

**REPRESENTATION OF URBAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN
SEX AND THE CITY SERIES : A POSTFEMINIST STUDY
THESIS RESUME**

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APPROVAL

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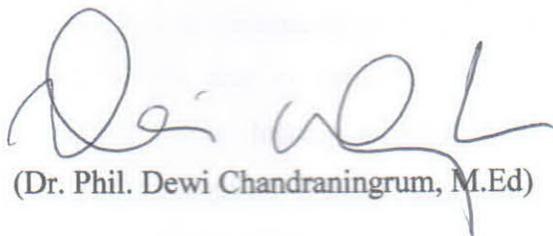
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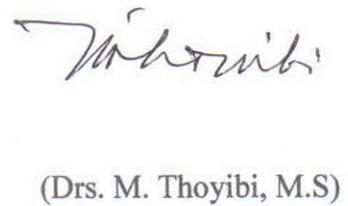
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CONSTRUCTION OF WOMANHOOD IN SEX AND THE CITY SERIES: A POSTFEMINIST STUDY

Nur Laila Abas

Abstract

This research is aimed to show the construction of womanhood in *Sex and the City* series based on the postfeminist perspective. This research is done by establishing three intentions, the first is analyzing how Urban American women is represented, the second is analyzing the dominant ideology by using representation theory and the third is analyzing the construction of womanhood by using postfeminism theory .

The study is a qualitative study. Type of data of the study is literary taken from two data sources: primary and secondary. The primary data sources taken from *Sex and the City Series* directed by Michael Patrick King and released in 1998. While the secondary data sources are materials taken from books and internet related to the study. Both data are collected through library research and analyzed by descriptive analyses.

The study comes to the following conclusion, many feminist issues are tackled in the show, such as gender-bias, limited constructions of femininity, dependency, and prejudice against single women. From those conclusions are suitable the characteristic of postfeminist such as the modernity of the women, aggressiveness, sisterhood, sexual empowerment, power, self awareness, and choices. Therefore the researcher finds a dominant ideology that appears in *Sex and the City* series. It is the ideals of female subjectivity present in postfeminism, these ideals not only develop the belief but demand it as an indicator of success that women can be independent and successful individuals.

Keywords: femininity, sisterhood, sexual empowerment, womanhood

A. Introduction

On June 6th, 1998, the cable network HBO aired the pilot episode of *Sex and the City*, a new comedy series chronicling the lives and loves of four single women living in New York City. The show's creator, Darren Star, was best known at the time for producing the long-running Fox TV series *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and its spin-off, *Melrose Place*. For *Sex and the City*, Star switched coasts, loosely adapting a book by the same name by Candace Bushnell, compiled from a number of her columns for *The New York Observer* (<http://sexandthecity.series.star-darren.html/>).

Sex and the City series is famous as a new genre of comedy series which talk frankly about woman, sex, and friendship. Therefore *Sex and the City Series* is becoming very interesting to be analyze. In *Re-Reading Sex and*

the City, Brasfield (2007: 130) examines the series' hegemonic feminist narrative by analyzing the series' methods of addressing issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Another analysis talk about the *Queerness of Sex and the And the City* (Gerhard, 2005: 37). Queerness mean narratives, images, and plot structures in the series can be read as queer, whether or not the characters, actors or writers involved identified themselves as queer. As queer involves attempts to weaken the naturalized and normalizing binaries of sexuality (straight vs. gay) and of gender (masculine vs. feminine), it offers important insights into the show's approach to the women's desires. In another research, Brenda Cossman (2009: 289) in her research *Sexual Citizens: Freedom, Vibrators, and Belonging*. The research is about the intimate public sphere explored in *Sex and the City* as part of the broader transformations sexual citizenship, a process of becoming, which transgresses the borders of old and domesticates the citizens of new. These women are strong and independent and unapologetically sexual. But they are also responsible market citizens, impeccably attired, with aspirations of relational and domestic happiness. They are part of the new sexual citizenry - a citizenry that, although highly sexualized, can be relied upon to self-discipline. And the last is *The Representation of Urban Upper Middle Class American Women Community in Sex and the City* by Yola Damayanti Ghani in 2005. The research is about the portrayal of urban upper middle class American women's community in *Sex and the City* is built upon constructed symbols related to the position of urban upper middle class American Women's community and how cosmopolitan the women are. The symbol's construction is characterized by singleness, upper middle class social status, well-established career, alienation, consumptiveness, independence, gender consciousness, and open mindedness in their sexual knowledge.

