteristic of the majority of these texts and their regular celebration and participation in consumerist practices has earned chick lit the epithet of "cappuccino fiction" (Montoro, 2007). Baloria (2014) states that these novels usually feature a light hearted and amusing tone and contain

candid sexual themes and their enormous popularity among female readers attests to the important role this genre possesses in popular culture. Chick lit is further elaborated by Genz and Brabon (2017) as a genre that is associated with novels which mostly have funky pastel covers and revolve around a female urban protagonist who has a vivacious best friend, a wicked boss who is usually a female and is tormented with romantic predicaments and a yearning to find Mr. Right, “the apparently unavailable man who is good-looking, can cook and is both passionate and considerate in bed” (p. 84).

Chick lit fiction, since its emergence and immediate popularity, has been a contested terrain in terms of its gender politics, female representation, and ambivalent association with second wave feminism. Feminism is generally perceived as a linear progressive movement which is said to have attained its targets of emancipation and equal rights for women in the 1970s and 80s, after which the western world is said to have entered the era of postfeminism. However, in the 1980s, a backlash against feminist movement was witnessed in the US and the UK and the term 'postfeminism' was used to denote this new type of gender politics (Faludi, 2009). This new movement appeared ambiguously feminist as being pro-woman while renouncing the angry vociferous tones attendant on traditional feminism especially second wave feminism (Gill, 2011). Douglas argues that postfeminism should be called Enlightened Sexism as it is promoting old fashioned misogyny in a deceptively palatable and seductive way. Postfeminism seems to have generated multiple debates about its meaning ranging from the idea that feminism has become obsolete to its double entanglement with feminist struggles to the embrace of Enlightened Sexism as a new form of emancipation.

Since chick lit genre's rise to popularity coincides with the surfacing of the postfeminist discourses, and in many ways it shares postfeminism's ambiguous stance towards feminism, this research paper seeks to investigate the mutualistic relationship between postfeminism and chick lit and the complicity of both in the 'undoing of feminism' by applying the framework developed from the postfeminist postulations of Douglas (2010) presented in her book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*. This research problematizes the postfeminist perception of feminism as a fait accompli which has achieved its desired goals of female emancipation and gender equality in the political, economic and socio-cultural domains in the Western world, thereby rendering feminism superfluous and implicitly undesirable. This paper attempts to appraise the current state of feminist emancipation as represented in popular culture by analyzing Giffin's novel, *Heart of the Matter* (2010) through Douglas's concepts of Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism as a conceptual framework.

In the Pakistani context, feminism, in a typical postfeminist backlash way, is perceived as a source of familial disruption and angst among women rather than empowering or liberating. Proponents of this view tend to buttress their claim by citing examples of postfeminist backlash in the West which holds feminism responsible for taking pleasure out of women's lives. Because of the narrow and distorted understanding of feminism which equates it with sexual freedom, another more regressive section of the society presents feminism as anti-Islamic and libertine by giving examples of female self-objectification in the postfeminist western societies. This study is an attempt to challenge these simplistic and unidimensional perceptions of feminism by arguing that it was the derailment of feminism, before its logical conclusion, that has impeded women's true liberation. This research problematizes the idea that feminism has achieved its goals even in the western world by exposing the continuing dominance of patriarchy through new garbs of Enlightened Sexism and Embedded Feminism.

Although this research project highlights the impact of postfeminism on the state of women emancipation in the western world, it has implications for the way feminism is perceived in Pakistan. Granted that the horizons of intelligibility regarding women's role and their current state of emancipation in the West and Pakistan are quite diverse, the discussion of postfeminism and chick lit both entail exploration owing to their impact on the discourses surrounding the role of feminism and the state of women's emancipation in Pakistan. The overwhelming response, in the form of reviews and scholarly articles to Saba Imtiaz's chick lit novel *Karachi, You're Killing Me!*, both positive as well as negative, indicates the discursive potential of this genre even though so far very few novels in this genre have been written in Pakistan.

Emily Giffin is a popular American author with many popular chick lit novels to her credit including *Something Borrowed* (2004), *Something Blue* (2005), *Baby Proof* (2006), *Heart of the Matter* (2010), *All We Ever Wanted* (2018), *The Lies That Bind* (2020), *Meant to Be* (2022) and many others. Her novels have been translated into thirty-one languages and over twelve million copies have been sold worldwide. Additionally, five of her chick lit novels are at the various stages of transformation for the big screen.

For this study, her novel, *Heart of the Matter* (2010), has been selected to explore the impact of Douglas's concepts of Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism on the lives and choices of the female characters. This novel focuses on Tessa, who leaves her well loved job to become a stay-at-home mother only to find that her sacrifice goes unappreciated by her husband who betrays her by falling in love with a successful lawyer who happens to be a single mother.

