

“Angels in the Twenty-first Century House”: Middle-aged, Middle-class Heroines Who Conform to the Feminine Script

By Dr Jade McKay

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly selfless. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.

(Woolf 1931, 2)

Anita Brookner's *The Rules of Engagement* (2003) and Mark D'Arbanville's *The Naked Husband* (2004) provide an insight into how feminine dictates affect fictionalised women's lives. The novels assess twenty-first-century women characters who continue to subscribe to the Angel in the House ideal as delineated by Virginia Woolf (1931) in "Professions for Women." While the two novels analysed in this paper are not specifically written for a feminist audience, they are certainly written for women familiar with feminist principles, hopes and ideas. Both twenty-first-century narratives articulate the oppressiveness of the masculinist institutions and structures Woolf critiqued in the early twentieth century and which feminists of the second wave continued to critique, and all of the female characters are treated as trapped by the feminine script. Significantly, the pathways of escape from the feminine script are cast as tantalisingly available to the female characters, only to be persistently closed off through negative representations. By circumventing possible

alternatives, both novels function as a technology that represses feminist positions and women learn that marriage is not conducive to female happiness, but nor is adultery or the single life. The overall message within these reiterative narratives of failure appears to be that there is no route to happiness for middle-aged women.

That these characters are embodying the ideal would seem to suggest that despite feminist efforts to liberate women, cultural mechanisms to ensure female conformity remain in place. This is intriguing given the implied reading audience and female characters that the novels speak *to* and *about* are not the young girls of the twenty-first century who are popularly and academically represented as vulnerable to dominant patriarchal, postfeminist discourses (Gill 2008). The “Grrl culture” girls are seen to be ignorant of feminist principles as, within the framework of postfeminism, feminism is passé and thus not a political agenda to be seriously engaged in (Gill & Herdieckerhoff 2006; Gill 2008; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2004). By contrast, the middle-aged and middle-class women these novels focus upon and address have been subject to the feminist discourse of the second wave and are thus presumably aware of the popular and overt discourse of the 1960s and 70s. They therefore represent a generation of women who have had to engage with feminist ideas and politics, even if only to resist them.

While these narratives and their grim representations are arguably strategic, prompting the reader to revolt at the perspectives of the unenlightened characters, that these representations are so unfailingly dismal undermines the potential for irony. The female protagonists are consistently rendered as pitiable, their powerlessness and victimisation make them objects of derision, and both texts

ultimately fail to envision what female happiness and success may look like for older women. Significantly, the two texts in this paper are representative of a broader sample of thirty-five novels from a PhD study (McKay 2010) exploring representations of middle-aged women in early twenty-first-century fiction (see Appendix A). Firstly, all of the novels were published in the first five years of the twenty-first century (2000 to 2004). Secondly, in terms of their political agendas, each of the novels explored the experiences of the white, western, middle-aged and middle-class category of women specifically in the context of the shifts in feminine norms over time by indicating how they impact upon the everyday lives of women. Thirdly, like the female protagonists they feature, all of the texts were pitched toward a similar readership: a likewise white, middle-class, educated, middle-aged group. Finally, all of the novels belonged to the same strangely unacknowledged and unidentified genre. They were not highbrow literary texts but nor did they fit into the standard “popular” sub-genres of bodice rippers, chick lit, or gothic romance. They seemed to occupy a liminal space between the literary and popular and for this reason they were identifiable as “middlebrow” novels (Humble 2001; Radner 1995; Radway 1997; Light 1991; Bauman 1983; McAleer 1992).

What emerged from the analysis was that female characters were either represented as conforming to the feminine script and attempting to embody the Angel ideal, or they transgressed the feminine script and were subsequently punished (McKay 2006). The alarming message across this larger sample of novels (excluding two) was that this category of women is beyond the scope of happiness in contemporary postfeminist times. These two texts are the focus of this paper precisely because they stand together in conspiratorial confluence, representative of the larger sample,

presenting conformity to traditional femininity in tandem with depictions of the unhappiness awaiting women in middle age.

The Postfeminist-Feminist Divide

The two novels to be discussed are often referred to throughout this paper as “postfeminist” in sentiment. This paper maintains that “postfeminism” is a cultural and attitudinal backlash to feminism and the resistance politics of second-wave feminism in particular. There is significant dissent in the field not only surrounding the term itself but whether it is indeed a backlash and anti-feminist (Felski 2003; Hollows 2000; Moseley & Read 2002; Dow 1996; Rabinovitz 1999). When the term is used in this paper, I am drawing on the definition expounded by Harris (2004):

Postfeminism [...]is the argument that girls and women are doing fine, feminism is unnecessary, and the movement is over. The deployment of Girl Power discourse to make these postfeminist claims plays an important role in the disconnection of Girl Power and feminism by dismissing the need for feminist action. Some journalists have used the language of Girl Power to claim that girls have attained all the power they could ever want, and that there is nothing left to be done. These assertions that feminism is unnecessary promote the idea that girls should be satisfied and content with the current social order, potentially obstructing their attempts and desires to create social change. (72)

Unlike the third wave of feminism, which strives to further the women’s movement by building on past feminist efforts, many postfeminist discourses consider second-wave feminism as passé and in fact often criticise women (Tasker & Negra 2007).

Postfeminism thus forms part of a cultural backlash against the advances made by feminists in the past as well as the efforts of contemporary third wavers. Another way it differs from its more political counterpart is that understandings and theoretical explanations of postfeminism predominantly occur in the media and in media criticism (Gill 2007; Lotz 2001). To this day the media, in particular, espouses the idea that the women's movement has done nothing to improve the lives of women (Baumgardner & Richards 2000; Caro & Fox 2008). Third wavers Baumgardner and Richards argue that "newsmagazines rarely use the word *feminism* except to run negative stories about how weak the women's movement is or, in a contradictory spin, how powerfully detrimental it is to women's lives" (2000, 94). Caro and Fox (2008) maintain that this has resulted in feminism itself becoming the "F" word of the modern mass media. It is this reductionist postfeminist edict that "feminism has made women unhappy" which results in many viewing postfeminism as a form of anti-feminist backlash.

The texts under examination in this paper actively engage in the backlash by critically assessing their heroines via negative representations of these women and subsequently inviting the female readership to make similar critical assessments that militate against female solidarity. In the populist and journalistic *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy suggests that today's women do not "bother to question the criteria on which women are judged, they are too busy judging other women themselves" (2005, 103). Although strident and, at times, sensational, Levy's text raises an important point: inviting women to be critical of each other ensures that their attention is diverted from the core issues of existing gender inequality and patriarchal injustice. The inbuilt criticism of the female characters in the narratives is one of

many intersections between the political thrust of the novels and popular postfeminist tracts.

The idea of “choice” and individualism precipitates this criticism as women are told that they have the choice to *do* and *be* anything that they wish (Wolf 1994; Summers 2003). As a result, Henry explains, “women have ultimate responsibility for their problems, happiness, and lives” (2004, 45). That postfeminism is directed to the younger generation ensures, as the novels show, that fictionalised middle-aged women find themselves neglected and overlooked precisely because they are unable to enact these notional choices at points in their life when many opportunities are no longer available. In *The Illusions of “Post-Feminism”* this issue of freedom to choose is explored: “The implication is that if they do not know what they want, or cannot achieve it, individual lack of purpose or ability must be the cause of failure” (Coppock, Haydon & Richter 1995, 7).

Both novels in this paper have been analysed using a feminist lens deriving from the images of women criticism that was popularised during the second wave (1963 to 1971) (Benstock, Ferris & Woods 2002). This form of criticism entailed the critical assessment of representations of women in literature. This was the work pioneered by Woolf and continued during the second wave by feminists like Friedan (1963), Millett (1972) and Greer (1970). By the 1980s and 1990s, the critical lens had shifted to more sociological understandings of women living under patriarchy typified by the work of Radway (1991), Brownmiller (1984), Wolf (1990) and Faludi (1993).

