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Cultural Arts Research and Development

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ARTICLE

‘Same Old Stories’: Sexist and Anti-Feminist Discourses in Greek Chick-Lit

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the reproduction of sexist and anti-feminist discourses in contemporary Greek chick-lit through a critical discourse analysis of ten novels by Chrysiida Dimoulidou and Lena Manta. Situating the genre within post-feminist and neoliberal cultural contexts, the study interrogates how linguistic, discursive and narrative strategies construct and normalize restrictive conceptions of femininity and masculinities in popular romance fiction. Drawing on a classical Fairclough-informed framework, the analysis foregrounds recurring patterns—linguistic violence and abusive epithets, slut-shaming and body-shaming, portrayals of female hysteria and emotionality, hetero-determination via sexual relations, and the sacralization of motherhood—that function to depoliticize women’s agency and to naturalize gender hierarchies. Although fleeting emancipatory moments and individual claims to autonomy appear, they are fragmented and subordinated to conventional romantic resolutions (marriage, pairing, or withdrawal), which ultimately reinscribe the genre’s ideological closure. The paper argues that Greek chick-lit, while commercially successful and culturally resonant, frequently legitimizes ‘patriarchal common-sense’ through everyday language and plot conventions, thereby complicating assumptions of the genre as inherently empowering. By mapping thematic categories and providing close textual readings, the study contributes to feminist literary scholarship and calls for more sustained critical engagement with popular women’s fiction as a site where ideological meanings about gender are produced, reproduced and consumed.

Keywords: Chick-Lit; Romantic Novels; Sexism; Antifeminism; Gender-Based Violence

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ARTICLE INFO
Received: 19 November 2025 | Revised: 18 January 2026 | Accepted: 25 January 2026 | Published Online: 2 February 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v6i1.682

CITATION
Liotzis, V., 2026. ‘Same Old Stories’: Sexist and Anti-Feminist Discourses in Greek Chick-Lit. Cultural Arts Research and Development. 6(1): 15–32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v6i1.682

1. Introduction

The representation of women in contemporary popular culture remains a critical field for exploring how gender ideologies persist and evolve within post-feminist and neoliberal contexts. Within this framework, chick-lit—a subgenre of romantic fiction written predominantly by women for women—occupies an ambivalent position in feminist criticism. While it has been praised for offering more authentic portrayals of women's everyday lives, emotional complexities and personal ambitions, it has also been criticised for reproducing conventional ideals of femininity and reinforcing patriarchal values under the guise of empowerment. Internationally, chick-lit reflects a post-feminist sensibility that privileges individual agency, consumer self-fashioning and the pursuit of personal pleasure, yet often reinterprets romantic desire through traditional moral frameworks. In Greece, the genre has achieved notable commercial success and cultural resonance, but it has received limited critical attention within feminist literary and cultural studies. The article responds to this absence by examining Greek chick-lit as a cultural and ideological site where representations of femininity and gender relations are constructed and normalised.

The study focuses on ten novels by two of Greece's most commercially successful authors, Chrysiida Dimoulidou and Lena Manta, whose works exemplify the domestic popularisation of this genre. The analysis employs critical discourse analysis to investigate how linguistic, narrative and rhetorical strategies articulate broader gendered ideologies. This methodological approach enables an examination of how linguistic and rhetorical practices reflect and reproduce relations of power and ideology, revealing how discourses of femininity and sexuality contribute to the naturalisation of gender hierarchies within the Greek socio-cultural context. Accordingly, the central aim of the study is to examine how the social construction of femininity is (re)produced and normalised within this body of popular fiction, and how these discursive practices may contribute to wider ideological formations concerning gender and representation in contemporary Greek society.

2. Materials and Methodological Aspects

Before all else, regarding the selection of samples from the works of Chrysiida Dimoulidou and Lena Manta, the following criteria were concurrently applied: firstly, the books were required to be essentially romantic novels, despite any references to other types of relationships; secondly, they were required to have a female heroine or, in the case of multiple protagonists, women as main characters; and thirdly, they were required to be set in the present day or at least in a not too distant past. The sample includes a total of ten books, with five from each author. From Dimoulidou, the following were selected: *Guess Who's Leaving Tonight* [1], *Don't Shoot the Bride* [2], *Men? No, Thank You, I'll Pass!* [3], *Love at the Wrong Time* [4], and *Snow on Fire* [5], while from Manta, *The House Next to the River* [6], *Love Like Rain* [7], *Without Applause* [8], *It Was a Coffee in Ember* [9], and *Journey to Venice* [10]—the names of the books, as well as all the excerpts mentioned below, have been translated by the author of this article.

The present study in relation to the phenomenon of chick lit is a critical discourse analysis from a socio-cultural perspective. Critical discourse analysis is not a self-evident approach, since its contemporary field is characterized by heterogeneity, because the basic theoretical references of contemporary researchers vary, and because discourse analysis has been appropriated by a number of different disciplines, leading to different methodological articulations. On this basis, its classical approach was adopted, according to which critical discourse analysis is a methodological approach that aims, above all, to identify the inequalities produced from the power relations that develop in society [11]. This takes place through the study, on the one hand, of the often opaque and latent relations of causality, correlation and determination between discourses, rhetorical practices and events, and, on the other hand, of the wider socio-cultural structures, relations and processes; in order to investigate not only how such practices, events and texts emerge, but also how they are ideologically shaped by power relations and wider social reality [11] (pp. 132–133). After all, it is only by situating textual analysis within a broader social perspective provided by social theory that the role and significance of scientific, in this case,

discourse can be 'fully appreciated' [12].

Furthermore, this text-centred analysis is founded upon the theoretical supposition that mediated discourse and linguistic/discursive practices do not merely function as a depiction or representation of an extra-textual situation, but rather contribute, in a dialectical relationship with the reader and the process of consuming the text, to the social construction of the reality by proposing preferred meanings to the audience [13] (p. 85). Therefore, the paper aims to shed light on how semantic practices implicitly produce hegemonic gender ideologies, as well as how the meaning of femininity and masculinity is constructed. The analysis focuses on the assumption that the adoption of a dichotomous/oppositional approach to gender, the consequent naturalisation and generalisation of gender duality, and, ultimately, the prevailing dominance of a restrictive and often essentialist logic play a decisive role in the reification of gender characteristics as self-evident givens that reproduce and perpetuate the logic of sexism. In essence, the primary research question pertains to the potential sexist leanings observed in the selected novels. The initial working hypothesis centres on the purported traditional/conservative and stereotypical social construction of femininity in the genre of Greek chick-lit [14].

The relative debate pertains to the overarching question of whether literary representations mirror actual events. It could be argued that these representations are not an accurate depiction of social reality, but rather the interpretation of that reality by specific creators in a specific place and time. On this basis, it can be posited that symbolic representations of roles and relationships largely reflect prevailing values [15]. Nevertheless, gender representations in literature are not confined to a 'faithful rendering' of extra-textual reality, due to the symbolic dimensions of the language used and the 'fictional coding' that relativises any attempt to depict or reflect the empirical world. As it has been contended, the characters in chick-lit belong to an 'explicitly meta-linguistic context' wherein, collectively with authors and readers, they engage in the negotiation of language usage and its social formation [16] (p. 78).

