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Book Review
McDermott, Catherine. 2022. *Feel-Bad Postfeminism: Impasse, Resilience and Female Subjectivity in Popular Culture*. **London: Bloomsbury Academic. 266 pp. £ 28.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781350224988 (hardback).**

How does it feel to live in the aftermath of the culturally ubiquitous postfeminist empowerment discourses of the Anglo-American contexts of the late 1990s and early 2000s? Have they delivered the prospective empowerment and happiness? Catherine McDermott examines these questions by exploring the affective dimension of postfeminism that constitute female subjectivity in girlhood coming-of-age films and TV series. The book is published in 2022, at a time when the postfeminist legacy is confronted by unforeseen impasse and uncertainty.

McDermott uses Lauren Berlant's (2011) work on affect and Rosalind Gill's (2007: 147) understanding of postfeminism as "a distinctive sensibility" to explore postfeminism as "a contradictory set of discourses which respond to, disavow, and individualise feminist politics" (p. 3). The book is divided into two parts, whose respective key words are 'empowerment' and 'resilience'. The first half focuses on female fictional characters whose coming of age overlaps with the upsurge of postfeminism. The second half looks at the impact of the legacy of postfeminism on coming-of-age genres. The book contributes to debates about the values and value of the postfeminist legacy for a moment marked by the impasse arisen from coming-of-age women's relationships to postfeminism in a post-2008 recessionary environment.

In Chapter 1, McDermott states that postfeminism provides women with "perniciously harmful illusions" (p.31) in an era characterised by increasing precarity, uncertainty, and insecurity. Postfeminism begins to be understood as a feel-bad genre since it cannot produce the promised happiness, fulfilment, and satisfaction. Using the 38-year-old female protagonist Amy in the American crime thriller *Gone Girl* (2014) as a case study, McDermott analyses how coming-of-age women are expected to perform "quintessentially adolescent" femininity and engage in self-transformation (Sarah Prokansky 2007: 45). Similarly, protagonists of the American comedy films *Girl Most Likely* (2012)*, Bridesmaids* (2011) and *Young Adult* (2011) consider themselves constrained in an "unhealthy" and "toxic" relationship with postfeminist aspirations (p. 33). McDermott further conceptualises the highly contradictory figure of the "Cool Girl", as women who conform to traditional femininity and elaborately conceal the knowingness simultaneously (p. 40). Cool Girl has updated the Bridget Jones style of femininity in the way that she also yearns for the same goals as Bridget Jones, but in secret. As exemplified by the protagonist of *Gone Girl*, Amy internalises her male partner's desires and makes it appear as her own choice and enjoyment. In this way, Cool Girl is depicted as a contemporary woman figure who moves from passivity and fragility.

In Chapter 2, McDermott explores how the American television series *Girls* (2012-2017) produces postfeminism as an impasse "characterised by the return to failed fantasies of fulfilment" (p. 57). Impasse describes a "cul-de-sac" in which "one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, *in the same space*" (Lauren Berlant 2011: 199). McDermott argues that protagonists are supposed to experience constant "psychological and moral transformation" (p. 57) to strive for future happiness. In postfeminist culture, self-actualisation has become a key

theme in debates around female subjectivity and the self is constructed as "a never-ending project requiring continual work" (p. 57). Individuals are always expecting to 'become who I am' through persistent upgrading and transformation. McDermott relates the expectation for women to work on the self with the mechanism of cruel optimism, since cruel optimism works as "an affective state" (p. 62) with optimistic and uplifting attachments promising the fantasy of a good life. Women are made to believe that the hard graft involved in cultivating an upgraded selfhood will get them closer to achieving the dream. McDermott states maintaining faith in postfeminist ways of living is likely to thwart the fulfilment that people desire and end up with an impasse.

In Chapter 3, McDermott uses case studies of the British film *Appropriate Behaviour* (2014), the American television sitcom *Broad City* (2014), and the British television series *Fleabag* (2016-2019) to explore detached and isolated feelings generating from normative genres. The storyline of *Appropriate Behaviour* is out of the ordinary as it does not follow a traditional narrative structure, neither reconciling conflicts nor pursuing the romantic comedy convention of a happy ending. *Broad City* represents "an act of queering of normative life trajectories" (Aleksandra Kamińska 2020: 1060, as cited in McDermott 2022: 99) by portraying failure as an acceptable way of life. The protagonist of *Fleabag* does not undergo a self-transformation to become a more socially acceptable subject or to secure heterosexual romance. At the end, Fleabag is accepted as who she is. The three case studies present a divergence from traditional happiness scripts and instead, focus on feelings of isolation, ambivalence, and disillusionment, opening up the possibility of new forms of narratives and storylines in girlhood coming-of-age genres.