Research Questions

1. How does Embedded Feminism in Giffin's *Heart of the Matter* lead to the 'undoing of feminism' by falsifying the true state of female emancipation?
2. How does Giffin's *Heart of the Matter* depict Enlightened Sexism as being responsible for cultural retraditionalization in the form of retreatism and re-establishing of patriarchy?

Literature Review

Postfeminism as a concept is laden with conflicting interpretations and connotations and resists a single definition. Just as the prefix 'post' - in postcolonial, postmodern and post racial - does not simply signify the period that comes after the terms it qualifies, the post of postfeminism carries within it, multitudes of significations (Genz and Brabon, 2017). This multiplicity of post-feminist perspectives is not necessarily negative in its implication: it can also be its strength as Projansky (2001) aptly observes that, "Because postfeminism is and can be so many different things, it is a powerful, pervasive, and versatile cultural concept" (p. 68). The broad scope of the concept of postfeminism is evidenced in Evans et al.'s (2010) postulation that in the field of feminist and cultural research, postfeminism signifies a theoretical framework, a movement associated with third wave feminism, an anti-feminist backlash, an expression of contemporary cultural ethos, and an epoch. Cognizant of the plurality of its implications, many scholars, in their expositions of postfeminism, identify the presence of multiple and sometimes even contradictory strains. Gill (2007 too in her analysis of postfeminism points to the fact that 'postfeminism' as a concept has become laden with diverse meanings resulting in substantial divergences in how it is understood, as "the term is used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the second wave, or a regressive political stance" (pp.147-148). Alluding to the entanglement of various feminist and neoliberal values, Banet-Weiser (2018) defines Postfeminism as "a set of ideologies, strategies, and practices that marshal liberal feminist discourses such as freedom, choice, and independence, and incorporate them into a wide array of media, merchandising, and

consumer participation” (p. 153). These diverse perspectives on postfeminism attest to its broad scope and fluidity as a concept, however, the presence of conflicting strains and its co-optation by media consumerism seems to be the common denomination among its various definitions.

In her book, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* (2010), Douglas carries out an in-depth analysis of these conflicting forces by identifying them as ‘Embedded Feminism’ and ‘Enlightened Sexism’ and how both these discourses are responsible for distorted representations of women in mass media. Grounding her study in the popular American television serials and reality shows about women, she states that through this twofold distortion, Embedded Feminism endorses the view that women’s concerns have already been given privileged position to eliminate any need for collective feminist activism, and Enlightened Sexism employs Embedded Feminism’s stance of gender equality as a given to revive retrograde sexist attitudes. In fact, Douglas (2010) postulates that, “Enlightened Sexism sells the line that it is precisely through women’s calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace” (p. 15). She adds that Enlightened Sexism seems to claim that true power for women is not related to economic independence or even professional achievement but rather in having the power to make men fall for them, and women to feel envy towards them. Especially targeting young women, Enlightened Sexism emphasizes that since now they “have it all” (Douglas, 2010, p. 16), women need to focus their attention on their looks, pleasing men, looking sexy, dissing other women, and above all on shopping (Douglas, 2010, p.16). Commenting on the insidiousness of Enlightened Sexism, she states that it is “feminist in its outward appearance ... but sexist in its intent. While Enlightened Sexism seems to support women’s equality, it is dedicated to the undoing of feminism” (Douglas, 2010, p.16). Gill’s analysis of postfeminism sensibility also views it as contradictory and incoherent because of the simultaneous play of opposing perspectives. For instance, the themes of reaffirmation of biological essentialism and sexual categories can be observed in the famous British Chef Nigella Lawson’s idealization as a “domestic goddess” (Hollows, 2003), while the themes of sexual subjectification and the femininity or female body as a means of success appear to be embraced in the advertisement of Wonderbra which endorses the mantra “I can’t cook. Who cares?” (Riley et al., p. 3) out rightly rejecting domesticity as outdated.

The chick lit novel, *Heart of the Matter* analysed in the current study falls into the category of mom-lit, an offshoot of chick lit. Although the selected novel tackles important issues such as spousal infidelity, parenting, and sexism, research on the said novel is almost non-existent and I was able to access only one study on the novel. Wahyuni’s (2014) study focuses on how emotive functions are expressed by different characters, especially the protagonist, Tessa, her husband and her friend Cate. Using Roman Jakobson’s emotive function of language, Wahyuni (2014) identifies seven types of emotive functions which include “pleasure, surprise, sympathy, disappointment, gratitude, worry, and displeasure” (p. 20). Identifying and explaining various emotive functions employed by the characters helps in understanding their attitudes towards and perceptions of the issues and thus contribute to the development of the characters as well as the thematic elements of the narrative. However, Wahyuni’s study is limited to the identification and brief explanation of the identified emotive functions in their context without connecting and elaborating them to the overarching themes of the novel. *Heart of the Matter* offers rich material for research on significant issues like work-life balance, ‘retreatism’, gender retraditionalization and generational divide regarding feminist values among women, and is therefore the focus of this study.