In any case, to the extent that literature is not only performative, as it 'realises' subjects of discourse through discourse, but also constitutes much more than a simple fictional conception, there is room to distinguish both the overall work and its individual parts [17]. Nevertheless, given that texts are primarily perceived and interpreted as wholes, it is logical to hypothesise that critical references may be obscured by the prevailing logic and dominant sentiment within these texts. The text as a whole serves to contextualise the various representations, and ultimately, each story attains its complete meaning in relation to the other elements within the content. These elements are integrated to construct a rather unified conceptual system that ultimately gives rise to the text's overall meaning. Therefore, while the primary objective of the analysis is to emphasise the presence of sexist and anti-feminist discourses within the sample texts, the books of the sample are also evaluated in terms of their capacity to perpetuate the fundamental dynamics of sexism as a whole.

At this point, it is imperative to acknowledge the complexity of the concept of sexism, which, for the most part, has been theorised as a dynamic, multifaceted system of practices involving power and representations, inextricably intertwined with gender inequalities. This concept is often characterised by its ambiguity, controversy, and its emergence as a consequence of authoritarian confrontations. As it has been rightly observed, sexism is not merely 'a handful of problematic stereotypes'; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive ideology or discourse that is consistent with so-called common sense and the most established ways of thinking, feeling, and existing in the world [18] (pp. 65–66). Moreover, it is inextricably linked to a long history of exploitation, discrimination, and social injustice against women. A perspective on sexism that does not explicitly acknowledge its role as a social phenomenon that manifests against women, often referred to as 'gender-blind', serves to perpetuate gender inequality and, consequently, contributes to the legitimisation of their subjugation [19].

On this basis, the aim to clarify the reality of sexism, or otherwise to 'resolve the competing claims about reality' [20] (p. 664), proves to be of particular importance. This endeavour entails poly-logical processes through which the premises of power are formed within a distinct framework, and the manner in which those involved comprehend themselves and their experience in relation to the prevailing situation and circumstances. Consequently, the analysis of such phenomena becomes an arduous undertaking, wherein the elusive concept of 'scientific neutral-

ity' is revealed to be, in a profound manner, unattainable [20] (p. 663). Furthermore, sexism is not confined to overt forms of discrimination and gender-based violence; it is frequently manifested in a covert or latent manner through sexist discourse. This discourse constitutes a 'mild' but fundamental form of sexism that expresses symbolic violence and embodies meanings hostile to women. As it has been rightly observed, if we wish to learn how to recognise and address sexist speech, we must tackle its pragmatics [21]. The analysis of sexist language must extend beyond the examination of terms and concepts that are 'inherent in cases of sexist discourse' to encompass the fundamental beliefs and assumptions that render such speech comprehensible, accessible, and functional [22] (p. 138).

3. Theoretical Framework: Chick-Lit as a Genre

The genre of chick-lit is defined as a form of romantic comedy fiction [23]. The term's primary meaning is 'literature for young women', yet it also encompasses the pejorative connotations of the word 'chick' [15]. Conversely, the abbreviation 'lit' for 'literature' has been shown to automatically imply low quality [24] (p. 141). Consequently, as an informal, colloquial form of the term 'literature', 'lit' unambiguously suggests that the genre does not belong to the realm of 'high art' and should therefore be included in the broader field of popular culture [15]. Chick-lit, a genre of women's fiction [25], is characterised by its subject matter, characters, audience, and narrative style. As an organic component of mass culture, it constitutes a globalised women-oriented literary genre that nevertheless manifests itself with the particularities of each national/regional context [26]. Despite the presence of differences and difficulties in the classification of the field typologically, certain factual and stylistic characteristics serve to distinguish chick-lit from other literary genres; the most significant of these characteristics are the simplistic literary conventions, the superficial plots, which are generally based on the juxtaposition of events, and the rife use of comic elements.

Despite the apparent heterogeneity of plots and styles in chick-lit, the presence of a central female character who is seeking personal fulfillment is a defining characteristic of the genre [27]. Indeed, classic chick-lit novels tend to feature a young, unmarried woman living in a modern urban environment and attempting to balance her professional and personal life as the central heroine [28] (p. 85). However, this trend has undergone so many revisions that the only common aspect of individual novels with the original genre is that they are written by women for women [29] (p. 2). Still, this genre of romantic fiction, chick-lit, is characterised by a more or less fixed plot that typically commences with the inception of a romantic relationship, progressing to the quest for love, which is initially realised, subsequently lost, and ultimately, the protagonist reaches a point of acceptance that love can transcend all obstacles [30] (p. 4).

On this basis, chick-lit can be approached as a reworking of fairy tales in a post-modern context [31]. Utilising numerous conventions of intimate fairy tales, chick-lit places emphasis on the relationships of the protagonists and their pursuit of the romantic ideal of 'true love'. However, it simultaneously creates a distinction from these narratives by filtering the central story of the fairy tale through an axis shaped by the influence of feminist thought on popular culture in the late 20th century. This concept has been termed a 'post-feminist fairy tale' and it can be defined as a narrative that features a deliberate idealisation of the 'true female self' [31]; that is, a woman who is capable of achieving success in all areas of life. The post-feminist fairy tale, understood as a reinterpretation of the fairy tale within a popular post-feminist context, is a subgenre of fairy tale that has been presented through the chick-lit genre, as well as in subsequent film and television adaptations, including the well-known cases of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and The City* [23] (pp. 4–5).

Chick-lit provides a more sophisticated depiction of the lives, relationships and ambitions of the women it portrays, albeit primarily in a context where the 'anticipation of happiness' has been largely superseded by the active pursuit and experience of 'present pleasure' [32] (p. 208). For instance, in this relatively recent popular genre of romantic fiction, the phenomenon of heroines being killed when they do not find the 'right man'—as is often the case in older genres of literature—is absent. On the contrary, heroines often 'do all succeed', even when they do not achieve the 'ultimate goal' [33]. Despite the persistent presence of the romantic fairy tale in women's lives as de-

picted in chick-lit, the themes of 'true love' and 'happily ever after' frequently become secondary to the pursuit of self-transformation and freedom of expression [31].

However, in contrast to the conventional Harlequin-style romance novels, the genre of chick-lit provides a more authentic depiction of the life of a single woman and the relationships she forms [34] (p. 30). In any case, although these works represent a new direction in popular women's writing [35] (p. 6), the chick-lit books that began to emerge in the late 1990s share many similarities with previous novels produced for women; these include both a focus on a 'female voice and narrative perspective' and their appeal to and preference for a female audience [36] (pp. 192–195). In this text, the frequent use of first-person narration as a literary technique is a hallmark of chick-lit, connecting it to the oeuvre of women's fiction from previous generations [23] (p. 4). The employment of a first-person, confessional style in chick-lit serves to foster the reader's identification with the heroines; a stylistic preference which draws parallels with contemporary forms of memoirs and autobiographies [25] (p. 256). In addition, as previously stated, the heroines demonstrate a form of self-deprecating humour that functions as a form of entertainment and facilitates a deeper connection between readers and the protagonists of the stories; thus, offering a more authentic representation of human nature [37] (p. 49).