From that previous research, it can be concluded that *Sex and the City* was about modern women. Women who were independent, who could support themselves, who had power, who were confident. These types of representations through the four leading ladies were not common on TV, and

especially not in the entire principal cast. *Sex and the City* also broke a lot of taboos by talking about subjects that were not mentioned often on TV, mainly revolving around sexual issues, like sexually transmitted infections. For a lot of women, this is how they learnt about their own body, because it had previously been deemed socially unacceptable to talk about such matters. The matter of fact and sometimes comedic way these “forbidden” topics were dealt with allowed women a new way to view themselves.

Sex and the City series was divided up into six seasons altogether. The first season was twelve episodes (two discs of six), the second season was eighteen episodes (three discs of six), and the third season was eighteen episodes (three discs of six). Then the fourth season was eighteen episodes (three discs of six), the fifth season was eight episodes (two discs of four), and the final season was twenty episodes. In total, there were 94 episodes of *Sex and the City*. *Sex and the City* series was end on February 22nd, 2004.

Sex and the City Series are very interesting movie. There are several aspects that make these movie are very interesting. The first aspect is the title of the movie. "*Sex*" and "*the City*" combine the two fundamental aspects that give meaning to the characters. Sex is not simply an activity that takes place in an isolated room at a specific time. Sex, at least for the four women in the show, is the filter through which their entire lives emerge. The second part of the title concerns "The City", which is a central element that characterizes the environment where this economy of sex can exist. Cities are distinguished by their modern appeal. They encompass a wide number and variety of people packed into a relatively small, dense space. In the city, people experience physical closeness and emotional distance. There people are closer to other people all around us, yet due to the nature of a busy metropolis, we are left feeling farther away than ever before which is precisely where this particular brand of sex comes into play.

The second aspect that makes *Sex and the City* interesting is the character and characterization. The four women themselves are categorized by the material and physical elements of their character. They are defined as

much by the role they play within the group as they are by how they differ. Their hair color alone is indicative of four distinct personality types. Miranda has short red hair, and embodies the temperamental nature typically ascribed to redheads. But Miranda is the minority in more than just her hair. She is the only member of the group to be portrayed in a masculine way. She wears business suits and high-buttoned collars. As a stark contrast to Miranda, there is Samantha. Samantha is also a powerful figure, but her blond hair indicates a power that derives from her sexual appeal, and not Miranda's tempered restraint. Blonde hair is usually associated with a fun-loving ambitiousness. She is the older, wiser seductress of the group, whose age and experience only seems to add to the cool cynicism that accompanies her sexual escapades. Charlotte serves as the opposition to Samantha's cynical takes on life. By casting Charlotte as a brunette, the show's creator wants to build the connection between brown hair and down-home decency. Brunettes are considered the standard in western culture, and Charlotte personifies the acceptable, natural version of femininity. She is sweet, good natured, and the perpetual romantic, even in spite of her repeated failed relationships. Her femininity is reinforced by her emotional temperament, as she is the "crier" of the group, regardless of whether she is overly happy or overly sad. As the narrator, Carrie is the anchor of the show, and she is less of an archetype than her fellow friends. For instance, Carrie's hair is constantly changing in color and style. She represents the full spectrum of choices available to the stylish, modern woman, especially when it comes to physical appearance. Carrie's grappling with the diverse representations exhibited by her friends becomes the central storyline throughout the series. She fluctuates between Charlotte's innocence, Samantha's gumption, and Miranda's sensibility, all the while searching for a compromise that will finally bring her some sort of acceptance and fulfillment.