Chapter 4 focuses on the intersections between resilience discourses and contemporary girlhood genres, with the case study of the American film *The Hunger Games* (2012). The cultural preoccupation with resilience is problematic in that it only requires individuals to adjust their attitudes and beliefs, rather than calling for structural or social transformation. McDermott develops the concept of "suffering resilience" to highlight that "systematic oppression is what naturalises this contextual suffering, steering discussion away from resilience itself becoming the 'problem' to eliminate" (p. 124). Suffering resilience suggests "overcoming or capitalising on trauma in ways that benefit the social order" (p. 125). It reflects neoliberal ways of thinking, as it stresses the capability to extract value from suffering and to turn less into more. It encourages people to capitalise on their suffering in order to create value and to benefit from it. The notion of suffering resilience summarises a type of female protagonist in girlhood coming-of-age narratives whose heroism is generated from overcoming struggle and trauma.

In Chapter 5, McDermott introduces two entwined notions: relational resilience and transformative resilience, conceptualised from the French film *Girlhood* (2014). The former represents "moments or circumstances in which overcoming trauma transpires as a result of social connection" (p. 147). The latter refers to "the capacity for change that enables one to overcome adversity in 'socially profitable ways'" (James 2015: 15, as cited in McDermott 2022: 157). *Girlhood*'s narratives about transformation are divided into two types. First, the film suggests that transformation plays a key role in gaining access to social spaces and generating social value. Second, transformation is related to the construction of the character's

subjectivity, as depicted in *Girlhood* where the character Marieme is depicted as a resilient subject through her life trajectory of overcoming adversity.

Chapter 6 looks at the British thriller *Catch Me Daddy* (2014) to explore the feel-bad femininity and a particular form of resilient femininity. McDermott argues that *Catch Me Daddy* mobilises the aesthetic of agency through motion, affect, and choice. First, McDermott suggests that the protagonist, Laila's agency is constructed by the ability to initiate movement despite external constraints. However, within the resilience paradigm, femininity is understood to be a burden. The film depicts how traditional female fragility prevents women from mobilising agency and the agency can be acquired through motion. Second, McDermott makes a comparison between different crying scenes in *Girlhood* and *Catch Me Daddy* as represented by Marieme and Laila respectively. The former represents crying in a socially acceptable way, as controllable and aestheticised weeping with moist eyes – a form of resilient affect; whereas the latter shows uncontrollable and unmitigated tears, as feel-bad femininity. Third, McDermott suggests that contemporary feminine resilience is reflected in making choices and acting upon them. As McDermott puts it, "which choice is irrelevant; what is important is that Laila must choose" (p. 187). It depicts the tensions between traditional femininity and resilience genres and suggests female protagonists must overcome these tensions to be socially accepted.

The "ever-growing cultural ubiquity" of postfeminism has enabled a variety of examinations of postfeminism (p. 4). It has simultaneously generated "a growing sense of frustration" and fatigue, because of the "dubious utility and lack of critical specificity" (p. 5). The "interrelated themes" that constitute the postfeminist sensibility have somehow become a checklist for researchers to classify texts which align with them (Gill 2007: 147). This approach can be tautological and limiting in the way that it tends to produce predetermined outcomes and overlook contextual differences. Instead, McDermott's approach is to explore postfeminism's affective enactments, and it proposes a nuanced analysis of the affective contract of postfeminism, which is generated by recurrent themes of happiness, fulfilment and self-actualisation under the banner of empowerment and a good life fantasy. More significantly, *Feel-Bad Postfeminism* is extremely incisive in offering new ways to understand gendered subject-making strategies in post-pandemic and neoliberal society where personal resilience and positive dispositions have been stressed as a panacea to remedy personal hardships and get through any unforeseen impasse.

Furthermore, the postfeminist media texts selected in the book mainly originate from Anglo-American contexts, which reflects and reinforces the idea that literature on postfeminism has predominately concentrated on the Western world and is conceptualised as Western culture. This book will therefore be more relatable to readers with a Western background than those without any cultural familiarity with the selected media texts. The book could have demonstrated how the affective approach to explore postfeminist culture can also be used beyond Western contexts as the approach has "the potential to break through the constraint of geographical specific locations" (Xintong Jia 2022: 21). I suggest that future research on postfeminism include audience reception studies to bridge the gap between media representations and the researcher's interpretations.

Biographical notes
Xintong Jia holds a PhD in Sociology at City, University of London. Her research interests intersect media and gender, popular culture, and feminism in post-socialist China. Her recent publications include "Coexisting with uncomfortable reflexivity: feminist fieldwork abroad during the pandemic" in *Difficult Conversations: A Feminist Dialogue* (2023) and "Victoria's Secret goes to China: femvertising and the failed promise of empowerment" in *The Cultural Politics of Femvertising* (2022).

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