Still, concerns regarding the ideological nature of romantic fiction have been a recurring theme in feminist thought for over half a century; i.e., during the 1960s and 1970s, romantic novels were regarded as a 'seductive trap' that legitimised women's subordination to men, perpetuating it as a form of 'false consciousness' [14] (pp. 490–491). They were regarded as a peculiar cultural instrument of patriarchal power that hinders women from acknowledging their actual living conditions, while also diverting their individual and collective attention from matters of greater significance to which they should direct their actions. However, even in contemporary chick-lit in which women are presented as having achieved social positions and goals that were unthinkable at the beginning of the 20th century, they still face a great deal of discrimination and inequality, proving that patriarchy continues to permeate their lives. Traditionally oriented approaches pervade the genre of chick-lit, exerting a profound influence on the lives of the protagonists, even in the most progressive texts of the genre; a phenomenon which persists despite the emphasis on the importance of personal choice and self-determination for women [15].

More specifically, chick-lit, as a post-feminist romance, may be defined as an ideal type of neoliberal subject maximalism, insofar as it is both a cause and a symptom of a post-modern culture that, in one respect, has 'modernised' the concept of marriage and, in another respect, has 'privatised' emotion, in the sense of complete individualisation in the field of intimate relationships [38] (p. 72). This genre reinterprets the traditional romance narrative in a manner that not only fails to fundamentally challenge patriarchal logic, but also does not allow for more complex explorations of concepts such as power, subjectivity, and desire. Instead, it offers a rather monolithic support for the 'salvation of women' through the pleasures of the body and the presence of a 'good man' in their lives [14] (p. 500). It is evident that, despite the common depiction of heroines in chick-lit as naive, lacking in self-assurance and in need of 'rescue from their independence', these characters are more dynamic and demonstrate a greater degree of determination to combat and resolve their issues in comparison to characters in other fictional texts [39] (p. 238). However, it is important to note that this dynamism is often confined to the domain of sexuality; consequently, the 'liberating' discourse on sexuality in chick-lit functions merely as a facade for more conventional female aspirations, such as marriage and monogamy [39] (pp. 247–248). In this context, chick-lit can be understood as a reinvention of the codes of romanticism within the paradigm of post-feminist consumer culture, wherein sexual prowess and disciplined physiques are often presented as women's primary assets [40].

For sure, the intricate issue of sexuality naturally gives rise to a plethora of questions that extend beyond the scope of this analysis. However, it is also intrinsically linked to other aspects more closely related to style, aesthetics, and communication. For instance, in order to appeal to female readers and facilitate immediate recognition of chick-lit novels on the shelves, the sexually oriented marketing of chick-lit focuses on book covers that are typically brightly coloured and feature images that refer to the overall style, such as lipstick, handbags, cocktail glasses,

and stiletto heels [36] (p. 194). This reasoning underpins the clear intention of chick-lit books as objects of consumption, thereby providing readers with a 'safe outlet' for their own consumerist fantasies and reinforcing the luxurious lifestyle as the primary means of creating identity and achieving success in both the personal and professional spheres. In other words, by undermining many of the concerns of modern professional women through consumerism, these novels provide at least a temporary illusion of 'having it all' [41] (p. 220). The combination of consumerism and romanticism gives rise to a potent literary genre that taps into the fantasies and desires of readers, thereby providing a distinctive collective substitute characterised by incessant and unending consumption [41] (p. 237).

The commercially oriented dimension of chick-lit has provoked further debate [28] (p. 85). Chick-lit may initially appear to be a literary form in its own right, but, due to its commercialised nature and numerous television adaptations, it is directly related to popular entertainment and culture. Consequently, it is also indicative of the ongoing discourse surrounding the relative merits of 'high' and 'popular' culture [34] (p. 33). Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to prejudge the literary merit of a single work of chick-lit, or the genre as a whole, without first conducting a thorough investigation. To do so would be to align oneself with a long-standing tradition of disparaging female writers and their readers. Adopting this position does not, of course, render the literary value of chick-lit impossible to examine and critique; rather, it necessitates that such an endeavour should be undertaken with full awareness of how female writers have historically struggled to make their presence felt in the field of literature [37] (p. 48).

It is evident that feminist thought has established a circumspect relationship with chick-lit, given that, whilst it signifies a noteworthy contribution to women's literature with regard to its overall influence and popularity, it is perceived by the fundamental critical perspective to perpetuate the detrimental concept that women must identify the 'ideal partner' to attain contentment [33]. Conversely, the genre has been criticised as trivial and superficial due to its superficial treatment of women's experiences [42]. However, there exist forms of chick-lit that are more politically oriented and more critical of the prevailing social circumstances. It is precisely this capacity to address intricacy and uncertainty in contemporary society that renders this genre so appealing to contemporary women writers. By employing humour and irony, these writers are able to explore and address complex realities, contributing to the evolution of gender relations, the redefinition of women's roles, and, ultimately, the construction of new female subjectivities.

Still, the debate on chick-lit is extremely polarised between its outright rejection as meaningless fiction and its unquestioning acceptance by its readers, who claim that chick-lit reflects the realities of life for modern single women [23] (p. 2). More specifically, reactions are divided between those who expect women's literature to promote feminist political activism, represent women's struggles against patriarchal culture, and offer images of dynamic women who inspire, and those who argue that even romantic novels should depict the reality of everyday life faced by women in modern life [23] (p. 9). However, it is clear that, in most instances, there is frequently a discrepancy between the lifestyle portrayed in various forms of chick-lit and the experiences of the majority of women globally [43] (p. 96).

4. Results and Discussion: Sexist and Anti-Feminist Representations

The emphasis on the narrative depiction of events, as opposed to the exploration of the multifaceted nature of human behaviour and social conditions, is a fundamental characteristic of romance novels [44]. In this particular context, the two authors have elected to refrain from conducting a critical examination of the various claims, actions and events in their stories. Specifically, with the exception of a few points in Dimoulidou's works, the authors avoid taking a position on both the developments and the utterances of the characters. In other words, the uncritical plot and the various stereotypes that are reproduced constitute an informal semantic and conceptual framework, in the sense that, in the absence of any critical approach to the attitudes and behaviours of the protagonists, every word and verbal expression constitutes a quasi-reasonable reflection of social reality.

Despite the potential of an ethnographic study to provide insight into this matter [45], the present study is constrained in its objective to categorise the instances in

which anti-feminist constructions of femininity and forms of gender discrimination against women are identified as characteristic features of sexist discourse [18] (pp. 65–66). This classification seeks to emphasise a series of feminist arguments regarding the use of anti-feminist and frequently misogynistic discourse, as well as the more general social construction of gender inequality. These elements, it is argued, collectively constitute a restrictive and ultimately harmful framework for women. It is important to acknowledge that the ensuing categories encompass particular forms of discrimination and challenges, yet they do not represent an exhaustive compendium of all manifestations of sexism. The four categories presented in the following sections have not been arranged according to any particular gradation of importance; still, the aim was to present them in a manner that maintains semantic continuity. Finally, it is imperative to recognise that these categories are accompanied by an illustrative yet necessarily circumscribed reference to the numerous points that have been identified.