Another aspect that helps distinguish the four characters is the tone of their voice. Miranda has a flat voice that comes off completely asexual, Charlotte speaks with the perky high-pitched voice from her former

cheerleading days, and Samantha purrs her lines with a sultry, lower intonation. Carrie, once again, occupies that middle ground where her voice can take on the attributes of her particular persona in each scene. As the voice-over narrator, her voice is a projection of "every woman" (<http://hbo-movie.sex.and.thecity.html/>).

Last but not least, the interesting aspect is *Sex in the City* as one of the first shows to portray women in ways typically associated with men, especially in terms of their unabashed attitude towards sex, attempts to challenge our assumptions by transforming sex from a feminized act of modest submission to a masculinized act of power and control. The women in this show approach it from an unapologetic viewpoint, where they embraced the crass remarks and dismissive jokes usually uttered by men at the expense of women, objectifying the male gender in the same way that the female gender has claimed to be victimized in the past. Signs of this change are evident in the language rules during scenes where the women gather around the brunch table to chat. The women drink their staple cosmopolitans, and they speak liberally about their sexual exploits, feeding off the estrogen-charged environment. Although they are endowed with a certain power by assuming masculine qualities, the show makes it clear that the modern woman must also preserve her feminine allure. Carrie can wear a men suit, but she is still wearing an haute couture hat. Miranda can punch a man in the nose, but only as a creative come-on. Charlotte can stand by her "no sex on the first date" rule, but that does not mean she should not let him think he has a chance. These double standards can be found throughout the movies, and they complicate the expectations of how a woman should behave according to our collective system of signs. The movies represent women in urban city nowadays and the construction of womanhood in *Sex and the City*. Based on that reasons, the writer will observe how the construction of womanhood in *Sex and the City Series* is by using a postfeminism approach.

B. Research Method

In this research, the writer uses a qualitative research. Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena. The type of the data is verbal data and documentation. Data collection is often done through library research, note taking, and image capturing. In this research, the focus is the construction of womanhood in *Sex and the City Series*.

C. Main Findings

Sex and the City is very interesting to be analyzed because of the unique content and the candid discussions of sex from a female point of view. Alongside this content, the show has also featured comprehensive discussion and investigative of the construction of womanhood in contemporary society, often addressing issues related to the women's movement. Therefore this research conducted to know how the womanhood is constructed in *Sex and the City Series* by using Postfeminism Theory. From the analysis, there are four main findings from the analysis such as female body and class, female relationship, single vs married woman, and sisterhood.

D. Discussion and Conclusion

Sex and the City centers on the lives of four American prosperous thirty-something women in Manhattan. The show focuses specifically on sex and relationship columnist Carrie Bradshaw, who mediates the experiences of herself and her three friends. Six seasons, and a total of ninety-four episodes of the show were created, and were aired on American cable network HBO between 1998 and 2004. *Sex and the City* has focused on the female sex from a female point of view. In this part, the construction of womanhood in *Sex and the City* will be divided into four major analysis. There are female body and class, female relationship, single vs married woman, and sisterhood.

The first analysis is about female body and class. A recurring topic in *Sex and the City* is the question of what ultimately separates women from men. This question is sometimes explicitly addressed and at other times only implicitly referred to, but it is a primary feature of the friends' conversations

and Carrie's column. The four female characters are all presented as maintaining a different relation to traditional categories of femininity and masculinity.

This is most clearly represented in the characters' style of dress. The sharpest opposition in this sense is between Miranda and Charlotte: Miranda is often dressed in stern-looking, dark-colored suits, whereas Charlotte usually wears more traditional 50's- and 60's-style dresses with flower prints, ruffles and the occasional bow. Thus, Miranda is visually constructed as rather 'masculine', and Charlotte as 'feminine', and this may be said to be mirrored in their character.