Wolf and Faludi were particularly successful in reaching audiences beyond the academe and infiltrating the media, and both Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and Faludi's *Backlash* (1993) were wide-selling. Interestingly, five years after publishing *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf shifted her focus, her new work adopting a distinctly postfeminist position. Wolf's *Fire with Fire* (1994) seemed to undermine the feminist strides made by her earlier text in that *Fire with Fire* champions "power feminism" and makes bold claims about women having "made it." The text shifts the focus away from how women continue to be oppressed and disempowered, claiming that if women are powerless, they need only step up and claim the power that is already theirs. *Fire with Fire* thus participates in the backlash that Faludi (1993) critiques, primarily by simplifying and at times ignoring patriarchal injustices and existing inequalities facing women. Faludi's (1993) argument is premised on the idea that the fight for female empowerment must go on. Wolf (1994), meanwhile, claims the fight has been won. When juxtaposed, Wolf and Faludi's texts are representative of the feminist-postfeminist divide, foregrounding the conflict playing out between feminist and postfeminist discourses since the 1980s, and for this reason, this paper will draw on each of these theorists and their texts to frame the discussion for the novels.

The Rules of Engagement

Anita Brookner's *The Rules of Engagement* (2003) is a novel driven by a contemporary anxiety about women's ability to embrace feminist empowerment. The narrative is a Baby Boomer retrospective that maps across the lives lived, but more significantly, the mistakes made, by two women born in 1948, and who are instrumental in their own unhappiness and oppression. The first-person narrator,

Beth, is counterpointed against her friend Betsy, and the similarity in their names is one of many indications of the shared issues faced by these schoolgirl friends. Other female characters satellite around these two, in particular Beth's mother, who haunts her with expectations of women's roles and station. More significant, however, is a woman named Constance. Constance is pivotal in both the politics and the plot of the novel in that her husband makes mistresses of Beth and then Betsy. In many respects this negatively portrayed woman, one who knows about her husband's affairs and manoeuvres events so as to further disempower both Beth and Betsy, occupies a similar position to Brookner herself. Constance and Brookner bear witness to and oversee the oppression of women while also profiting from it in real financial terms. Where Constance makes an unpaid labourer of Betsy within the fictional landscape, Brookner collects from book sales that buy into a market of female readers interested in assessing the dubious choices and consequently unhappy life trajectories of these fictionalised peers. While it is facile to imply intention on Brookner's part, and indeed, she may be using unhappy female characters as part of a cautionary tale to alert women to alternative choices, the overarching implications of this story are embedded in a series of invitations to judge women harshly. This inbuilt criticism of women failing to free themselves from the pressures of social censure around gender roles positions the novel as part of the postfeminist era in which it was written, despite the historical ground that the story covers. There are numerous intersections between the political thrust of Brookner's novel and the overt messages in contemporary postfeminist discourse as delineated by Gill (2007), McRobbie (2004) and Tasker and Negra (2007) that will here be interrogated as part of the mirrored intra-textual and contextual gender politics of the twenty-first-century western world.

The Rules of Engagement is a tale driven by anxiety about the place of women in society and how they 'should' behave, particularly in their relationships with men. At the core of the narrative is the feminine script and its impact on the female characters. The introspective protagonist, Beth, recounts the details of her friendship with Betsy, beginning in the 1950s when the two girls are beginning high school. The narrative then traces their parallel paths into womanhood, detailing the decisions that shape each woman's life. After completing school, Beth marries Digby, a man many years her senior. Against the cultural backdrop of the activist 1960s, Beth laments the monotonous merry-go-round of housework and wifely duties that marriage entails. Betsy, meanwhile, seems to be the freer spirit of the two. She goes to France to study at university, and begins dating Daniel, a social activist who is handsome and intelligent, but ultimately unreliable. Betsy's love is buoyant and excessive, qualities which Beth envies, however Daniel does not make Betsy happy, particularly as she ends up supporting him and his politics to the detriment of caring for herself. Seemingly in response to her envy at the passion of Betsy's relationship, Beth begins an affair with her husband's friend, Edmund. The affair gives Beth a briefly felt sense of decadent selfishness, but this soon wanes as the relationship becomes yet another in which she subjugates herself.

Beth's failure to find happiness in relationships with men is counterpointed by Betsy's similar problems and their lives begin to intersect in physical as well as experiential ways. When Daniel dies, Betsy returns to London. Soon after, Digby also dies. At Digby's funeral, Betsy is introduced to Edmund and there is an instant connection. Despite her connection to this man who offered her nothing more than her marriage in terms of genuine self-fulfilment, Beth does not warn Betsy about Edmund, nor

does she confide in Betsy the nature of her involvement with him. The friendship between these women is almost as distant and unsupportive as their respective relationships with men. In an act that crystallises their lack of solidarity, the day after Digby's funeral, Beth ends her affair with Edmund, simplifying the next phase of his abuse of women so that Betsy seamlessly becomes his new mistress. When she becomes ill, Betsy is deserted by Edmund and it falls on Beth to support Betsy. Beth ends up alone, pondering — in a typically brooding fashion that characterises the novel's narrative voice — the choices she and Betsy have made throughout their lives.

In line with postfeminist pop-political tracts that argue women are free and powerful (Wolf 1994; Gill & Scharff 2011; Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004), Brookner's novel criticises women for failing to take up the opportunities presented to them in the postfeminist world. Brookner's narrative is set against the backdrop of the feminist movement in ways that accentuate Beth's passivity. She laments her lack of liberation, claiming: "It had never occurred to me that I could have it all, as the feminists proclaimed" (196). Rather than using such statements to critique the patriarchal oppression of women, the novel concentrates specifically on women and how they cause their own misery. Like so much postfeminist discourse, the novel oversimplifies, even ignores, shared material conditions of female vulnerability and the attendant pain this lack of status induces.

The novel similarly sells female misery and invites the reader, who is presumably reading for pleasure, to consume the pain of other women. Moreover, within the conceptual boundaries of postfeminist discourse and Brookner's novel lies an

unstated criticism of women who continue to experience pain and subjugation. *The Rules of Engagement* enacts the key assumptions of postfeminism, actively denouncing women who continue to identify with that which oppresses them. The protagonist and narrator, Beth, is representative of women who view themselves as powerless. She is, according to Wolf's (1994) definition, the quintessential "victim." The narrative emphasises the hopelessness of such women and depicts them as self-subjugated.

Indeed, the novel critiques a broad range of women. Mrs Crook, Beth's elderly neighbour, is particularly unpleasant and her role is to denounce feminist change. She asks Beth, "What has happened to manners [...] Tradition? Standards? All those dreadful women clamouring to be heard, making fools of themselves. What has happened to morality?" (45). Mrs Crook continues her diatribe:

"In my day women were looked after by men. I never saw any reason to quarrel with that. My mind was as good as my husbands. Yet I would never have dreamed of protesting, or arguing with them, of demanding more than my due."

"I think that women want more than that," I said.

"And what good will that do them? They will find out too late, when all the men have deserted them. I despair of my sex [...] Not that I have anything in common with this new breed. Women knew how to behave when I was young." (46)

Her views are represented as harsh and judgemental and Beth is convinced that her safety depends on keeping her "distance from this kind of woman, from the species of which Mrs Crook was an outstanding representative"(44). Mrs Crook's vitriolic

criticism of women is unsettling for both Beth and the implied reader of the twenty-first century. In a positive sense, Mrs Crook's characterisation is presented as outdated and laughable and her presence alludes to the restrictive way in which women are judged by other women; however, by locating this message in a narrative structure that entails both Beth and the reader judging Mrs Crook harshly, the novel reverts to encouraging a woman-against-woman mentality. The irony of this character placement in the novel is that Mrs Crook's political position prefigures Beth's marital circumstances. Fearing the recriminations Mrs Crook points to, Beth never strays from the path of subjugation, and the reader is not invited to think well of either woman. Regardless of whether the reader takes Mrs Crook's advice at face value or whether she sees her claims as outdated, she is still immersed in a narrative that judges women as failures of their own making.