Method

This research paper makes use of qualitative research methodology with a descriptive-interpretivist approach. The method selected for this research is the Reflective Thematic Analysis developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2019) from the early version of thematic analysis, because of its flexibility and acknowledgment of reflexivity in qualitative research.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Douglas's concepts of Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism explained in *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* (2010) are used as a theoretical lens to examine how exaggerated representation of female emancipation is employed to obfuscate the continuation of gender inequality in Giffin's *Heart of the Matter* (2010). Douglas (2010) argues that postfeminism is not a very fitting term to describe the regressive cultural and social attitudes towards feminist values during the contemporary era and posits that the concept of Enlightened Sexism with its subtle and ostensibly ironical dimension more aptly defines it, since 'postfeminism' seems to suggest that feminism is in some way responsible for the predicament women find themselves in which, according to her, is not true. Through her concept of Enlightened Sexism, Douglas (2010) attempts an extension of Faludi's (2009) idea of 'backlash' by arguing that while backlash was an outright resurgence of sexism, postfeminist Enlightened Sexism is disguised and tells women that they have power and agency and by voluntarily acquiescing to male expectations of 'girliness' and submissiveness they gain true power. It especially targets young women by emphasizing that since they have achieved economic independence, they should focus their energies and time on their looks and pleasing men by being hot and competing with other women. Deveaux (1994) in her article observes with concern that such forms of imposed feminine bodily disciplines are not limited to simple messages from the cosmetic industry and culture that women should present themselves in certain ways but also contain negative ramifications on personal and professional relationships and opportunities for those not amenable to these messages.

In her explication of Enlightened Sexism Douglas (2010) calls it a manufacturing practice that is regularly produced by the media. Its main ingredients, according to her, include "anxiety about female achievement; a renewed and amplified objectification of young women's bodies and faces; the dual exploitation and punishment of female sexuality; the dividing of women against each other by age, race, and class; rampant branding and consumerism" (p. 16) which are all hallmarks of postfeminist ethos. Enlightened Sexism appears outwardly feminist (of course women can do or be anything they want) but intrinsically sexist with its double edged message that reminds them that that freedom is to be taken "only up to a certain point, and not in any way that discomfits men or pushes feminist goals one more centimeter forward" (p. 16).

Douglas (2010) posits that Embedded Feminism is used as a pretext to justify Enlightened Sexism by pointing out that women's achievements, or their aspirations for achievement are made to look like a natural part of the cultural scenario. In postfeminist media and fictional representation women are projected as accomplished and independent entities because of their personal agency and right choices and they also neither need nor care for sexual politics or collective feminist movement. This embeddedness of feminism and magnification of women's achievements renders feminism redundant and when women face any sort of oppression and discrimination they are made to feel responsible for what is happening to them and find themselves isolated, since they feel that complaining against discrimination makes women appear whiny and incompetent. Instances of Embedded Feminism are provided by Douglas (2010) by pointing to the 'fantasies of power' created by popular television and media through representations of strong female

characters in dramas like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and other such television serials which represent empowered independent women as a routine part of the cultural landscape, strengthening the view that women have gained complete autonomy (p. 15) and feminism is no more relevant. Since Embedded Feminism projects women as freely choosing agentic subjects while Enlightened Sexism induces women to embrace their femininity while sweeping the continued systemic gender discrimination under the rug, many women opt out of their jobs to become housewives, a phenomenon called 'retreatism' by Tasker and Negra (2005).

Results and Discussion

Embedded Feminism, which according to Douglas is one of the important facets of postfeminist theory, not only creates an illusion of equality in the public domain by magnifying female achievements in their professional lives but also gives the impression that women are enjoying equal rights in the family and are free to pursue the kind of life they choose in the Western societies. Such perceptions conveniently turn a blind eye to the continuing gendered division of household responsibilities which put an unfair burden on women. Michael Bittman and Judy Wajcman (2000) in their research on leisure time and gender equity seem to challenge this perception observing that:

A standard assumption of current sociology is that modern Western personal relationships are based on the central value of egalitarianism (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Cheal 1991; Giddens 1992). However, the uneven distribution of unpaid work (housework, child care, and shopping) allocated according to gender creates theoretical difficulties for this claim (Coverman & Sheley 1986; Lopata 1971; Oakley 1974). (p. 166)

Bittman and Wajcman's ideas are also apparent in Emily Griffin's (2010) novel *Heart of the Matter*, which engages with the domestic lives of the main character, Tessa and indirectly her friends, family and acquaintances, providing a rich study to explore these claims of egalitarian family culture in twenty-first century American society. Although the novel's main plot revolves around Tessa, her married life and her husband's act of infidelity, the narrative also touches on the experiences of many other female characters and their problematic marital and domestic lives, hinting at the pervasiveness of discontentment in the familial relationships, especially, between the spouses because of the enduring gender roles that seem to belie the assertions of equality in the domestic sphere. What makes this phenomenon more critical is that women who experience this persisting inequity at home are seemingly not cognizant of their own inferior and precarious position in the family. Arguably, they seem to be under the illusion that they are freely making their choices and are completely empowered agentic subjects, responsible for whatever is happening in their lives, whether it is discontentment and boredom or tension between them and their spouses or even unfaithfulness of their husbands.