Sex and the City, in its themes and dialogue, often attempts to investigate and challenge the traditional, culturally constructed categories of male/masculinity and female/femininity. Indeed, the characters often prove unwilling to accept the gender-biases and submit to what society expects them to be as women, and seem to recognize the possibility of multiple versions of 'femininity'. In *Sex and the City*, gender is presented as "a dichotomous category" or as an "identity formation with multiple possibilities". It may seem that, in its celebration of femininity and female friendship and its persistent depiction of male dysfunction and inadequacy, the show privileges femininity over masculinity, and thus maintains a categorical distinction between 'male' and 'female'.

However, while *Sex and the City* does celebrate the women's friendship as something valuable and unique, it does not present it as something *exclusively* female or as attributable to some essential female quality, and the show does indeed present women as being capable of being dysfunctional as well. Thus it does not seem that *Sex and the City* retains as dichotomous a view of gender as lies at the basis of emancipatory feminism. Indeed, the show does address the gender-prejudices that exist in society but discards the essentialist notion of gender for a more post-structuralist conception of gender. For instance: while such traits and qualities as dependency, vulnerability, and emotionalism are presented as *traditionally*

'feminine' and we see the female characters battling these supposed 'feminine' traits, the notion that they are inherent to women is presented as just that: the result of a traditional conception of gender. For this reason, it is interesting that Charlotte, the most traditional in her outlook of the four women, is the character that seems to worry most about appearing or acting 'feminine'. It is particularly interesting that in an episode titled "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" (episode 4 of season 3), Charlotte, when dressed as a man for a photo shoot, is finally able to abandon her sexual inhibitions. Presumably, Charlotte considers sexual forwardness to be an 'unfeminine' quality, thus explaining why her gender-crossing allows her to act more 'like a man'. The characters, and particularly Samantha and Miranda, can be seen to possess many qualities traditionally seen as 'masculine' while oftentimes, the men in their lives turn out to be needy and over-emotionalist. But though there is thus clearly an acknowledgement of and playfulness with these traditional gender constructions, it is not suggested that any quality is inherently male or female. This also explains why the feminist accusation that media texts present maleness as the goal for women is not really applicable to *Sex and the City*: especially Miranda and Samantha are not trying to be men, they are I will further discuss issues of independence in the next paragraph. Merely trying to be more empowered and more independent women.

This is how New York is introduced by Carrie in the first episode of *Sex and the City*. New York is clearly portrayed as a city in which romance is a thing of the past; a city of cynical men and women who are equally cynical when it comes to love and relationships. Carrie continues by explaining Manhattan women specifically: "There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of women like this in the city. We all know them, and we all agree they are great. They travel, they pay taxes, they'll spend four hundred dollars on a pair of Manolo Blahnik-strappy sandals. And they're alone.:" (SATC, 1: 1).

Three elements are mentioned in these segments: modern urban life, the financial independence of women, and the inability of those women to enter successful relationships. What is addressed here is not only changed urban life in general: it is, more specifically, a change in relations between men and women. Whether the cause or the effect of this change, the financial empowerment of women is established as one of the key defining elements of the modern city. As Samantha explains later on in the episode: “Sweetheart, this is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have had as much money and power as men, plus: the equal luxury of treating men as sex-objects.”

What becomes clear in these quotes is that the empowerment of New York or Manhattan-women is presented as being directly connected to *economic* empowerment. Women pay their *own* taxes; they can spend four hundred dollars on *themselves*, and thus they are now equal to men, in several ways. Thus, it seems as though the project of feminism is completed, as New York-women are fully emancipated. While this perception can be questioned, broader issues also have to be addressed if this perception would be assumed to be true only for the show.

The characters’ class and racial positions are relevant for the *Sex and the City*’s feminist context and potential, and thus it is relevant to note that the specifics of the women’s background are rarely addressed in the series. We are made aware that the four women differ somewhat in background, for instance, Charlotte is an Episcopalian WASP from a traditional upper-class family while Carry was raised by her single mother, but mostly, this is something which is assumed rather than explicitly stated. Furthermore, ultimately the women all occupy the same privileged position. There *are* some episodes in which issues of class are somehow addressed, a good example of which is “The Caste System” (episode 10 of season 2) interestingly enough, this issue here automatically becomes intertwined with issues of gender and power.