Victims and Victimisation

In its construction of female characters as victims or victimised, the novel implies there is only one subject position available to women. That the novel invites the reader to be critical of the female characters while also depicting the female characters as equally critical of each other, results in a situation where no woman is able to escape victimisation, nor are they able to find intimate connections with people, female or male. This construction invites the pity of the reader, however, rather than prompting the reader to sympathise with the impossible situation that women find themselves in, the role of pity in this text is actually a veiled criticism that works to further set women against each other, constellating female relationships as inherently oppositional. The text fails to exhibit any compassion or prompt a sense of

“fellow feeling” between women, suggesting only that unhappy women have no one to blame but themselves. For example, Beth’s discontent is attributed to her passivity and inability to break free from conformity rather than to the restrictions of normative femininity or masculinist institutions.

The novel’s highly optimistic assessment of gender inequalities further chimes with postfeminist sentiments relating to women’s freedom from patriarchy and female power. In line with Wolf (1994), Brookner’s novel suggests that women have “made it” and if certain women still feel miserable then they are responsible. Beth observes that during the “triumphalist” decade of the 1980s, “it was almost indecent for a woman to be bereft and yearn” (127), and furthermore, “A woman in our time is far from helpless; she can work, earn her own money” (86). Such sentiments that equality has been achieved and women should no longer identify with victimhood arguably embody another form of backlash against feminism. This backlash affects female relationships by fostering a divisive set-up in which women view each other as adversaries.

Beth is certainly anti-woman in her relationships with other women, scathing of “the dreadful confidences that women are supposed, indeed entitled, to share” (141). At the hairdressers, she rails against the women trying to welcome her: “women nodded and smiled at me [...] I did not want to be drawn into any female conspiracy of the sort I had often witnessed in this place, women discussing minor ailments or telling of laughable mishaps which were somehow reassuring” (102). Even her own mother’s attempts to establish a confidante relationship with Beth are met with resistance: ‘she [...] seemed to want to confine herself to women’s talk’ (58). Beth

cruelly dismisses her mother's need for female reassurance: "Her need of support [...] had not been met by any helpful suggestion on my part. I was embarrassed for her and by her" (58).

Beth's mother's attempts to connect with her daughter are met by a complete lack of empathy from Beth: 'she seemed more anxious to talk about her own plight than of mine [...] she was succumbing to the distress of advancing age, which was not yet my affair' (98). The neoliberalist sentiment expressed here by Beth's inability to see past herself and her own needs, hopes and fears is endemic in postfeminism, which requires that women respond to patriarchal dictates only in ways that serve their self-interest (Tasker & Negra 2007). While the reader is here positioned to be somewhat critical of Beth and sympathetic towards her mother, the narrative ensures that sympathy is retracted. Beth explains her mother "was the kind of woman whose main attention is given over to other women, as if to calculate their assets, and if possible their disadvantages, with regard to herself. She had been expert at the subtle insinuation, the laughing dismissal, as if these matters were crucial to a woman's success with men" (54). It is interesting that Beth views these actions with such derision when she herself is doing the same thing to her mother. By contrast she has only sympathy for her father: "I now saw why my father had looked for love and comfort elsewhere. I did not exonerate him, but I understood him" (54).

Beth demonstrates a similar emotional distance and critical assessment of Betsy. Rather than sympathise with Betsy's situation as motherless and poor, the reader is invited to share Beth's censure of Betsy as unloved and pathetic. Beth refers to Betsy as her "oldest friend," however, when they catch up, Beth admits: "At one level

we were genuinely pleased to see each other; at another we were calculating how much information could be disclosed, how much concealed” (167). By depicting women’s relationships as based on mistrust and in most cases, rivalry, the novel eschews the idea of a sisterhood. Beth suggests that she had “been sufficiently imbued with the spirit of the times to believe in sisterly solidarity, although I knew this to be a fiction in the face of rivalry” (129). This oppositional dynamic between Beth and Betsy also extends to all of the other female characters and is a pervasive trope in the two novels under examination in this paper.

On the surface, Constance Fairlie, Edmund’s wife, seems to be the most powerful female character and is someone who Beth is “frightened of [...] without quite knowing why” (97). Constance is the only assertive female in the novel — the one woman seemingly in control of her life despite her husband’s affairs, given that she sanctions them and finds material gain from allowing them to flourish. Her power is, however, negatively rendered by its association with her cruelty given she is “not kind at all” (30) and “no friend to women” (150). Throughout the narrative, Beth compares herself to Constance, and feels “diminished by comparison and more than ever conscious of my subordinate status” (31). These feelings ensure Beth experiences little remorse at her affair with Constance’s husband, Edmund, conceding: “It hardly disturbed me that [...] Edmund was unfaithful to his wife” (39). She admits, “His wife I managed to forget for most of the time” (40). These sentiments attest to the self-interest and lack of female solidarity that is so prominent in the postfeminist age but is here cast as part of a larger historical trajectory in ways that naturalise the idea that women have always been and will always be rivals.

It soon becomes clear that Constance's "power" is illusory as she is only granted a certain measure of power because she serves the interests of her husband, specifically by turning a blind eye to his infidelities. Beth explains: "I would be obliged to acknowledge that her cynicism [...] might have been earned the hard way, that it was entirely possible that she knew everything, that the two of them were parties to an arrangement that I could hardly understand" (43). Constance is thus also a victim, forced to partake in a Faustian bargain in which she must ignore her husband's affairs in order to keep her marriage, because apparently the only thing worse than a cheating husband is no husband at all. Her acceptance of Edmund's infidelity ultimately lays bare how crucial wifedom and marriage are to normative femininity.

The world of the novel mediates and naturalises a version of the patriarchal real world where women are pitted against each other as competitors for the attention of men. In the past setting of the novel, and in the post-2000 publication date, the woman reader is shown that women compete over most things without question or criticism. As Beth says, "All women compare themselves" (141). The divisionary structure which characterises female relationships depends on female participation and this novel perpetuates the notion of women as "natural" competitors. By pitting female characters against each other — when women are trying to compete in a male-dominated world — the narrative is arguably compounding the victimisation of those who are already victims of patriarchy.

Angels Thrown to the Wolves

Brookner depicts the ways in which middle-aged women are caught between traditional and more contemporary notions of femininity. Beth and Betsy were born and raised in the gender-traditionalist 1940s and 50s but the narrative that houses them is written (and read) in the twenty-first century, surrounded by the attendant assumptions that feminism has triumphed. Further, Beth marries Digby during the second-wave feminist movement, and against this politically charged backdrop, finds herself disheartened by the drudgery of wifehood and domesticity, conceding: "I longed to be delivered from this chore, but was not trained to do anything else. The liberating climate of the recent past had not included me in any significant respect" (15). Beth is constantly critical of her own behaviour, aware that her actions and ideas were "not in keeping with the new raised consciousness of women" (207). Her disillusionment is compounded as she reaches middle age in the postfeminist 1990s described in the narrative, and finds her ideas about women rendered obsolete: "The fragmentation of present-day society had meant a loss of hope, so that those who harboured traditional leanings were largely disappointed" (199). Her comments highlight a significant issue: that postfeminism leaves out (or perhaps behind) middle-aged women who are deemed beyond the state of youthful desirability that (apparently) empowers. In this respect, postfeminism embodies the maturation of feminists who are now anxious for their daughters, but in limited ways that are played out in their need to see younger women as enacting a toughness rather than the passivity of old. The Generation X and Y Xenas, however, have little hope of transgressive behaviour when the system has already devised the shape their rebellions should take: sexualised and individualised. This novel, although written in this climate, looks backward and could therefore encompass the possibility of empowerment of currently middle-aged women. Instead, the novel constructs a

category that should perhaps wear the moniker “too late.” There are no benefits to be reaped from feminism as Beth and Betsy experienced it, and this depiction of feminism’s historical trajectory offers little hope for change.