Like many chick lit protagonists, Tessa is represented as a modern empowered woman who is able to break off her engagement when she feels a lack of passion in her relationship. Moreover, she is also shown as agentic in pursuing her love interest when she falls in love with Nick at first sight while still engaged to Ryan. In this respect, it can be said that she is a long way from the heroines of earlier romance novels who are shown to be passively waiting for the hero to sweep them off their feet. She is working as a lecturer and also pursuing a PhD, indicating her seriousness in her profession. All these things about her can be viewed as the manifestation of women's changing social status but after her marriage, the situation gradually changes towards a retraditionalization of gender roles. Nick is a paediatric surgeon with a very demanding job. Initially, Tessa is able to balance her domestic and professional responsibilities as she has

reconciled herself with Nick's busy routine by making herself see the nobility of his profession. Ironically, she does not see the nobility of her own profession of teaching, demonstrating the entrenched gendered mindset which makes women prioritise their husbands' jobs. The act of giving priority to her spouse's profession and acceptance of taking the complete responsibility of the household shows the enduring nature of gender disparity when it comes to the division of household work which is not only unpaid but also under acknowledged as is illustrated in the analysis of Nick's opinions about stay at home wives.

In spite of Tessa's determination to support her husband without any complaints, the situation gets worse after the birth of their first child when Tessa has to juggle the duties of a mother, wife and teacher with very little help from her husband. However, instead of demanding that her husband share the responsibilities of parenting and household duties, she expresses frustration with her colleagues who do not have children, blaming them for lack of empathy. Thus, it seems that Tessa is unable to get any respite from either her husband or the college management though the novel does not go into the description of her work life. After the birth of her second child, when the pressure of responsibilities starts to cause fatigue, her husband advises her to quit her job, saying that they can manage on one income. She accepts his advice without any protestation even though she thoroughly enjoyed teaching, as evident in her nostalgic reminiscences of her classes. The irony in the situation is that Nick thinks he is doing her a favour by offering to take the financial responsibilities of the family, ignoring the never ending tasks Tessa has to carry out in looking after the children and the household. When Tessa's mother hears about her decision to quit her job, she advises against this decision, pointing out that she will be giving up all her dreams that she had worked so hard for.

Tessa's mother is represented as a feminist who believes that women must be independent and have their own identity rather than finding the meaning of their lives in their children and husbands. She warns Tessa that she will regret her decision in the long run, quoting Friedan who called staying at home "the problem that has no name" (p. 11). She also cites the famous feminist, Alix Kates Shulman who in her essay "The Marriage Agreement" proposed that household work must be equally divided between husband and wife. Shulman critiqued traditional marriage norms, highlighting how they often reinforce patriarchal structures. She questioned the societal pressures that bind individuals to conform to conventional roles within a marriage, especially those placed on women. Based on her own experiences, her essay contains a complete plan about how domestic responsibilities should be divided with mutual agreement between the spouses and she had implemented this schedule in her life in the seventies. However, more than three decades later, in what is called the postfeminist era, women are still putting up with the unfair burden of domestic work without any form of protestation.

The argument between Tessa and her mother shows their contrasting views regarding feminist values, whereby Tessa's mother represents second wave feminism, Tessa seems to embrace postfeminism that portrays feminism as anti-family and detrimental to women's emotional and psychological well being. Tessa's mother, who is a divorcee, had started her own interior decoration business shortly before her divorce and Tessa erroneously believes that perhaps it was because of her mother's work that their family was broken. The way Tessa talks about her mother's consciousness raising talks and her passionate arguments is representative of the negative views of second wave feminism prevalent in postfeminist culture. Her comments that her mother's ardent way of argument "conjured her bra-burning, flower-child days" (Giffin, 2010, p. 24) seems to suggest that even though she says she shares her mother's feminist sensibility, she does not

generally agree with her mother's views regarding feminism and femininity. In response to her mother's urging to not quit her job, Tessa defends her decision by arguing that she is prioritising her children and husband, indirectly implying that her mother did not. Her mother rightly points out to her that this sacrifice is not necessary as it will soon end in boredom and regret:

“And before you know it, those kids will be in school all day. And you'll be sitting around, waiting for them to come home, peppering them with questions about their day, living your life through them—and you will look back and regret this decision.” (Giffin, 2010, p.24)