Early on in the episode, it can be seen that the four women were given a pedicure in a salon. Sitting alongside each other on a large regal-looking sofa, they chat about Miranda and Miranda's boyfriend, while four female pedicurists sit kneeled at their feet. The conversation, centering on the fact that Steve is a barman with no higher aspirations, leads Charlotte to say: "you're talking about more than a difference in income, you're talking about a difference in background and education. This guy is working class". The other three women are visibly and audibly astonished by this remark. In response to her friends' comments, Charlotte then says: "you're trying to pretend that we live in a classless society, and we don't", discreetly signaling at the pedicurists sitting at their feet. The pedicurists, who we only see from the back, and therefore do not observe a reaction to the conversation from, are then stared at by the four friends.

The conversation then turns to the relation between income and gender. Charlotte says to Miranda: "Honestly, I don't know how you can get serious with a guy whose entire future is based on tips", leading Carrie to incredulously reply: "Wait a minute! Rich men date not so rich women all the time. I mean, come on, look at me and Big! It's not about money! It's about compatibility". Charlotte then responds: "Yeah but it's normal for the guy to have more money", to which Samantha objects: "Oh come on! I know lots of women who make more money than their husbands!". Miranda finally concludes: "When single men have a lot of money it works to their advantage, but when a single woman has money, it's a problem you have to deal with. It's ridiculous! I wanna enjoy my success, not apologize for it!" (SATC, 3: 6)

By the end of the episode, Steve breaks up with Miranda, apologetically telling her that her the difference in income 'didn't make him feel good about himself'. Interestingly enough, here Steve alludes to the fact that it is not the difference in income that causes Steve to feel inferior to Miranda, but the fact that the person with the higher income is a woman. Thus, the fact that the four women occupy a privileged position is addressed

in the series' narrative here, and some sense is also generated that this is far from standard. However, we as viewers are still never shown what the alternative to this privileged position is, and so we never get a real sense of what life for 'normal' modern women may be.

Similarly, though the issue of race is also addressed in the series narrative, this is not done in such a way that the relation between the women's privileged position and their possible feminism/empowerment can be critically assessed. Thus, no sense is given of what female empowerment could mean beyond *Sex and the City*, or beyond the position of privilege.

The second analysis is about female relationship. *Sex and the City* is a show dealing mainly with the subjects of sex and relationships. In this part address a number of issues from the perspective of specific relationships that are key to *Sex and the City*, and that also occupy an important role within feminist theory, namely dating, the single woman as opposed to the traditional family, the related issue of childrearing, and the relationship between the four women.

During one brunch with her four friends (in episode 1 of season 2), Miranda can take no more of the women's obsessing over men. Though later on in this episode (appropriately titled "Take Me Out to the Ballgame"), she apologizes for her outburst, Miranda's point remains valid. Indeed, a very large portion of *Sex and the City* is centered on the women's relationships with men. Although this may not be surprising, it is relevant to note that not only the dialogue, but also the broader narrative seems, at least at times, to be largely driven by male characters. It is significant that although many episodes do not offer any real final narrative resolution, inviting ambiguity instead, in the last few episodes of the last season, narrative resolution is suddenly achieved, and, furthermore, each of the four women finds relational fulfillment. It does seem that the suggestion, occasionally put forward throughout the six seasons of *Sex and the City*, that women do not necessarily need a partner in order to become happy, is discarded completely for a more traditional, romantic ending.

If we were to look at that statement from a perspective of ideology, it might seem as though there is a clear and definite message behind *Sex and the City*: that it is normal to obsess about men, and that true love and happiness will come to those who are patient. But when we examine *Sex and the City*, a different interpretation could be said to be at the show's basis. Although the possibility is addressed in individual episodes that the four women suffer from society's structural inequalities, when we look at the show's wider narrative and ideological content, something else is exposed. Indeed then, societal problems are largely presented as being individual problems, and many problems are presented as being solvable through shopping and as being a matter of finding the right man. It is for this reason that the show's central focus on dating and relationships is highly relevant, as finding the perfect relationship is often presented as the end-all solution to all problems.