Beth is caught in a tension between old and new, as she struggles to reconcile the feminist ethos with her mother’s teachings and a traditionalism which is most apparent in her attitude towards domesticity. Upon marrying Digby, Beth adopts the role of a traditional Angel in the House believing it to be “decreed by immortal custom” (217). She attributes this to her mother’s influence: “I had drifted into the fatal habit of falling in with my mother’s plans” (15). Beth’s preoccupation with conformity to the ideal permeates every aspect of her life, so much so that she admits her life “depended on a wholly artificial stasis” (84). She recalls her childhood, lamenting the “time before prudence, before artifice, had come to rule my life” (167). She refers to her conforming behaviour in a typically critical fashion: “I am a disgrace to my generation [...] I think I was born a little too early to appreciate the fact that I was free to please myself” (185).

Betsy is in a similar predicament and is characterised as a woman “whom experience had taught so little as to make her seem anomalous, even threatening, like a dysfunctional infant” (171). In considering Edmund and Betsy’s affair, Beth notes:

It was [...] likely that he was unacquainted with Betsy’s type, that he thought all women able to take care of themselves, as the feminists of the time were so loudly proclaiming. He would have admired such women, seen them as equal partners in the sex war [...] A woman like Betsy, with her desire to

become part of a family, would strike him simply as odd. Were women in the 1980s not pursuing their own ends, eager to get ahead with plans to conquer territory formerly the province of men? Was there not something Napoleonic about the new woman, something titillating as well as provocative? Whereas Betsy, who asked only to lay her life at some man's feet, would be regarded as quaint, anomalous. (111)

This interplay between the old and the new is interwoven throughout the text and there is no escape for Beth and Betsy from the pressures to reconcile the opposing paradigms, as both women ultimately fail to ever become "comfortable in an uncomfortable world" (121). As a result of their inner struggle, both women are persecuted by postfeminism for being passive victims in their lives. Postfeminist discourse would suggest that the position held by Beth and Betsy is inherently weak and "can only rebound destructively on women" (Wolf 1994, 195). Postfeminism, in this sense, fails Beth and Betsy because it is targeted towards a younger generation of women and does not offer older women any possibilities.

These women are depicted as anomalous because, for the most part, they subscribe to the gender-traditionalist mode reminiscent of Woolf's *Angel in the House*. Beth's decisions are influenced by her mother's traditional views, particularly her views of marriage and domesticity which echo the Angel ideal. The shift from the female solidarity, championed during second-wave feminism, to the individualisation so celebrated by postfeminist discourse, defines these poles. To care about others more than oneself seems to be derided in postfeminist rhetoric. Apparently, it makes women passive, easily victimised and a willing victim of patriarchy. But this configuration is the same sense of directed individuality that sets women against

women, rather than engendering solidarity. When the individual prevails, support, empathy and care for others becomes a marker of subjugation. But feminism as a political movement requires a collective action rather than a celebration of commitment to individual betterment. Brookner's novel participates in this distortion of the goals into an individualist concern, even in its retrospective fictional assessment of culture in a pre-feminist era. The narrative seems to carry the baggage of the early years of the twenty-first century into its assessment of the past.

Given this stultification of the feminist ethos, it is telling that neither Beth nor Betsy have children of their own, so they are not in a position to influence the next generation — they are essentially dying out (in terms of their genetic line). Perhaps the novel is killing them off as a “positive” step to leaving them and their kind behind? In which case, this could also be read as their punishment for failing to embrace any brand of emancipatory feminist ethos given they subscribe to the Angel ideal.

Subjugating Relationships

Where the novel constructs female relationships as inevitably competitive, male-female relationships are characterised as necessarily subject to men's conditions. Although these delimiting relationship structures are foregrounded, the potential for empowerment is limited because the novel offers no scope for an alternative and does not envision a more egalitarian relationship dynamic between men and women. It could be argued that the novel is realist in this respect, but given the narrative evinces such interest in the function of second-wave feminism, the complete absence of a positively depicted female presence suggests a significant gap. In all of

the relationships Beth and Betsy have with men, the women are characterised as powerless and inferior to the male who determines the parameters of the relationship. The relationships within the novel are constructed along gender-traditional lines and accordingly Beth and Betsy are represented as “doormat” wives and mistresses, but their position is also normalised, and arguably endorsed, by the novel which presents these outcomes as somewhat inevitable. While it could be argued that these constructions suggest to women that seeking fulfilment through men is a no-win situation, any such positive messages are undermined by the fact that the text once again invites the censorious scrutiny of the reader.

While many theorists claim that feminism has seen marriage toppled as the “one true end” and route to happiness for women (Nicholson 1997; Bennetts 2007), this assertion is problematised by the novel’s construction of relationships. Despite growing up during the feminist movement, Beth in no way identifies with feminism. She marries at twenty-five to a man many years her senior, viewing marriage as a woman’s only path to success: “I married Digby Wetherall because [...] without him, or someone like him, I had no future” (15). In relation to herself and Betsy, Beth maintains, “We had both been born too soon for the freedoms currently claimed by women; we had assumed [...] that safety lay in stability, that love [...] could have only one true end: marriage, and no doubt children” (34). Such sentiments denote the attitudes of women in bygone eras. Given the publication date of this novel, this construction arguably counters views that such myths have been exploded. Even when Beth is middle-aged, having lived through the second-wave feminist movement, she continues to maintain outmoded views: “A woman with a partner feels superior to a woman who has none” (174). That her ideas about marriage

never waver demonstrates that not all women are changed by the political values of a given time in this novel's realist landscape.

Not only does Beth view marriage as the "one true end" for women, but she also sees marriage as an institution in which women must defer judgement to men. Her role as wife is characterised by an "obedient childlike wifeliness" (28), and she displays all of the characteristics generally associated with the traditional "good" wife which Kingston describes as 'servitude, subordination, self-sacrifice, summarized in the pejorative "doormat"' (2004, 3). Beth realises early on that her mother's claims that marriage gives a woman status are ludicrous, admitting her role as wife "was a subordinate one" (26). Underscoring the power of the feminine script to influence female behaviour, Beth constantly feels pressured to self-abnegate. Beth eventually comes to resent her role and the performance she is forced to partake in: "I dreaded the weekends, which were filled with subterfuges of the kind designed to uphold my status as a loyal wife" (49). She admits, "I played my wifely part adequately and yet I could see it for what it was: a sham" (60). Despite this, she continues to play the part expected of her; the cultural pressures are apparently so ingrained that doing anything else seems almost unimaginable. While the novel may well be holding this kind of marriage up to scrutiny, the narrative structure accentuates Beth's pitiable attempts to conform to the Angel ideal, inviting readerly criticism. The female characters are locked down into positions of hopelessness and powerlessness, while the role that men play in the misery of women is overlooked. It is clear from her introspective narration that Beth has the ability to reflect on not only her subordination but her passivity, and this self-awareness works to underscore her failure to reject her victim status, thereby intensifying the reader's censure.