4.1. Violence and Abusive Language against Women

The discussion around sexism and sexist discourse must commence with the contentious issue of gender-based violence. In this context, it is imperative to not only effectively identify various violent attitudes and behaviours, but also to emphasise that the societies themselves that ultimately tolerate, accept and consent, primarily through silence, to the desire of certain men to completely control women and their lives [46]. It is precisely in this context that in the romance novels of the selected sample—mainly those by Manta [8–10]—there are many depictions of gender-based violence and abuse in which no critical accusation is made. In certain cases, the victim is even held accountable, with the violence they endure being justified through words such as, "I didn't want to, but you always make me lose control..." [8] (p. 444) and "when a woman goes crazy, there's only one way to bring her back to her senses!" [8] (p. 523).

More generally, the portrayal of numerous scenes of brutality in the novels serves to render overt violence against women an 'inevitable' social condition, and the absence of explicit condemnation constitutes a form of tolerance. While it could be contended that gender-based, domestic and sexual violence are endemic nowadays [47], this is not synonymous with presenting them as self-evident and therefore justifiably acceptable. The same applies to the reproduction of the 'rape culture', when one heroine wonders: "since no one is going to help me, I let myself be caressed and think that if you can't avoid rape, at least enjoy it" [3] (p. 205). This is clearly a reference that directly refers to the notorious 'rape myth', according to which women 'enjoy' being raped, and not to the consensual sexual fetishization of the 'rape scenario'.

The abusive language directed towards women that is constantly referred to in the books of the sample is along the same lines. In a broader sense, gender inequality is deeply entrenched in the fabric of everyday sexist language use, leading to its perception as a 'natural' and self-evident form of expression. However, it also functions as an insidious form of domination and violence that remains largely unnoticed. The unequal treatment of women through language constitutes what is known as 'linguistic sexism', or, in other words, sexist language is a language that insults, degrades, and devalues women [48]. It is evident that a critical approach to language does not merely signify 'political correctness' or the redefining of linguistic practices; rather, it constitutes an indispensable demand for a transformation in meanings, perceptions, and beliefs [49] (pp. 88–91). In this particular context, the documentation and emphasis placed on sexist phenomena in public texts is regarded as a preliminary measure towards the limiting—wishfully eradication—of antiquated concepts, perceptions, and beliefs pertaining to contentious gender relations and asymmetrical social roles.

With regard to the obvious derogatory references to women in the novels under study, the most prominent and prevalent form of abusive language found in most of them is the unproblematic use of the term 'whore'. The following phrases are intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject matter; i.e., the term 'whore' is used as an easy way to insult a woman, e.g., "disgusting whore!" [10] (p. 110), as a way to criticize her choices, e.g., "the whole of Corfu would know what kind of whore Agapinos' only daughter is chasing married men" [7] (p. 231), and as a criticism of her appearance, e.g., "I can't stand overly painted eyes. They remind me of a whore" [3] (p. 20). More generally, the stigmatization and further devaluation and mar-

ginalization of sex workers are evident in these references, e.g. "she felt very cheap with what she was doing, something more than a prostitute" [8] (p. 154), while the familiar vulgar generalizations are not lacking, e.g., "don't worry, they're all whores" [5] (p. 83). At this point, it should be clarified that in some cases, such as in *Without Applause* [8], the setting of the story in previous decades may not result in significant changes to the narrative. The narrative in question concerns situations that could conceivably occur in the modern era. However, it functions as a 'facilitating framework' for the effortless juxtaposition of misogynistic abuse as a quasi-acceptable form of criticism of women.

It is evident that references to 'immoral' women and reprehensible choices and behaviours are not limited to the aforementioned vulgarities. There are also more 'refined' forms of disapproval, which are primarily associated with the delineation between 'ladies' and 'non-ladies.' A salient example of this is the inquiry: "Do you consider those so-called ladies who bring their husbands in through one door and their lovers out through the other to be more serious? [...] There are real ladies, I think" [3] (p. 74). Indeed, while half of the novels of the sample concern stories revolving around the protagonist's infidelity, when there are references, even by the heroines themselves, to the infidelities of other women, these are strongly judged and accompanied by derogatory and disparaging expressions, e.g. "the lady who so easily spread her legs for him" [8] (p. 65). Undoubtedly, these are manifestations of internalised sexism, defined as a situation in which individuals, including women, criticise other women for not conforming to or responding to the restrictive stereotypes and anti-feminist demands of the patriarchal order [50].

In this context, a series of arguments against female sexuality are presented with unbearable levity throughout the books of the sample. To begin with, critical references to female self-determination and sexual liberation are pervasive and focus primarily on younger women. For instance, "Despoina was what we call a slut. At thirty, she already had two divorces and had slept with all the soldiers in Thessaloniki and the surrounding area. An independent female, without barriers or moral inhibitions when it came to sex" [5] (p. 101) and "others enjoy you [...] the worst thing [...] is that you enjoy them even more! [...] what kind of perversion do you hide inside you" [6] (p. 313). Indeed, even the discourse on the subject of sexual relations is not immune to the phenomenon of objectification and alienation, as evidenced by the following passage: "she is the whore of every handsome male in the neighbourhood who just wants to get rid of the unnecessary burden he feels in his balls" [3] (pp. 330–331). The reluctance to explicitly refer to female sexual desire is expressed through the puritanically oriented recourse to sex as a 'need', e.g. "she had a lot of sexual repression inside her and she had to vent it somewhere. And, as she grew older, so did her needs" [5] (p. 100).

In contemporary feminist terms, the practice of 'slut shaming', which involves the criticism of a woman's sexual behaviour, is frequently accompanied by a discourse pertaining to a female 'gold digging' strategy, that is, the pursuit of a wealthy partner. Illustrative of this phenomenon are expressions such as "young women do it standing up with a 'nice to meet you' [...] as soon as they smell money or a willing partner, they spread their legs like the Colossus of Rhodes" [3] (p. 51). Alternatively, they resort to extremely offensive body shaming (mocking a person for the size or shape of their body), e.g., "in the arms of an indifferent brunette, with so much silicone on her that you wondered if she had any left over" [8] (p. 382). Yet, where deprecation of the female body reaches absolutely disappointing levels is in the fatphobic references in Dimoulidou's novels. For instance, the author notes: "this fat cow, whose only male partner was Dodo, a dog [...] the fat one [...] And yet, she had found a man" [2] (p. 12), "she had bent over at the sight of the cow she had seen in the glass" [1] (p. 155), "at least Vassiliki isn't like a whale in a miniskirt" [5] (p. 52). It is important to note that in the case of Manta's works, the use of humour as a narrative choice is extremely limited. Consequently, there is no particular scope for interpreting the various anti-feminist condemnations as a peculiar form of 'post-feminist irony' [39]. In contrast, Dimoulidou's novels are distinguished by a pronounced inclination towards humour, albeit of a mocking and disapproving nature, primarily directed towards women.