Tessa's mother reasons that Nick is encouraging her to quit her job because it is not his dreams which are being put off, and as time passes this might create a wall between them, since he will have a “stimulating, challenging, rewarding, vibrant life, completely separate from you, Ruby, and Frank. Meanwhile, all the drudgery, all the domestic details, will be yours” (Giffin, 2010, p.25). She tries her best to persuade Tessa not to leave her job but Tessa remains skeptical about her suggestions and quits the job to become a full time housewife. By following this course, Tessa tries to show that she is consciously and freely taking this decision but the reality is that the backlash against feminism has estranged young women from feminist goals of self actualization as evident in Tessa's resolution in not following her feminist mother's suggestions. At the time Tessa does not pay heed to her mother's advice but later, she does feel the kind of ennui her mother warned her about, as at times she feels so lonely and bored that even random a phone call excites her: “So when the phone rings, I happily retrieve it, feeling relieved for civilized adult companionship (the other day, I was excited when a pollster called)” (Giffin, 2010, p.12).

Tessa's representation as a modern independent woman living in an egalitarian relationship with her husband is at odds with the way she undertakes the entire burden of not just the household responsibilities but also the sustaining of their relationship without expecting any effort on Nick's part. The novel starts with the incident when their wedding anniversary dinner is interrupted by an emergency call from the hospital and Nick has to leave immediately. Tessa accepts the situation with grace, reminding herself of the vow she made to herself that she would always remember the sacredness of his profession “even if that meant a certain measure of loneliness” (Giffin, 2010, p.12). She tells the readers that looking for a silver lining was her unspoken role in their relationship. Her whole hearted resolve to make allowances for her husband's taxing routine without making a fuss contrasts sharply with the way Andy in Weisberger's (2003) novel *The Devil Wears Prada* is made to feel guilty for prioritising her career and eventually feels compelled to quit her job. The gendered division of household tasks and Tessa's 'retreatism' from her professional life indicate a serious imbalance in the allocation of responsibility between genders and contradicts the claim of egalitarian spousal relationship, except the fact that Tessa is ostensibly shown as making these choices voluntarily in the best interest of her family. According to Douglas, this practice of choosing to become a housewife is presented as liberating for women in postfeminist culture without taking into consideration the unfair burden on women when they have to be responsible for the home in addition to their professional responsibilities which compels them to opt out of the work force. Bittman and Wajcman's research augments Douglas's claim that Embedded Feminism disguises the undue burden of responsibilities borne by women by highlighting that what is perceived as equality is actually adding to women's burden rather than liberating them:

The fear has been that, following the emergence of the dual-earner family as the norm, women will simply add a shift of paid employment to their existing responsibilities for

housework and child care. This problem has come to be known by various names - the "dual burden," the "double burden," the "double day," and the "second shift." (p. 166)

A close analysis of the apparent free choices that Tessa makes, show that they are not as voluntary as she likes to believe. There is a huge discrepancy between the rhetoric of equality and the actual practices at home which show marked disparity in gender roles with women bearing a substantially heavier burden of responsibilities. In the novel, it can be seen that Tessa is responsible for taking care of the children as well as the running of the house with very little help from her husband who would occasionally give children baths and put them to bed. After her son, Frank's birth, when she was suffering from 'baby blues' Nick decided to hire a part time nanny and take up Frank's morning feeding of which he seems to be very proud. Tessa is very grateful but this kind of set up where the wife is thankful to her husband for doing small household tasks does not in any way show an egalitarian environment. It is no wonder that many women want to opt out of their professional careers in favour of 'home and hearth' since the 'dual burden' becomes almost impossible to tackle. Another incentive for women to quit their jobs is that they are idealised as real women who prioritise their families rather than selfishly following their career as the denigrated second wave feminism encouraged women to do (Douglas, 2010).

Apart from 'retreatism' as a contradiction of gender equality between spouses, a critical examination of their interaction dynamics demonstrates Nick's dominance. In fact Tessa's observation of a family sitting next to their table in the restaurant reflects her traditionally patriarchal perception of family hierarchy; "The enthusiastic laughter at the table next to ours as a silver-haired man *holds court* with what appears to be his wife and four grown children (my italics 4)". Even though she mentions that she and her mother have a "shared feminist sensibility" (Giffin, 2010, p.24) she is unable to shake off her patriarchal perception of family and gendered roles which pushes her into absolving her husband of any domestic obligations, even though she herself was an academic. It seems that she is not conscious of her interiorised gendered thinking, as on another occasion when her husband does not come home on thanksgiving and she has to hand out candies she states, "although I try not to subscribe to gender-role parenting, I believe trick-or-treating falls squarely in a father's domain" (Giffin, 2010, p.114) attesting to the fact that Embedded Feminism creates an illusion of equality when in fact many women still follow the patriarchal family values.