The drudgery of marriage and domesticity are cast as the catalyst in Beth's decision to begin an affair with Edmund:

I descended into clandestinity with a gratitude, a relief, an open-heartedness [...] I had a reason for getting up in the morning other than to make coffee, to pour orange juice, and to grill the bacon on which Digby insisted [...] All day I performed domestic tasks uncomplaining, knowing that the days were a mere preparation for the evenings, when I should see my lover. (38)

Beth regards her behaviour as quite transgressive; however, the fact that she is swapping the constraints of her marriage for another set of constraints with a different man exposes her behaviour as merely a side-step along the continuum of conformity. Beth's behaviour throughout the affair is ultimately conformist as Edmund dictates the terms: "The agreement, or rather the agreement that had been imposed on me, that we were two strangers who met from time to time for a specified purpose, but who did not otherwise intrude on each other's lives" (79). Beth defers to Edmund's directions, and (just like in her marriage) she manages her time to work around a man: "He was a man of pleasure, and I was a means of ensuring that pleasure" (40). Hence, the affair as a potential and viable alternative to her sham of a marriage is also circumvented by the narrative.

Beth's subservience invites the criticism of the implied, twenty-first-century reader, who is positioned to wonder at her embodiment of the "doormat" wife and mistress. Beth's overall inaction, by being so recurring, could work to magnify women's discontent with patriarchy; however, her complete passivity undermines the potential

of such a reading. The novel's foregrounding of her victimhood is not so much a call to arms as it is a call to resent women who feel powerless.

While both Beth and Betsy find a temporary and fleeting euphoria in their affair with Edmund, both affairs inevitably end and, in Betsy's case, end tragically. Betsy grows increasingly attached to Edmund and gradually becomes a "problem." When Betsy is admitted into hospital with a terminal illness, Edmund takes the opportunity to relocate. Betsy's behaviour, while undoubtedly desperate, is painted as pathetic by the novel through Beth's censure. In contrast, Edmund's reprehensible behaviour is not actively critiqued. Both Beth and Edmund are, in fact, critical of Betsy's actions. Edmund tells Beth, 'she is round at my house on various pretexts which are in fact quite nebulous' (160), and "I can't stop her coming to the house. She turns up as if it's the most natural thing to do, as if she's a member of the family" (161). Betsy's behaviour is rendered as a lonely woman's desperate plea for love and family, a characterisation underscoring the pathetic figure of the middle-aged spinster. Edmund explains, 'she has so little in her life, that awful flat, no friends [...] No family' (162). His summary of Betsy's life invites the reader to view Betsy through the same censorious lens.

Failing to see the parallels between her friend and herself, Beth is shocked by Betsy's behaviour. Her explanation invites the reader to participate in this criticism:

She was in love with Edmund and was willing to court humiliation [...] I was profoundly shocked. No woman of my generation is allowed to behave so slavishly. Women's liberation had surely been designed to free us from such

masochistic impulses. But in Betsy's case such a liberation might not have taken place. (170)

What is most conspicuous in this excerpt is Beth's complete lack of empathy for her friend, and these are not rules for behaviour that make her happy. Beth chooses emotional distance structured around pleasing Edmund, but she is no more satisfied by these choices than Betsy. Both women are ultimately rendered powerless and unhappy in their relationships with men. Beth, at least, is a woman who supposedly occupies a position of power in western culture and that she feels powerless raises the question: how can women who are not white, middle-class, heterosexual and educated (that is, women who are not part of the dominant group) negotiate these power dynamics?

The implied critique of women within the novel is most apparent when Beth bemoans that neither Betsy nor herself had children and "therefore failed the one essential test that all women feel obliged to pass" (227). The absence of children and access to the feminine ideal through the maternal is the underlying point at which the narrative most criticises these women. They are painted as equally bad feminine failures — a point reinforced by the fact they share the same name (Elizabeth) and the same man. Beth is contrasted with "modern" women leading full lives, juggling careers and families, and is once again painted as inferior: "I felt like a humble petitioner, seeking an hour of their time" (152). When her "busy" friends enviously question what Beth does with her empty days she protests: "I was not entirely inactive, or so I persuaded myself" (152). The reader is well aware that Beth does nothing other than wander aimlessly through suburban streets. The protagonist seems incapable of doing anything right in the novel, and this construction alludes to the way in which many

women are victimised in the postfeminist world — a world which has little time for women who do not (or perhaps cannot) identify with a position of empowerment.

The surface message of this novel is a call to “power feminism.” Like Wolf in *Fire with Fire* (1994), the text appears to be prompting women to discard the role of victim and embrace the power that is rightfully theirs by demonstrating the failed lives lived by Beth and Betsy and inviting the reader to smugly assess these failures. However, none of the female characters are actually able to access the power that the novel seems to imply with its gaping absence. Indeed, *all* of the female characters are strikingly conformist and victims in their lives. Further, the novel invites the reader to view the female characters as ultimately responsible for their oppression. Rather than taking the patriarchy to task and condemning the way it delimits the lives of women, the novel instead reproaches women for their role as functionaries in their own subjugation. So, while the sentiments expressed are about the need for women to relinquish their victim status, overall, the novel actually works to deflect attention away from the patriarchy as the source of disempowerment. By doing this, *The Rules of Engagement* subscribes to a postfeminist sentiment and is part of the backlash against second-wave feminism, functioning to reinscribe gender norms and maintain the status quo.

The Naked Husband

Mark D’Arbanville’s *The Naked Husband* (2004) is ostensibly a story about the relationships between men and women, fidelity, desire and unhappiness. The plot relies on a soap-opera sequence of events across which a tale of betrayal and

adultery is told from the perspective of the egocentric protagonist and narrator, Mark. The narrative traces Mark's adulterous escapades with his mistress, Anna, paralleled with the tedious monotony of his marriage to Sue. The two women are juxtaposed throughout the narrative; Anna is depicted as the appropriately feminine woman, while Sue is cast as the woman who fails to "keep herself up." Mark eventually leaves Sue for Anna, resulting in Sue's emotional breakdown and suicide. Anna, by contrast, is unable to leave her husband, Paul. When Anna is involved in a serious car accident which leaves her in a coma, the event is the catalyst in forcing Mark to scrutinise his life and his relationships.

The story speaks in realist terms and in particular with an invitation to the reader to understand Mark's hopes and fears, and to forgive his failures as he seeks a seemingly elusive happiness in his relationships. This realism is writ large in the novel in a meta-narrative moment in which it becomes clear that the author named Mark is the same as the Mark of the fictional narrative. While the surname only appears towards the end of the novel, the identical first names make apparent this slippage from the fictional into the real world. But despite this individualisation of the character, the narration invites the reader to see Mark (as he sees himself) as emblematic of the difficulties men face in navigating mutually positive relationships with women. This narrative focus is what makes the novel of particular significance in assessing the politics of lived experiences of women in the twenty-first century by demonstrating that experience as it is understood from a male point of view. That the subject matter of the novel is directed to a typically female readership makes this mirror of women in the real world and in the eyes of twenty-first-century men particularly compelling.

In alignment with Brookner's novel, D'Arbanville's reinscription of gender norms operates behind a smokescreen of empowerment. The novel could thus be considered a postfeminist emissary in that it issues a covert backlash to feminism; whereby the politics embedded in the novel that are most damaging to women operate, according to Faludi, "on the sly" (1993, 395). The surface message is that women need to claim the power that is available to them and "be true to themselves," in another example of the pervasive individualism of the postfeminist shift away from collective action advocated in the 1970s. Undermining this (already problematic) message of individual empowerment, however, is an additional mechanism of backlash; like *The Rules of Engagement*, the novel invites women to blame, dislike and criticise other women. This divide-and-conquer agenda has been identified as a crucial tool of postfeminism's backlash and the novel ultimately works in the same way as the backlash by evading overtly sexist representations with a veneer of female empowerment.