The derogatory comments that follow the numerous instances of slut shaming are those about foolish women who behave like 'little women'. In general, the verbal disparagement of an individual described as 'acting like a woman' is indicative of their behaviour being in accor-

dance with the perceived flaws of the female gender. It is evident that the deployment of derogatory terminology pertaining to female identity, exemplified by the contentious use of the term 'little woman', is a salient indicator of this phenomenon. While this is a reproach found only in Manta's novels, it is important to highlight her constant insistence on such references. For instance, the following phrases have been recorded: "you're not some ignorant little girl" [6] (p. 430), "it doesn't suit you to behave like a timid little woman!" [8] (p. 326), "little woman! Simple-minded, perhaps even naive" [9] (p. 41), "she started whining like a weak woman" [10] (p. 73). The pejorative terms are primarily directed towards young women, who are, to a great degree, the focus of social interest. This is because their 'innocence and freshness' is seen as a collective dispute and is indicative of the androcentric fantasy of sexuality and the patriarchal order. If anything, the self-criticism of female characters is typically an exaggerated form of self-flagellation that, according to the logic of chick-lit, does not invariably encompass genuine introspection and reflexivity or a dispassionate understanding of the factors that may have led them to make 'wrong choices'; something that, all things considered, is a fundamental aspect of the human condition.

4.2. Forms and Fields of Social Pressure on Women

The external social pressures to which women are subjected in order to conform to gender norms have been shown to engender a number of difficulties. It is an established fact that gender relations of domination have a detrimental effect on women in all areas of their lives, including intimate relationships, sexuality, education and employment. A prime example of this is that the right to choose one's identity and personal style, the management of sexuality, and the formation of the self have essentially only been won by, mainly Western, young and professionally independent women [51]. This phenomenon can be attributed to the long-term process of socialisation experienced by women, which has led to the cultivation of specific attitudes concerning their position in society. These attitudes are formed from an early age through the influence of various interconnected socialising agents [52]. This is particularly evident in contexts where, by and large, the attempts to engage in conscious socialisation, devoid of sexist stereotypes, are at odds with the prevailing messages propagated by other agents and institutional spaces. These spaces often perpetuate gender discrimination and negative consequences for women.

A significant area of social pressure pertains to the well-documented tendency of Greek mainstream culture to portray the decision of women of a certain age not to marry as a 'problem', under the assumption that there must be 'some reason' for not following this informal yet imposed social norm; for instance, "you will remain on the shelf, unloved, unfulfilled, alienated" [5] (p. 30) and "how could I show up at her wedding when I would be the only unmarried person there?" [2] (p. 12). This predicament is further exacerbated by the contradictions inherent in bourgeois marriage, which is often regarded as a 'restoration' of a woman's role, typically confined to household life and excluded from active participation in the workforce and the public sphere. This social structure often necessitates a significant personal sacrifice on the part of the woman, who submits to an alienated private life in exchange for the perceived security of a traditional social/gender role. A common sentiment expressed in such contexts is the belief that a woman who opts for marriage and motherhood is expected to assume the role of a homemaker, thereby sacrificing her professional aspirations and contributing to the household; e.g., "in my place, a woman who gets married takes care of her household!" [6] (p. 513). This phenomenon is particularly salient among women who are engaged in academic or professional pursuits. These individuals often encounter perceptions of 'inconsistency' in the characteristics of their social status, stemming from their concurrent possession of social positions of divergent prestige; for instance, "What business do you have, a married woman with a child, running around to schools? Stay at home and look after your family!" [10] (p. 343).

The above is usually framed by the broader social pressure of 'what will people say', i.e., the pervasive social pressure to conform to specific expectations dictated by external societal expectations. For example, "this story couldn't go on. What would people say..." [4] (p. 158) and "what will people say and who will take you after that?" [10] (p. 49). The social pressure to conform to specific expectations regarding one's appearance and behaviour, particular-

ly for women, is a persistent and pervasive phenomenon. This 'demand' is often characterised by a concern about how one's actions and presence will be perceived by others, particularly within the context of public spaces; e.g., "How will I walk around the neighbourhood? I'll be pointed at" [1] (p. 122) and "not only did she get married without ever giving the neighbourhood the right" [10] (p. 282). It is evident that the feminist perspective has been instrumental in challenging the pervasive misrepresentation and sexist, long-standing convention that the male-female dichotomy is intrinsically linked to the dichotomous distinction between public (for men) and private (for women) spheres.

For sure, social pressure on women is not confined to the issue of marriage, but extends to other domains, such as the expectation of virginity as a symbol of 'purity'; e.g., "the moral principles with which she was raised did not allow her to have relations with a man without being married" [6] (p. 377). However, if there is one issue on which the often latent but multifaceted pressure on women manifests itself, it is that of childbirth and the accompanying condemnation of abortion. Herein, the social construction of motherhood as the 'ultimate experience of emotional fulfilment', a concept consistently promoted in the novels of the selected sample, is predicated on the polyvalent regulation of childbearing within the context of a family, which is regarded as the zenith of an intimate relationship. In this context, the significance of a woman's life is only meaningful when she remains faithful to the values of motherhood [53]. For instance, "happiness is family and its warmth, and let the progressives say what they want! [...] By its very nature, motherhood is fulfilment for a woman!" [9] (p. 307) and "She wants to live, Mina [the baby in her womb]. Don't kill her..." [4] (p. 165).

The concept of compulsive motherhood or, as it has been stated, the 'mother of all sexism' [53], is myopically considered the 'most fundamental' component of femininity and a necessary vehicle for a woman's fulfilment. This form of socialisation occurs from an early age and limits or discourages women from making choices that appear to conflict with the 'duties and obligations' of childbirth and child-rearing. This phenomenon can be attributed to a protracted and exhaustive socialisation process concerning the role of women and their position within society. This socialisation process is profoundly characterised as 'sexist' and functions as the catalyst, manifestation, and outcome of the disadvantaged position of women due to the prevailing social inequality of power and authority [52]. Still, this social process is not a straightforward linear causation, but rather a recurrent and cumulative phenomenon. Herein, women are disapproved of when they fail to fulfil their role as 'reproductive machines' and are applauded when they align themselves with the patriarchally defined role of motherhood. This is always in a context of absence or disregard of their individual desires, as well as the various circumstances in their lives. In essence, the notion of promoting women's self-realisation through motherhood, with the concepts of sacrifice and selflessness being central themes of this lifecycle, represents a pervasive stereotypical motif; a motif which is inextricably linked to the naturalistic conception of femininity and the long-standing anti-feminist social construction of the family.