The way Tessa concurs with Nick's condescending opinions about the other women in her circle, suggests that she judges herself and other women from his perspective. On many occasions she is on the receiving end of his disapproval or criticism for her choice of friends or topics of discussion with her friends or family and she generally defers to his views thus showing her internalised sense of inferiority. For instance, she accepts Nick's views about April, one of her close neighbourhood friends, as she says, "Nick likes April well enough, but doesn't understand why we're so close and accuses her of being neurotic and overly intense—both irrefutable" (Giffin, 2010, p.30). In true postfeminist style where patriarchal control is exerted indirectly through social pressure Nick's critical gaze serves as a controlling mechanism that leads to Tessa's self-monitoring even in her conversations with her family. Once, when her brother and his family were visiting them, Tessa's sister in law, Rachel, while asking Nick about Charlie, mentions if he is the one with the single mother, Nick's annoyance is recorded by Tessa in the way which shows that she feels guilty of indulging in gossip, "Nick shoots me an irritated look which I take to mean either, *Why are you discussing my patients? or Why are you getting sucked into this petty gossip? Or likely both*" (original italics, Giffin, 2010, p. 61). Although Tessa does not usually refrain from discussing what she wants to, she is always conscious of what Nick would think if he hears her,

bringing to mind Michel Foucault's discussion of the panopticon in his work *Discipline and Punish*, as a formidable system for surveillance and control through self-monitoring.

Another case in point, which shows her perception of Nick as more upright, is that she discusses most of her everyday activities with her friends but when it comes to telling the same stuff to Nick she states, "I mentally pare down the important issues and spare him the trivial ones—or at least the ones I think *he* would deem trivial" (original italics Giffin, 2010, p.59). Tessa's situation validates the claim made by Goodman (2011) that "The private as a female domestic space could be used to create differential values in categories of work, space, thinking, and activity, often to the detriment of women" (p.15).

Another more complex and ironic facet of this relationship dynamic is, that in spite of Tessa's deference to Nick's opinions, when she questions him about his relationship with Valerie and his discontentment with their marriage, he plays the victim and angrily tells her that since their marriage everything has been decided by Tessa and he has no say in anything: "You have everything all mapped out... What we do with every hour, minute, second of our free time" (Giffin, 2010, p. 209). Nick's exaggerated complaints about these things are not justified for two reasons; first, Tessa has to look after all the domestic responsibilities and whenever she wants to discuss them with him he mostly shows disinterest, and secondly, except for the school about which a debate is still going on between them, all the other things can be considered trivial compared to the matters where he seems to have the last word. One such example is that Tessa wanted to have a third baby but could not fulfill her wish as in her words "Nick has long since ruled out a third in no uncertain terms" (Giffin, 2010, p.59). Another instance is that although she told her mother that quitting the job was her decision, the reality is that it was suggested by Nick when she was struggling to balance her domestic and professional commitments and she agreed with him. As her mother points out to her, she was unable to see the sexism and selfishness of Nick's advice who, instead of contributing to domestic burdens so that she could continue her job, tells her to abandon her hard earned career and prioritises his own job.

These examples demonstrate that equality in the domestic terrain is an illusion that occasionally slips and women have epiphanies when they have realizations about their disadvantaged situation. Tessa writes that she used to feel annoyed when women told her that they hid their purchases from their husbands, wondering why they were scared of their husbands, they were not their fathers but when she herself slammed the car against the closed garage door, ironically, her gut reaction was "Nick's going to kill me" (Giffin, 2010, p.125). Her reaction disturbs her as she notes, "that the power was shifting between us and I was becoming a needy, approval-seeking wife, someone I didn't recognize, someone my mother warned me about" (Giffin, 2010, p.125). On some other occasions too, she is aware of the unfairness of women's situation like when because of Nick's "laissez faire" fathering style, she cannot get much help in dealing with her children, she heaves "the burdened sigh of mothers everywhere" (Giffin, 2010, p.27) and envies "the exhilarating freedom of being a man, the daddy" (Giffin, 2010, p.19). She states that though she uses 'we' when referring to tasks like bringing snacks for kids' school, she knows that she alone was responsible for them even when she was working. This use of the pronoun 'we' is significant as it hints at the illusion of equality many women maintain.