Faludi claims that the backlash has permeated western culture and has, along the way, adopted various disguises: either "a mask of mild derision or the painted face of deep "concern." Its lips profess pity for any woman who won't fit the mould, while it tries to clamp the mould around her ears [...] It manipulates a system of rewards and punishments, elevating women who follow its rules, isolating those who don't" (1993, p16-17). *The Naked Husband* confirms Faludi's assessment by presenting a narrative that illustrates a system of rewards and punishments for a range of female characters who emblemise contemporary types of white, middle-class, western-world women. The women in the novel are routinely scrutinised and criticized, as

well as adored and loved by Mark whose focalisation thus frames the choices made and lives lived by these women. By insisting on his version of events and his perceptions of women as paramount, the narrative asks the implied female reader to share his perspective in assessing women and the happiness they are in a position to strive for. The novel thereby requires a conformity such that D'Arbanville's text makes a bid to "clamp the mould around" the implied reader's ears, or in this case, eyes, so she sees what he sees of these women.

Mark's narration promulgates a particularly one-dimensional and stereotypical view of women: "Women are still mysterious to me after a lifetime, the perfume, the underwear, the camisole tops, the little jars and tweezers and pink razors" (62). While Mark's comment suggests his errors of judgement as much as it does common stereotypes about men and their incomprehension of women, placed within the larger narrative context of a novel that asks the reader to empathise with Mark this statement takes on a range of political ramifications that are heightened given that this novel seems designed to be marketed to, bought and read by women as a pleasurable leisure pursuit.

Performing Women, Performing Fictions

Like Wolf's *Fire with Fire* (1994), a quasi-feminist gloss distorts the regressive gender politics of this story. The novel makes a bid for an (albeit highly precarious) position as progressive, pro-feminist and empowering. The first of these empowerments is embodied by the representations of conforming female characters such that the novel successfully exposes how women go to extreme lengths to

embody the Angel ideal and normative femininity. Mirroring the representations of women in Brookner's novel, all of the female characters are strikingly passive and this representation works to expose how women internalize societal and cultural pressures surrounding the feminine script, and how damaging conformity can be to identity. The novel explores the painful quandary women find themselves in as they are torn between traditional notions of femininity and twenty-first-century roles and demands. The female identity is no longer merely tied up in the Angel ideal and as such it is not enough for women to merely be selfless wives, mothers and housewives. Rather, in negotiating their way through their many roles and identities, women must now also be beautiful and appropriately "sexy" (Gill 2007). Writing at a time when increasing numbers of women were entering the workforce and taking on multiple roles and numerous identities, Chapkis claimed:

The shift from full-time homemaking to double duty (working both for wages and in the home) has helped create a need for new symbols of identity. Women are discovering that they are expected to have not one, but several conflicting images: the wholesome mother, the coolly professional businesswoman and the sexy mistress. No wonder women turn to the magic wardrobe and make up to provide inspiration for their multiple selves. (1988, 90)

While Chapkis is critical of the importance of such accoutrements, the novel celebrates the "magic wardrobe," maintaining that it ensures a woman is sexually attractive and alluring *to men*. Details about Anna's appropriately feminine attire permeate the text, while Sue's appearance is briefly mentioned. In this sense, the novel canvasses the consequences which await women should they conform or fail

to conform to these directives. By mapping the two different paths, the novel offers the female reader a chance to weigh up ways of being as though there are a range of possibilities available.

Even as the novel communicates its surface message that the destiny of all women is fundamentally open, the underlying suggestion is that such views are erroneous. After all, not one woman within the text evolves or is able to enact change. There are no representations of women that offer models of autonomous happiness, just emotional and physical punishments for failings even when these failings appear unavoidable. By mapping the sanctions which await women who are unable to satisfactorily embody the feminine norm, the novel becomes a tool of the backlash.

While Mark judges the women in his life, it is Mark with whom the reader is positioned to sympathise. For example, when Mark and Sue return from a holiday in Antigua, he is critical of the change in Sue when she reverts back to a busy wife-mother-businesswoman. Mark laments how her “buoyant mood evaporates [...] and when the aircraft touches down in Manchester the stranger is back” (22). He yearns for Sue to be as “playful” (22) as she was on their holiday and eventually confronts her, questioning “where the Antigua woman has gone.” Sue’s response is understandably curt: “The reality is, you can’t have that all the time, Mark. It was a holiday. What do you expect?” (22). While her responses would arguably appear reasonable to the implied audience of twenty-first-century women, this is only one of many instances Mark recounts as evidence for Sue’s lack of femininity — not only her failure to put his needs before her own. He carefully identifies a set of behaviours she exhibits that make him feel unloved in what amounts to a role reversal of the

typical female complaints about men in previous eras. In this sense, the postfeminist world in which Sue is often busy with her career has made her undesirable because, as a function of her working life, Mark is not the centre of her daily universe. Sue may perform her femininity appropriately for the most part, but her failure in this one instance to perform within naturalised gender guidelines automatically renders her “unfeminine.” Mark suffers from a sense of marginalisation and the reader is asked to empathise with his decision to pursue an affair in which he can find some pleasure.

Mark’s expectations of Sue are never cast as unreasonable, and he fails to consider his own part in Sue’s unhappiness. Instead he plays the victim, attempting to arouse the reader’s sympathy: “I want to dance, drink, have fun. Is this too much to ask of your wife, for Christ’s sake?” (27). He laments how the women in his life make him miserable, never considering how his own actions impact on these women. In feminist terms, the female characters are the *real* victims of cultural pressures that have been internalised by women—to their detriment. Mark is not the real victim, but the way the novel is written from Mark’s perspective (always wounded and a victim of unhappy circumstances) deflects away from this. This is made most explicit in the title itself, as *The Naked Husband* suggests that Mark is stripped down to his raw emotions, making his perspective more truthful and not performative at all.

Every hardship and negative trait of Mark’s is attributed to the women in his life. He credits his ‘shallow and self-obsessed’ (33) nature to his mother who spoiled him, claiming: “I was Ivy’s golden-haired boy; but favourite sons grow up with an inflated sense of their own self-importance” (142). Similarly, during the affair with Anna, it is

Anna who is held accountable for his suffering because she refuses to leave her husband. Throughout his marriage, Sue is also deemed responsible for Mark's unhappiness because she cannot turn herself "into an Anna" (130). While it will be quite clear to the critical reader that his views stem from a distinct lack of self-awareness, for the most part Mark promotes himself as a reliable narrator, giving the impression that he is accurately conveying the "reality" of the situation. For many readers, then, there would be no reason to question his reliability and this has obvious implications when combined with the narrative's negative underlying message.

While *The Rules of Engagement* victimises each of the female characters, *The Naked Husband* takes this one step further — not only victimising women, but objectifying them also. The women in this novel are thus trapped in the double bind of victim *and* object. The reader is positioned alongside the desiring male and asked to judge women according to Mark's standards, through his myopic gaze that sees bodies rather than individuals.

The novel focuses on the two main female characters of Sue and Anna; however, satelliting around these two women are other minor female characters who are also typically one-dimensional. Taken together, the spectrum of female characters in the novel — Sue (the wife), Anna (the mistress), Jen (Mark's friend), Siobhan (Mark's ex-girlfriend) and Ivy (Mark's mother) — amalgamates every face of woman: wife, mistress, mother, friend (no sex), friend (with sex). In all of these stereotypical roles, the text does not characterise a single female character as happy, thereby suggesting that there is no happiness for women. This underlying message locks

women into categories of type but also offers no challenge to these categories by way of an alternative and invites the reader to see all of these women (like Beth and Betsy) as instrumental in their own oppression, allowing — even inviting — their victim status.