Anyhow, the pervasive social pressures on women do not exclusively pertain to the role of the mother, but rather extend to various other domains. Specifically, we have the stressful and guilt-inducing 'internalised compulsion' of constant beauty and youth preservation [54], which is mainly found in Dimoulidou's novels. To illustrate this point, one might consider the following phrases: "at what age does menopause begin? Somewhere around forty. And then a woman is finished. Any sexual desire goes out the window. It's like a car without an engine [...] that's how Fofo was. A harmless forty-something who was desperately trying to stop the ravages of time" [1] (p. 200), "she threw herself into food and two years later she looked a decade older" [5] (pp. 19–20), "they saw him in an old woman's car [...] Hey, isn't he forty?" [3] (pp. 86). Consequently, the condition of youth is regarded by women as an 'insurmountable premise' in terms of beauty, sexuality and life. This is substantiated by a discourse that conveys unbearable pressure, which is occasionally characterised by reprehensible ageism. In fact, it is clear that the pressures experienced by women are compounded when they encounter multiple obstacles concurrently, resulting in a profound and debilitating accumulation of intersecting challenges [55].

4.3. Anti-Feminist Stereotypes

Feminist thought has attempted to draw society's attention to the beliefs regarding expectations for wom-

en's attitudes and behaviours. This is due to the fact that misleading and, to a large extent, sweeping generalisations give rise to further prejudices, which have obvious negative consequences for women. While the forms of social pressure previously mentioned encompass stereotypical and essentialist/naturalistic conceptions of femininity, they have been distinguished in the context of this analysis as manifestations of readily identifiable 'social anxieties'. The stereotypes referenced in this section primarily function as indirect or latent forms of social pressure and anti-feminist rhetoric, as they are presented as established realities and as 'actual truths'.

In this context, the most prevalent negative stereotype, and essentially blatant stigmatisation, is the special nature of female 'hysteria and madness' [56]. Indicatively, "women are crazy after all, he thought. He had heard it on television in a Greek film [...] Phew! he said to himself. Thank goodness I'm a man..." [4] (p. 243), "Are you talking about that crazy woman? She, my child, lost her mind a long time ago" [2] (p. 275), "he had no idea about female hysteria [...] the often explosive temperament of women and their irrationality" [8] (p. 143), "He was in for your mother, but the crazy woman drove him away..." [7] (p. 419). The accusations concerning women being irrational and hysterical are not limited to the level of reference, but rather function as an articulation of reprehensible behaviour, thereby ultimately justifying gender-based violence against women, e.g., "his girlfriend became furious. She easily slipped into hysteria and forced him to hit her to bring her to her senses" [10] (p. 174). Moreover, such claims frame a woman's emotional outbursts as uncontrollable situations, e.g., "She screamed and shouted, broke everything in front of her, and if his father hadn't stepped in to stop the hysteria, Fokas didn't know what he would have done" [6] (p. 182). Equally problematic are the references to 'frantic' women who wish to vent their feelings by resorting to violence, which is presented as a 'cute expression of psychological turmoil', e.g. "if she didn't love the vase [...] she would have thrown it at his head [...] she looked at the salad and a desire was born in her. To throw it at his head!" [9] (pp. 31, 173).

The assertion that jealousy is an inherently feminine characteristic is a self-evident one. It is an established notion that women are perceived as envious competitors in relation to one another's romantic partners, e.g., "all the chatterboxes on the beach have their eyes on him [...] all the magpies who watch me with jealousy" [3] (pp. 339). This dynamic often engenders a state of discomfort among the women involved, e.g., "every female presence next to him caused her unbearable jealousy" [10] (p. 153). Furthermore, women's jealousy reflects a sense of insecurity in the presence of 'potential rivals', e.g., "the elegance of the women in there should make me feel insignificant" [2] (p. 246). It is generally accepted that such attitudes and behaviours typically form part of a more extensive context of misunderstanding, primarily attributable to 'gender oppositionality' [57]. The escalation of 'women's difference' based on the familiar rhetoric of 'female creatures' is also a common phenomenon, e.g., "women are mysterious creatures" [1] (p. 86). Yet, at times, this perception can give rise to perilous consequences, e.g. "despite the dozens of women who had passed through his life, he had never bothered to understand these creatures, to learn how they think as human beings" [6] (p. 484) and "the girl had guts... and, unfortunately, a brain in her head [...] What a strange creature!" [6] (p. 523).

More generally, the 'mystery of female nature' may manifest itself in different circumstances each time, but it is treated as a thorny and unexplored field that does not leave space for analysis and interpretation, except for the description of linear and unmediated attitudes and behaviours. A prime example of this can be found in Manta's repeated references to female boredom as the root cause of all infidelity. The initial emotional response to the experience of boredom in women is one of physical sensation of being 'suffocated', which in turn can lead to the immediate discovery or formation of prospects for an (extramarital) affair. For example, "she suddenly grew tired of the dull life that Stelios had painted for her [...] again that feeling of suffocation..." [10] (pp. 165, 339), "I'm suffocating. To death! I feel like screaming from boredom!" [9] (p. 187), "she didn't want to admit that she was suffering again [...] she was suffocating [...] what she had wasn't enough for her" [6] (pp. 305–306), "boredom struck Polyxeni without her realizing it [...] She felt suffocated" [6] (p. 359), "and then she began to suffocate... Boredom and loneliness struck her at the same time" [6] (p. 458). Nonetheless, an exception can be noted in *Snow in the Fire* [5], in the sense

that it has approached the protagonist's boredom with greater detail and, furthermore, there is no 'automatic transition' from monotony to a redemptive connection with a lover, as the heroine is presented as happy because of the joy her professional activity brings her.

In fact, the manner in which the state of boredom is invoked to justify the decision to embark upon an affair is so repetitive and uniform that it would not be an exaggeration to describe these novels as 'manuals of infidelity'. It is evident that the crux of the issue lies not in the puritanical critique aimed at rationalising infidelity, nor in the attribution of culpability to men who are unable to cope with 'female maximalism'. It is the restrictive social construction of femininity that presents women as lacking agency and 'subjectivity beyond intimate relationships'. This is due to the fact that their freedom of choice is constrained by 'linear reactions' that do not encompass other possibilities, even in their thoughts. For instance, this could entail demanding a higher quality of life and greater self-governance in their personal life, or liberating themselves from their relationships by pursuing their autonomy more dynamically and liberally. Instead, they remain rather indecisive and 'passive' in the face of the difficulties of marriage and cohabitation until, once again, a man, this time as a lover, comes to 'save' them; thus, reproducing and intensifying their general hetero-determination (see next section), since they go from being the wives of one man to being the mistresses of another.

Finally, it is important to note the presence of a stereotypical approach to women's lives, which can be attributed to patriarchal culture and a male-centred view of the world. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this can be understood as a collective projection of 'misogynistic repression'. In Manta's novels, a conspicuously fatalistic perspective on femininity is evident, characterised by a belief in the predetermined fate of women. This notion serves as a legitimising framework, providing a convenient justification for the perceived "misfortunes" of women. In other words, it concerns a peculiar constant for femininity that entails inevitable difficulties and unavoidable troubles, a fate that, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, allows, sometimes with a sadistic tone, the juxtaposition of an anti-feminist teleology. Despite the plethora of references to these assertions in her novels, some notable examples are: "Fate was angry with her self-confidence... It punished her... very harshly" [7] (p. 70), "something big had unexpectedly entered her life and it was foolish to think she could control it. So she would let fate chart her course. She would not react, she would not struggle with herself anymore, but she would not provoke anything either" [8] (p. 379), "she mocked all romantic novels [...] The time had come to mock destiny" [10] (p. 312). It goes without saying that only women are at the mercy of fate in these novels, unlike men, who either maintain a relative autonomy from it or are influenced solely as a reflection of the 'female destiny'.