Despite everything, Tessa does not take steps to change the situation, demonstrating the passivity traditionally associated with women. In fact, when Nick's affair with Valerie starts and she becomes suspicious, she suffers in silence and does not stand up for herself. Although after Nick's confession of his infidelity she tells him to leave, she does not abide by her stance for very

long. After everything comes out in the open, the advice Tessa gets from her friends Cate and April demonstrates that they still hold very traditional views about husband's infidelity and do not expect her to end her relationship. April reveals her own husband's infidelity and her decision to overlook it while Cate seems content with Nick's begging for forgiveness. However, the most unexpected response comes from her feminist mother who gets together with her ex-husband to convince Tessa that it would be in everyone's interest if she forgives Nick, explicitly conveying to Tessa that if she herself had not left her father after she caught him red handed with a woman, their relationship would have continued. Her phrasing of the situation, "I was depressed and frustrated and hard to live with. And he," she says, pointing at my father and nearly smiling, "was a cheating son of a bitch" (Giffin, 2010, p.259) suggests as if the onus of maintaining their marriage was on her alone even though she had told Tessa that her father had had love affairs before she had caught him. She does not explain why she was 'depressed and frustrated and hard to live with' in the first place. If he had been having affairs, it was natural for her to be depressed and frustrated and how can she be expected to be otherwise. This stance of her mother puts her feminist credentials to doubt as, what she is suggesting denies women the basic dignity as wives. Her brand of feminism expects a woman to be a forgiving angel when it comes to putting up with her husband's faithlessness on the one hand and a superwoman who should have a career and also be a perfect mother and wife. Her parents' reaction leads her to blame herself in addition to the humiliation that she already unreasonably feels. What makes matters worse is that in the postfeminist age all this is done by the wives voluntarily by exercising their agency, since the efforts of first and second wave feminism ensured that they are no longer their husband's property and are free to get education and pursue careers if they want. However, the idea advanced by Enlightened Sexism is that women have achieved equality yet they must prioritise their domestic lives over everything else in order to achieve idealistic feminine perfection that second wave feminism rejected in favour of non-gendered egalitarian relationships. It is ironic that postfeminist women are willfully foregoing the rights which second wave feminists had struggled hard to achieve. The second wave feminist slogan that 'the personal is political' was meant to raise awareness about the gendering of the private and public spheres, where private referred to domestic spaces, and public meant the contexts of important decision making at the communal level, explicating women's subordination (Rosaldo, 1974).

In *Heart of the Matter*, husbands' infidelity and wives overlooking the offence is not presented as an exception but as a norm. Apart from the characters in the novel like April, Tina and Tessa's mother, there's a mention of many married celebrities including the governor of New York who betray their wives. 'Retreatism' is also presented as a norm, as it is not only Tessa who quits her job, her sister in law, Rachel who had a legal career and her neighbour Carly Brewster who was "A former consultant with an M.B.A. from Wharton" (Giffin, 2010, p.115) have also abandoned their professions to become stay at home moms representing the voluntary retraditionalization of gender roles. Since the novel mostly represents characters from the upper or upper middle class of Wellesley, an economically thriving town of Boston, it is possible for women to opt out of jobs without seriously denting the household expenses, setting up an ideal of motherhood that prioritizes family and children - an option which is not available to women belonging to low income groups.

Although the novel is mostly populated with married women and their anxieties, the only two single female characters in the novel, Cate and Valerie are portrayed as unhappy and envious of the married women. Tessa's beautiful and professionally successful friend, Cate is always

telling Tessa that she is envious of her marriage and “likes to live vicariously through (her)” (Giffin, 2010, p.72) while Valerie as a single mother is portrayed as so desperate for male companionship that she develops a relationship with a married man with two children. These examples show the representation of a patriarchal society where women can only find true happiness in getting married and having children, thus refuting the feminist assumption that women have become emancipated and can visualize an alternative happy existence.

Enlightened Sexism is defined as the other side of the Embedded Feminism coin as both these concepts buttress each other in the postfeminist culture. While in novels like Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), which is set in the world of fashion design and is inherently objectifying, thriving on objectification of mostly female bodies, Enlightened Sexism appears more blatant, Giffin’s novel *Heart of the Matter* demonstrates that Enlightened Sexism is not only limited to the public spheres but permeates the domestic spaces as well, albeit in subtle ways. In her novel, Enlightened Sexism is manifested in women opting out of their careers to become stay at home moms as an act of free choice, stereotypical representation of women as frivolous and competitive and sexualization of young girls. Published in 2010, this novel shows a strong tendency for retreatism, women voluntarily choosing to opt out of their professions to become full time housewives. What makes retreatism more conspicuous is that these women are not shown as working in low end jobs which do not require university education or high level of skills, they are all professionals in their fields with professional education. For instance, Tessa, the protagonist has a PhD in English literature and had a tenure track position at Wellesley College, her sister in law has a degree in law and was working in the law profession and one of Tessa’s neighbours, Carly is an MBA from a prestigious university and had a high level job as a director before becoming a full time housewife. All these women are shown as exercising their agency to make choices that they think are in the best interest of their families’ well being without realising their internalization of gendered roles because of the impact of Enlightened Sexism that exhorts women that being an ideal mother and a perfect wife is their primary duty and their own professional success is irrelevant since their husbands are earning enough to support them.