Sue: The Feminine Failure

That the novel insists the reader view women through a patriarchal gaze has potentially serious political consequences and this is nowhere more apparent than in regards to the character of Sue. Lumby elaborates on the consequence of the male gaze for women:

Men look at women [...] and women learn to see themselves through the eyes of men. This process determines more than relations between men and women — it determines the way women relate to themselves. Women experience themselves as images designed to please an all-powerful male audience. They act out this image even though it's in conflict with their "real" selves. (1997, 80)

Sue over-identifies with Mark as the male audience, seeing herself only through his eyes. When he turns his gaze elsewhere, she ceases to exist. Years of suppressing her own agendas eventuate in the actual loss of herself. Lumby maintains that this is a problem for many women who are "uncertain where the representation stops and the self begins" (1997, 81). In Sue's case, the performance is ultimately so

consuming that when Mark leaves her for Anna, there is nothing behind the performance any longer and she commits suicide.

The text depicts Mark as justified in turning his gaze elsewhere because Sue fails as a woman to approximate an image designed to please a male audience. Sue dresses for practicality rather than ‘sexiness’ and is subsequently found wanting. Mark’s censure is unmistakable when he observes Sue’s “matronly” clothes: “I can barely look at her and I do not know why I am so angry” (144). Sue’s choices, however, do not stem from a desire to transgress the feminine script. Rather, she just fails in her efforts to embody the virtually unattainable ideal, which now expects women to be omnisexual: to serve the men in their lives, to bear the children *and* more importantly to stimulate their partners — whether through a sexualized appearance or sexual behaviour (Kingston 2004). Mark observes: ‘she is dressed down, as she often is, a black track top, black shapeless cords. No make-up. Like a chameleon she always endeavours to blend into her background’ (p54-55). When Mark ponders why he is no longer in love with Sue: “It’s the matronly clothes she wears. It’s the sacrifice. It’s that she never makes me jealous” (p144-145). Months after her suicide, he reflects on the demise of their marriage, likening his relationship with Sue to a fairytale in which “the prince and princess did not live happily ever after” (202). And his reason for the failed romance? The princess “traded in her golden tresses for a hairstyle that was a little more practical” (202). The reader is positioned to see Sue’s failed efforts to embody the ideal as justification for Mark’s affair and this is particularly the case because he focalizes the events and elicits reader sympathy for his perceptions. He does this by tapping into the same ideology

of femininity that women are subject to and showing them the consequences of “letting yourself go.”

While this novel exposes to scrutiny the physical trappings of beauty which women are faced with, it does little to condemn these trappings. Rather, the critique is reserved for the female characters like Sue, who fail in the performance of sexual desirability and beauty. While she is a tragic figure, Sue does not elicit much reader sympathy, and this problem is accentuated by the diary embedded in the novel in which she catalogues all her own failings as though to provide indisputable evidence for Mark's censure. The diary thus works as a political construct in the novel and is instrumental in the victim-blame D'Arbanville promulgates. Overall the text advocates those views that second-wave feminists attempted to abolish. Chapkis, for example, suggested in the 1980s that the “basic principles remain. The body beautiful is woman's responsibility and authority. She will be valued and rewarded on the basis of how close she comes to embodying the ideal” (14). Brownmiller similarly claimed: “To fail at the feminine difference is to appear not to care about men, and to risk the loss of their attention and approval. To be insufficiently feminine is viewed as a failure in core sexual identity” (1984, 15).

Despite Mark's affirmation that women should be “true to themselves” rather than change for men, Anna is loved for precisely her ability to mould herself into the feminine ideal. Sue's failure to embody the “ideal woman” results in Mark trying to change Sue “into an Anna” (130). While he admits that the pressure he puts on Sue makes him feel “cruel and guilty and shabby” (23), he never feels so guilty that he ceases trying to change Sue. Their fight “ends in tears, as it often does, for this is

what our marriage has become [...] the fight that one day I will win, one day I will persuade her to be what I want" (23). He defends his actions by maintaining that *all* men want their women to be appropriately feminine: "As justification I looked around, in the football club, at the pub, and saw other men doing exactly the same thing and that made it all right" (130). Mark further asserts: "This is about control now. Whether it is done with smiles or with silence, or as some men do, with violence, control is the mathematics of loving" (199). It is difficult to imagine a woman reader who would not feel affronted by such blatant commentary. In which case, Mark's views appear to be part of the text's larger agenda to perhaps demonstrate to the female reader that this is how it is with men, and more disturbingly, that women who want a man had better play the game. Such ideas are indicative of the overall ideology of the novel which works toward justifying male control even though it exposes the mechanics of this control.

As well as her failure to adorn herself in an appropriately feminine fashion, Sue is also criticized for her dependence and passivity. The protagonist portrays Sue as spineless and consequently as someone to be pitied: 'she stands and touches my arm, lightly. There are hot tears in her eyes. She is breaking in front of me" (116). Sue's breakdown is symptomatic of her behaviour throughout the entirety of her marriage and up until her suicide she continues to play the role of passive victim. Mark reasons: "It's unthinkable that she should still want me after my affair with Anna, everything I have done calculated to make her let me go. I had thought to find the limit of her needing of me and have not" (p115-116). While Mark finds her passivity "unbearable" (116), he and the novel fail to register the pressure that western culture puts on women to be passive (see Kingston 2004). That

heterosexual relationships and the dictates of motherhood require this passivity—which ironically becomes Mark’s reason for rejecting Sue—allude to the impossibility of this double bind.

The novel characterizes Sue’s dependence and passivity as pathetic and the implied female reader is positioned to wonder why Sue does not assert herself. Initially, after learning of the affair, Sue locks Mark out and the reader celebrates her sudden defiance:

Sue has changed the locks [...] Later that day, when she sees the car pull up [...] she runs inside and locks the front door. I call to her to let me in and she hides in the back room.

Everything has been dragged out of the study and piled in the carport. She has torn up some of my old scripts [...] spools of videotape lie around where she has smashed them. (66)

But even this act of rebellion proves illusory. Mark’s admission that he compelled Sue to kick him out exposes Sue’s rebellion as hollow: “I have set it up that she has thrown me out, instead of walking away first” (41). Once again, Mark retains the power and Sue’s subsequent and continual pleas for him to return further undermine her act of defiance. Even after Mark has left Sue for Anna, Sue declares: “I can’t live without you, Mark. I don’t know what I’ll do” (117). Sue’s portrayal is never complimentary and her inability to assert herself is a source of frustration to Mark and, in parts, to the implied reader. What is most disturbing about this climactic event, however, is that the reader is positioned to sympathize with Mark, and view

Sue as the one in the wrong because her weaknesses are multiple. She fails to see Mark's manipulative strategy, she grovels, and she wants to hold onto a failing and unhappy relationship with a cheating husband which suggests her lack of self-respect. This characterization invites the reader to blame Sue for her unhappiness, while simultaneously ensuring Mark escapes criticism.

Sue's journal, which Mark discovers after her suicide, generates an important facet of the text. While granting the reader an insight into her thoughts could have been redemptive, this becomes a mechanism for further victimisation. It is through the extracts from Sue's journal that the text conveys its surface message that a woman's fate is entirely a "course of her own making." The final diary entry that Mark recites supports this:

I am dying because the way I have lived for the last forty years is not working [...] I did this but at the price of never being there for myself, or at the cost of being so busy with everything else that I never had time for me. I have desperately tried to cling to the [...] people in my life who have defined who I am [rather] than face the frightening prospect of having to define me for myself [...] I have to trust and listen to the voice inside. I know I'll continue to die inside and begin to die outside if I don't do this. (270-71)

She also expresses her anger at her self-abnegation: "I spent enormous energy redecorating his study. I guess I would have loved it if I had spent that energy on a room of my own" (139). This allusion to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, is certainly an apt reference in that it evokes images of what Sue tries so hard to be: an Angel in the House. Woolf saw the Angel as a martyr complex which programmed women to

believe that they must be charming and conciliatory if they are to be considered appropriately feminine and, even in the twenty-first century, the Angel remains a potent influence on normative femininity. This is confirmed by the novel which depicts a wife and mother in 2004 striving — literally killing herself — to embody the Angel ideal.