Furthermore, success in the field of relationships even forms the narrative solution to the entire series, as all four women find personal and relational happiness in the final season. Though it could be claimed that the success that the four women encounter in their love lives in these final episodes is merely meant to mirror their individual success and happiness as independent women and thus that the latter is not a result of the former.

On the other hand, instances could also be named in *Sex and the City* where finding the perfect relationship is not presented as the solution to all the women's problems. One example of this can, surprisingly, also be found at the end of season 6. In the last two episodes (season 6, episode 19, "An American Girl in Paris (Part Une)" and episode 20, "An American Girl in Paris (Part Deux)"), Carrie is confronted with her desire of finding true romance, as she moves to Paris in order to accompany her new boyfriend Aleksandr Petrovsky, abandoning her entire New York-life. What appears to build up as a perfect fairytale ending to the series, turns out to be a near disaster, as Carrie is unable to find true happiness in her new hometown. Symbolically losing her signature 'Carrie'-necklace, being slapped by a Parisian child, and stepping in a pile of dog litter in her formerly flawless

outfit, Carrie is harshly awoken from her perfect Parisian dream, realizing that she is a New Yorker at heart and is thus far too cynical to believe in fairytales and romance. She does re-enter a relationship, but it is a genuinely 'real', problem-ridden one that she opts for, rather than the picture-perfect, superficial one that she leaves behind in Paris. Thus, though Carrie is portrayed as finding happiness in the form of a relationship, her search is presented as problematic and complicated, and ultimately, she remains true to herself rather than continuing pursuing a utopia.

The same could be said for Charlotte's character, who also discovers that her fairytale is not real (in seasons 5 and 6). Being 'rescued' after having fallen in the middle of a busy street, Charlotte falls in love with her 'knight in shining armor', Trey MacDougal, and they eventually marry. Charlotte, having obsessed all her life about finding the perfect man to enter marriage with, is blissfully happy, until it becomes apparent that her knight suffers from impotence-problems. The couple end up divorcing, after which Charlotte meets a new bed-partner, her divorce lawyer Harry Goldenblatt. While at first, Charlotte does not deem Harry adequate as a real potential partner, she turns around after realizing that superficial perfection is of no importance compared to true love. Charlotte even converts to Judaism in order to wed Harry, producing the most significant transition in the character throughout the series.

Thus, if these examples illustrate the false solutions being offered to the viewer, they are not as ideologically simple or straightforward as Jameson's theory might cause to expect. On the other hand, the examples do still end in all of the women finding a relationship, and arguably being rescued in some way by a man from solitude.

The concept of reification is applicable to the four main female characters of *Sex and the City*, as they could be seen as four 'prototypes' of woman clearly distinguishable and easily consumable for viewers, but it can also be applied to the men and the relationships in the show, in two ways. Firstly, the men could be seen as consumer objects for the women, as they are

'used' and then swiftly disposed of when turning out to be somehow inadequate. Secondly, it could be said that the dating in the series is exploited for its comical value, as one man after another becomes reduced to 'small-dick guy', 'funky-spunk guy', or 'up-the-butt guy'.

Another reason to introduce the concept of reification at this particular point, is because believing it is relevant also for the previously mentioned episode, in which Carrie moves to Paris. Particularly when connecting this episode to Jameson, it is noticeable that many of the key events in this plotline center around consumption. While out on her first Parisian day of shopping in a flawless and sophisticated outfit, Carrie drips rainwater from her umbrella all over the perfectly polished marble floors of the *Dior* shop she is just entering, causing her to trip and fall. Letting out a terrified shriek, she hurls herself and all her purse's contents across the shop floor, immediately being helped up by two startled French shop-assistants in fine suits. We witness the snooty looks of the other customers as Carrie, visibly mortified, attempts to recollect herself and grab her belongings off the floor. Later on, Carrie discovers that she has lost her signature 'Carrie'-necklace, about which she distraughtly explains that: "It cost like nothing but...it's priceless and I've just had it forever, so.." Later that day, Carrie sees four friends having lunch, as she herself used to do with her friends, as she walks down another Parisian street. She stares at the women through a melancholic smile, after which she calls Miranda in New York and confesses that she feels lonely and miserable in Paris and that she misses New York.