4.4. Hetero-Determination of Women

Within a specific narrative framework, the hetero-determination of women in relation to men can, under certain conditions, constitute an emancipation-oriented dialectic between the social construction of femininity and masculinity. Hence, in the chick-lit novels of the sample, this hetero-determination is part of a pervasive gender-oppositional approach; e.g., "women are one thing and men are another" [3] (pp. 49). This perspective works, for the most part, against women; e.g., "a man can be as many years older than a woman as he wants. It's not the same thing. A woman is not the same as a man. She cannot do what a man does" [4] (p. 108) and "the man is the one who keeps a home. The woman takes care of it, and if he is a bum, it falls apart [...] The man is the one who will lead her to do what she does; she does not have it in her, especially when there are children. She doesn't like sleeping around, it's not in her nature, she wants to love and be loved in order to be with someone else" [5] (pp. 258–259).

The hetero-determination of femininity, due to the subject matter of chick-lit, is mainly highlighted in the controversial and complex issue of intimate and sexual relationships. In the majority of the novels of the sample, the concept of love between two people is predominantly associated with passionate sexual desire. The crux of the issue under discussion here is the monological construction of women's gender identity through sexual intercourse. This is an experience that is 'offered by a man', thus, attributing one-dimensional elements of hetero-determination as if women are not an integral participant and the active half in a heterosexual encounter. Furthermore, within the prevail-

ing social reality, there is a constant dissemination of contradictory messages concerning female sexuality, which serves to further cultivate feelings of rejection and inadequacy, whilst also indirectly stigmatising sexual pleasure and confining it to moral codes that impose severe limitations on the scope for emancipation and self-governance [58].

A particularly intriguing facet of chick-lit is the manner in which contradictory (post-)feminist discourses coexist. For instance, in the context of sexual relationships, a discourse of freedom, liberation and the pursuit of pleasure prevails, which coexists with the equally strong belief that monogamy imprisons the true desires of married women [14] (p. 500). The most fundamental problem here is not so much the identification of these discourses, but the fact that it is extremely difficult to exercise criticism in such a fluid, ambiguous, and controversial context. This is due to the fact that, amidst the plethora of contradictory post-feminist arguments, it is quite challenging to form a framework of questioning that transcends the language of extreme individualism. That is to say, it is difficult to adopt a critical perspective that goes beyond the dominance of the so-called 'tyranny of choice' [59], as well as the relativistic limits of self-will, self-determination, and self-realisation. This is a rather 'shifting sand' related to the fact that the promise of freedom, which should essentially mean the elimination of all prohibitions and restrictions on the exercise of individual choice, has been transformed into a new form of restriction and pressure that calls on women to follow and not deviate from a logic that makes sexual liberation a 'new obligation' from which 'no one is free' [60] (p. 448).

The most common references that reflect the above have to do with the fact that women 'are and feel like women' only in the context of a passionate romantic relationship. Indicatively, "she needed to feel like a woman" [5] (pp. 211–212), "I made sure to give him a pleasurable evening [...] I felt like a woman again" [2] (pp. 166–167), "she began to feel like a real woman" [10] (p. 121), "to see what it's like to finally be a woman" [8] (p. 88), "he had made her a woman in a unique and dreamlike way" [6] (p. 185). At this juncture, it is conceivable to hypothesise that this is merely an 'outdated' yet alternative means of articulating the sensation engendered by a sublime sexual experience. However, even if this is the case, the ostensibly modest, almost puritanical way in which 'good sex' is described has a disproportionate effect on the definition of sexuality. Moreover, other references confirm that this restrictive framework is the prevailing paradigm through which the female sexual experience is approached. For example, "women who lack nothing and yet have nothing in their beds. They are half-people. No matter how you look at it, a person without a partner is half a person. It is a form of disability" [3] (pp. 79) and "she voluntarily necrotized every aspect of her female existence when her husband was unable to have sex for a certain period of time" [10] (p. 349).

Sexual relationships function hetero-determinatively for women on other levels as well. Firstly, it is important to note that in this context, sexual intercourse with a man automatically establishes a woman as his 'possession/property'. This notion is encapsulated in well-known, albeit anachronistic, phrases such as "she was his again" [9] (p. 333), "she was his, she lived to satisfy his every fantasy in turn" [10] (p. 123), "now you are mine" [3] (pp. 160). Moreover, the novels of the sample indirectly reproduce societal pressures on women to remain in a state of intimate partnership, perpetuating the idea that sexual activity is a prerequisite for maintaining youth. For instance, "I look like a teenager [...] Fabrizio is a mobile beauty institute. In a week, he has taken two decades off me [...] on the contrary, his face [...] has aged five years [...] for him [the intense pace of sex] is additive, while for me it is subtractive" [3] (pp. 150–151) and "a woman's makeup is the man next to her" [1] (p. 148). It is a commonly held belief that a 'fulfilling' sexual life is an important component of personal contentment, offering numerous benefits. However, within the context of androcentric heteronormativity, it is imperative to assume that a woman's youth and happiness are solely contingent on a man. Consequently, any woman's joy is perceived as the result or reflection of a man who 'does something well'; e.g. "deep down, what she couldn't stand was their gaze, which exuded their happy personal life like a fragrance [...] The look of a woman who is enjoying herself in the arms of her man can be recognized by another woman" [10] (p. 357).

This 'capability' of women is part of the pervasive gender antagonism and the presumably dominant naturalistic social construction of gender in these novels; thus, in social aspects that are key to sexism as a system of ideas.

In this context, it is unsurprising that a non-productive and rather defensive gender-based collective narcissism has emerged, as evidenced by references such as: "men who love are heterosexual beings. Their world begins and ends with us" [9] (p. 81) and "unfortunately, men, being weaker creatures, cannot be alone for long. They have learned from birth to be cared for [...] While women [...] do not feel this need [...] Since we are by nature the stronger sex, we will also suffer the consequences. That is why we live longer than they; that is why we are biologically seven years more mature. At least that is what the experts say. No one can go against the laws of nature" [2] (p. 317).

Overall, it could be said that, in the post-feminist romance of these novels, an 'endless companionability' is reintroduced as if the profoundly alienating social compulsion in both traditional and modern societies for women to 'settle down' or 'end up' in a relationship with a man is merely the ultimate life goal. To summarise, the patriarchal cultural superstructure that stipulates that a woman must 'belong to a man' is frequently superseded by a post-feminist and androcentric societal pressure on women 'not to be alone'. In this sense, the references in these chick-lit novels that monologically emphasise the emancipatory dimensions of the heroines' autonomy and self-determination should not be completely rejected nor uncritically adopted, precisely because of the complexity of the genre and its ability to simultaneously encompass different, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory meanings [60] (pp. 449–450).