Typically, this potentially positive insight is undermined by the text, as Sue's suicide seems a convenient way to remove her from any requirements of ongoing reader engagement. Mark uses Sue's diary as proof of her failings. That the journal describes how much she tolerated and why she did nothing to save herself, works to exonerate Mark more than condemn him. When reading her entries about her unhappiness and inability to overcome her subjugated role, Mark finds consolation, convinced that of his blamelessness: "There is a profound sense of relief in hearing these things from her, even now" (171).

Anna: The Feminine Success?

Unlike Sue, who slips in her duty to be "all things" for her husband, Anna is characterized as someone who successfully achieves the housewife-businesswoman-mistress identity shift. Unlike Sue's brief description as "ash blonde, petite and fearful" (22), Mark goes into considerable detail about Anna's appearance describing her as appropriately feminine: "Anna has on a pink scarf, her hair tied back with a tortoiseshell clip" (37). The writerly attention that is bestowed on Anna and her ability to draw Mark away from Sue substantiates Greer's (1999) assertion that women who attract and snare a man in patriarchal culture are granted a certain

status. Her characterization substantiates Brownmiller's (1984) claim that the "world smiles favourably on the feminine woman: it extends little courtesies and minor privilege" (15). Mark observes:

She is on her toes as she applies her make-up. I admire the long curve of her spine, black lace underwear, curious after so long, something uncurling inside me...

Sue always shuts the bathroom door.

I love the way Anna wears her clothes for herself, not for me or for her husband, her sensuality is the whole point. (61)

Passages like this demonstrate how the novel celebrates conformity—specifically, by portraying the appropriately feminine woman through the complimentary male gaze. It also paints Anna's eagerness to follow male convention as the route to validation (Kingston 2004). The text fails to critique how Anna's actions are products of capitalism, neo-liberalism and postfeminism which ask that women respond to patriarchal gender dictates in ways that serve their self-interests — but really serve male interests (see Gill 2007). Anna wins because she embraces, indeed, apparently enjoys, playing up her appeal to men. She participates willingly in the oppressive apparatus of beauty and sexual availability and this capitulation is what stands her in good stead. Where she has two men, Sue has none. Anna has internalized the black lace and cosmetics to a degree in which she enjoys the sport for which they are the uniform, perhaps because, as a slender and attractive woman, she knows she can win.

Sue is criticized for her failure to approximate the feminine ideal, however, even though Anna is deemed suitably feminine by Mark, she does not escape objectification. The latent message appears to be that regardless of a woman's femininity (or lack of), she will be an object to the gaze of men — either admired or found wanting. When Mark and Anna are at the art gallery, she stands scrutinizing the paintings, while Mark stands assessing *her*.

We are standing in the Tate Gallery, she is staring at a portrait by Rubens and I am staring at her. She is not classically beautiful, the lines of her chin are not perfectly defined and she has an endearing bump to her nose. She has a feminine poise and allure that comes from inside, it is unique and sets her aglow and makes her one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. (73)

Being privy to his thoughts, the reader is prompted to view such scrutiny as “natural.” Mark is characterized as an unfortunate victim of his own libido, and the reader is prompted to see this as a legitimate excuse. Indeed, this is paralleled to art appreciation as though one could no more reject assessing great art as one could resist an appropriately feminine woman. The novel not only presents the objectification of women as normal and harmless, but romantic as well. Mark likens Anna to a piece of art: “Beautiful woman with blue eyes, in black overcoat and pink scarf. By Rubens. A masterpiece” (73). Where D’Arbanville could perhaps have critiqued male attitudes towards beauty and women, he has opted instead to reinscribe such attitudes.

While Anna initially appears quite strong and in control, eventually the reader learns that there are aspects of the victim about her also. Anna laments that “men have disempowered her all her life” (68). In regards to Paul, she reveals: “All I wanted, once, was to find a way to make him love me” (45). And later she admits: “He had an affair once. I put all his things in a suitcase and put them outside the door. Then I brought them in again. I did that five times before he came home. I knew I’d make him love me in the end” (46). Her complaints are not only confluent with those expressed by Sue, but are typical of what some postfeminists call a victim mythology and are anomalous in postfeminist culture in which women are purported to be both free and equal (Faludi 1993). Accordingly, the reader is invited to criticize Anna and her outmoded views which belong to another time, another generation. Anna admits to loving Mark and yet passivity — as the ultimate driving force in her life—compels her to stay with Paul. Mark states: “You can change this,” but Anna merely sips her drink and looks away” (71). She appears rooted in her victimhood, seemingly incapable of any certitude or determination or agency. That Anna’s views belong to a bygone era is most apparent when she tells Mark: “I love that you open car doors for me...Paul would never think of doing that, or holding my coat for me. I can be at a party all night and he never checks to see if I have a drink” (70-71). However, perhaps the reader should see such regressive views as indication that a feminist movement is still requisite, instead of a reason to criticise women as the novel implies.

Anna confides in Mark: “My family thinks I’m perfect [...] I’d like to be a little wicked, just once. I’m sick of being everyone’s angel” (72). Despite voicing these sentiments, Anna continues playing the role of the Angel, demonstrating how the warnings from

the 1980s and 90s “about the “consequences” and “costs” of feminist aspiration have had their desired effect” (Faludi 1993, 80). Although her passivity exasperates both Mark and potentially the reader, it is through Anna that the reader is able to gain an insight into the reasons why women conform. Indeed, within this mode of being Anna finds safety and security. This would seem to support Pearson’s problematically essentialist claim that a “woman’s basic instinct is for a home and security, and it is unlikely she’ll do anything to jeopardize that security” (1997, 28). Anna is thus exposed as having more in common with Sue than first thought.

Both are dependent on men for their happiness, both are equally passive and both women subscribe to what postfeminists term a “victim” mentality. The all-encompassing passivity which permeates their lives extends towards suicide as they apparently see it as their only escape. While Sue actually takes her own life, there is doubt surrounding the circumstances of Anna’s accident, and Mark intimates that it was intentional: “The accident was how she had once described it to me, how she had rehearsed it so many times in her head, her car lurching into the path of an oncoming truck [...] This was her way out” (2). Pearson (1999) questions whether it is possible that women “are using gestures of self-destruction as a form of empowerment and a language of protest” (23). However, combined with both women’s self-effacement while alive, the final self-destructive act does nothing but underpin their complete powerlessness. Like *The Rules of Engagement*, the novel is suggesting that neither of the choices represented by these women makes women happy. This begs the question: what does? But the novel certainly offers no answer.

Conclusion

Both *The Rules of Engagement* and *The Naked Husband* trade in negative depictions of women in ways that are made more disturbing by being addressed to the same kinds of women as their key female characters, namely, white, middle-class, middle-aged women who are considered to be (and in many other respects are) culturally empowered by their social location. It is perhaps this position of power that makes them the necessary objects of gendered models of oppression. Where postfeminism targets young women deemed to be in need of direction while they are impressionable, the women of these stories appear to have lost that desirable innocence and so they have become fair game for men and women writers alike. While the impact of these stories cannot be measured given the individual nature of different readers' responses, the broader cultural messages can be understood as part of a continued and perhaps increasingly oppressive stance against women in the wealthy western world.

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Appendix A

My initial canvassing of the genre entailed the reading of thirty-five novels from a random sample taken from the middle of the market. From this I narrowed the sample down to ten novels (see below), those novels which best represented the shared narrative features and ideological preoccupations mapped across the larger sample. A final six novels were whittled down from these ten and selected as being typical of the entire selection, yet unique in the way the experience of middle-aged womanhood was thematised.

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