Enlightened Sexism conveys the notion that women have achieved equality, demonstrated in their ability to get higher education and have high end jobs, but they are prioritising motherhood over their professional careers as real women should. Although none of these women explicitly demonstrate any serious regret over quitting their jobs or acknowledge the presence of any external pressure forcing them to take on the roles of stay at home moms, they exhibit signs of boredom in different ways: Tessa feels cut off from the adult world and nostalgically remembers her lectures and discussions with her students and Carly has developed into an interfering and condescending person who pokes her nose into everyone’s business out of sheer boredom. Tessa ignores the fact that her husband should have taken on more domestic responsibilities so that she could have managed her job instead of telling her to quit. Nick’s sheer lack of empathy for Tessa’s emotional vulnerability when she is pregnant, and for which she holds herself responsible, depicts Tessa’s exonerating Nick of any responsibility towards her emotional or psychological health. Tessa’s acceptance of this sexist attitude, is evinced in the way she spends “the next hour rushing around, showering, dressing, and primping, as if [she was] going on a first date” (Giffin, 2010, p.200) even after she had heard about his alleged infidelity. This passive tolerance of male privilege and superiority is expected from women in the postfeminist age to be accepted as feminine women, who need to consciously distance themselves from strong and expressive feminists who had fought for equality between men and women in both personal and public domains. Tessa’s relationship

and interaction with her mother clearly show that even though she asserts that she respects her mother for her strength, she does not want to take her advice when it comes to her marital relationship. Her mother continuously urges her not to quit her job and demand Nick to take on more responsibilities at home but Tessa does not agree with her and possibly thinks that her mother's strong feminist personality makes her unfeminine, as revealed in her remark about her mother's slippers "pink fuzzy slippers that seem incongruous on my mother" (Giffin, 2010, p. 63). Tessa's observation demonstrates her interiorization of the perception that feminist women are unwomanly and unfeminine and she must distance herself from their influence if she wants to have a successful married life. In this way, Tessa and other female characters in the novel seem to substantiate Douglas's claim that Enlightened Sexism projects the notions that women are overly emotional and obsessed with relationships and housework and have unquestioningly accepted that child rearing is a woman's domain.

Another impact of Enlightened Sexism is perceptible in the way women including housewives are represented in the novel as overly obsessed with their physical appearance and competitive with one another. Most women including her neighbour, Carly and her friend April are portrayed as always anxious about how they appear to others and are in the habit of constantly comparing themselves with other women. Tessa herself admits that even though she was close to her brother and his wife, she still could not help feeling jealous of what she perceives "to be their perfect marriage" (Giffin, 2010, p.58) and uses it to gauge her own marital situation. Similarly, when Carly indirectly points out Nick's absence at Easter and gives Tessa "her very best "my life is better than your life" smile" (Giffin, 2010, p.117), Tessa starts pondering on women's tendency to compare and comes to the conclusion that Carly is not unique in being comparison-prone as all women compare their lives with other women in every way as in her words: "Comparing and then confiding; it is what women do (Giffin, 2010, p.117). Tessa's reflections on women's competitive and jealous nature match with the popular stereotypes of women and her uncritical acceptance of this as inherent in women, is symptomatic of her internalised sexist views about her own gender. Her attitude is an example of Enlightened Sexism which encourages gendered perception of men and women, focusing on their difference, with men being rational and practical and women overly emotional and obsessed with frivolous stuff.

Conclusion

This study unpacks the impact of Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism on the life trajectories of female characters in Giffin's *Heart of the Matter*. Giffin's representation of female characters' lifestyles, choices and marital relations suggest as if gender equality prevails in contemporary American society. However, a closer inspection reveals the continuation of gendered roles where professional women either opt out of their careers to become stay at home mothers or perform double responsibilities. It is notable that Giffin's narrative does not portray such women as satisfied with their choices as it can be observed in Tessa's nostalgic memories of her lectures and the boredom of Carly Brewster who seems to express her frustrations by becoming an aggressive and intermeddling parent, disliked in the community because of her highhanded attitude. However, because of the impact of Embedded Feminism, none of these women seriously think about the systemic social pressures that push them into making these because Enlightened Sexism encourages women to embrace their femininity and traditional motherhood, resulting in the undoing of feminism which taught women to think of themselves as persons in themselves instead of simply becoming the roles that they perform. A close scrutiny of the female characters' choices, social pressures and consequent frustrations clearly demonstrates the effects of Embedded

Feminism and Enlightened Sexism since they are portrayed as empowered women with agency who are consciously replacing feminism with retraditionalization and instead of rejecting continuing gender discrimination, holding themselves responsible when these choices fail to bring happiness. Depiction of such an attitude in women results in persisting sexism and uncritical acceptance of gendered roles, leading either to retreatism or dual burden for women, thus putting the feminist goals of gender equity in reverse gear. By highlighting the insidious effects of postfeminist concepts of Embedded Feminism and Enlightened Sexism, this paper has attempted to initiate discussions on how to identify and overcome new hurdles in the way of true gender equity.

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