5. Conclusions

Chick-lit, as with any term that carries social connotations, is a concept that is the product of power confrontations and is, consequently, a controversial one. The genre is distinguished by some relatively clear factual and stylistic characteristics, despite the inherent fluidity of any typological categorization in the related fields of study. The focus of chick-lit texts is the plot, which revolves around the life of a woman in the modern world and her efforts to survive and succeed on a personal, professional and social level. As a quintessential form of romantic fiction, it is written by women and primarily read by women. The distinguishing characteristic of this genre is not the presence of specific literary virtues, but rather the tendency to present a narrative of a heroine's story that is typically simplified and easily comprehensible. Despite the heterogeneity of national manifestations of chick-lit, their texts invariably feature an unavoidable romantic narrative. The Greek chick-lit production, in the majority of cases, eschews the systematic use of the comic element that characterises principally Anglo-American works and incorporates to a greater extent elements of tragedy and people's history. Nevertheless, the narratives adhere to the fundamental logic of a popular, accessible, and commercially oriented romantic novel.

On this basis, the extracts from the selected books, which were summarised and classified in the present study, do not merely constitute explicitly sexist arguments and aspects of an anti-feminist construct of femininity, but in combination with the general lack of critical negotiation of the narratives, they render the novels in which they are found as rather sexist texts. The superficial nature of the non-analytical approach to the issues that arise in the development of chick-lit stories, as well as the constant appeal to emotion, not only leaves the supposedly 'self-evident and generally accepted' stereotypes unchallenged, but at the same time reproduces them, often justifies them, and ultimately legitimises them. This approach serves to reproduce a male-centric perspective and perpetuates the logic of a male-dominated social reality. However, it is noteworthy that Dimoulidou's narratives do make some references to the challenges faced by women in their daily lives, while also expressing some claims regarding the various pressures exerted on them. This concern stands in marked contrast to the rather misogynistic tone that pervades Manta's novels, where women are depicted as either foolish or powerless victims of their allegedly tragic fate; although, in several instances, her heroines manage to overcome their adversities with an 'apparent ease'.

It could also be argued that the individual references to women's emancipation in Dimoulidou's works concern only a certain group of women, those who 'deserve' self-determination. The exclusion in this context primarily pertains to women who are subjected to moral and aesthetic stigmatisation as a result of a series of socio-class and cultural characteristics, including their desperate search for a wealthy partner or their insatiable sexual appetite, which ultimately results in their categorisation as 'not ladies'. In sum, the concept of female autonomy in Dimoulidou's

novels is subjected to certain limitations. The emphasis placed on women's appearance and personal attributes may be perceived as a form of restrictive and stereotypical treatment. However, the social construction of female identity in her books appears to be more detached from that of men, in contrast to the persistent derogatory hetero-determination of women in Manta's narratives.

The extent to which the progressive aspects of the novels prevail over anti-feminist references and the prevailing sexist orientation remains an open question. This is due to the fact that, in a narrative devoid of critical depth, the limited yet genuine moments of liberation, vindication and self-determination experienced by the heroines are readily identifiable and represent particularly key points in the narrative progression of the stories. It is evident that, despite the significance of these points, they are subordinate to the pivotal element of the narrative, which is the denouement of the plot at the culmination of the novel. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that, in the novels of the selected sample, the narratives reach a conclusion in two distinct ways: either with a conventional union with a partner or with escape and withdrawal. In sum, the conclusion of the narratives corroborates that which the society in which the work is produced deems 'ideologically desirable'. Therefore, on the one hand, the people's imagination is fixated on the idealised notion of a romantic relationship, epitomised by the 'happily ever after' trope, which is predicated on the notion of identifying the ideal partner [30]. On the other hand, the pervasive myth of femininity as a state of inevitable suffering and torment persists, representing another iteration of the 'same old story' [61], where the happy ending in mythical or real-life narratives of women is linked exclusively to happiness in a distant reality or in the afterlife.

At this point, it is necessary to furnish further elucidations. Firstly, it is important to note that the present study does not involve a systematic search for sexist arguments in the romance novels under investigation. Despite the explicit declaration that the analysis is conducted from a feminist perspective, efforts were made to limit any subjective difficulties and distorting prejudices, so that the study would not slip into circular reasoning. Furthermore, notwithstanding the focus on points considered to be sexist, the novels of the sample contain, as previously mentioned, some emancipatory references, albeit very limited, fragmentary, often contradictory and, in any case, outside the general analytical framework. Unfortunately, the limitations of the text prevent further clarification on this point. However, it is imperative to emphasise that the adopted approach has nothing to do with the esteemed reputations of the two Greek authors, but rather with the critical evaluation of specific books from their extensive work. It is also important to note that this study does not presuppose that the two Greek novelists may be carriers or expressers of internalised sexism; however, it is significant that this type of literature is primarily authored 'by women for women'; in fact, being a woman is neither a political-ideological stance per se, nor does it necessarily imply an anti-sexist perception of social reality and human relations.

In conclusion, the textual representation of femininity in the chick-lit novels studied reveals the reproduction of anti-feminist discourses and the adoption of a rather sexist perspective. In other words, the analysis demonstrates the reproduction of what has been referred to as the 'same old stories' about women [61]. It is evident that an 'entire universe' of concepts is indirectly and often tacitly constructed, which not only attributes negative and derogatory gender characteristics to women, but also leaves unchallenged the perception of the construction of social reality by the dominant patriarchally-oriented culture [13] (p. 86). Furthermore, the anti-feminist and sexist nature of these books is indicative of a more extensive social tendency to relinquish various achievements in relation to women's rights and freedoms, a phenomenon that has ultimately proven to be detrimental to the mobilisation of social and political forces against the propagation of numerous regressive perceptions of women. In this context, the assertion that the identification of a negative image or stereotype in literature is insufficient to effect change, given its historical intertwinement with complex social practices, assumes added significance. Additionally, the employment of a non-sexist language is not capable of subverting the prevailing asymmetrical and unequal state of affairs in itself; rather, it necessitates a multi-level revision of the prevailing patriarchal social order [62] (p. 845). What is more, while the elimination of sexist language is widely regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving gender equal-

ity, it remains uncertain whether shifts in societal attitudes will ultimately result in the adoption of non-sexist language. Alternatively, the endeavour to formulate anti-sexist language may contribute to the development of a more progressive culture and social landscape [63]. In creating the prerequisites for the dissemination of a more inclusive and feminist-oriented language and cognitive framework that will contribute to the elimination of sexism, it is imperative to firstly emphasise the pervasive sexist and anti-feminist discourse that permeates various forms of social expression, including literature and, thus, the genre of (Greek) chick-lit.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

All data and information used in this study were obtained from original published documents. Details of these sources can be found in the References section, in accordance with citation guidelines.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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