Throughout this episode it is made clear that Carrie, a true New Yorker at heart, does not belong in Paris, a city where everything is magical, beautiful, clean and perfect. What is most remarkable, however, is both this contrast between Carrie, New York and Paris and Carrie's longing for her hometown are conveyed through particular acts of consumption. She realizes she does not fit in when her inelegant manner of consuming exposes her as a New Yorker; she misses home when she realizes that she can no longer share the delights of lunching with her friends; and she feels she has abandoned her

true self when she loses a consumer-object that she feels represents her New York-self. Thus, it is ultimately consumption which identifies Carrie as a New Yorker, and indeed: Carrie's entire Parisian experience is defined in terms of commodities and objects.

In this manner, reification and commodification prove to be relevant concepts when analyzing *Sex and the City*, as the logic of consumption and commodification defined all experiences and relationships. Dating and relationships become portrayed as the search for the ultimate and perfect commodity, and relationships are reduced to the means to that end. This then also leads us back to Jameson's theory of ideology, as the search for the perfect relationships can be seen as a false, or utopic, solution to all problems.

Conversely, other narrative details from the mentioned episode could be cited to contest this argument. It may be relevant, for instance, that when Carrie loses her necklace, the infinitely more costly version she receives as a replacement from Aleksandr does not offer her any consolation. In this sense, it may be valid to argue that it is in fact the symbolic, more emotional value of the object that is of importance to Carrie, rather than its exchange value, as the necklace symbolizes her friendship with her New York-friends. Similarly, it may not be the act of consumption that Carrie regrets not being able to share with her friends as she sees the four French women having lunch, but the act of sharing itself.

The third analysis is about single woman vs the married woman. A constant struggle the women in *Sex and the City* face has to do with the societal pressure they feel to be in a monogamous relationship and to create a traditional family. The notion of 'the single woman' is often addressed in the series, and this is also relevant for feminist questions, as being single is considered an important issue and privilege in terms of self-definition for women. Furthermore, as the family is seen as a key site of patriarchal oppression by certain feminists, it is relevant to investigate the role of traditional, heterosexual relationships in the series. The characters often face the prejudices against single women of a certain age, as it also demonstrated

in the paragraph on dependence or independence, and it is questioned time and again whether women are actually free in their lives, or whether they are conditioned by patriarchal society and the institution of family to aspire to a traditionally shaped lifestyle.

A thirty-four-year-old guy with no money and no place to live, because he's single, he's a catch. But a thirty-four-year-old woman with a job and a great home, because she's single, is considered tragic. Once, again, it is Miranda who succinctly assesses the inequalities between men and women that exist in society (in episode 9 of season 3, titled "Easy Come, Easy Go"). This time, it is the stigma attached to the single woman that Miranda addresses, as she also does in the first episode of season 1:

I have a friend, who had always gone out with extremely sexy guys, and just had a good time. One day she woke up, and she was forty-one. She couldn't get any more dates. She had a complete physical breakdown, couldn't hold on to her job, and had to move back to Wisconsin to live with her mother. Trust me, this is not a story that makes men feel bad.

As Miranda asserts, being single is not really an option for women over thirty. While overall in *Sex and the City*, the single life is celebrated, indeed it is also established that 'the fabulous single life' may be a severely limited option, available only to young women, as older single men are seen as virile skirt-chasers, while older single women are regarded as spinsters. Thus, it seems that women are only allowed a life of 'singlehood' by society as long as they are still young and, importantly, conventionally physically attractive, while for men, age and attractiveness are not conditions for being allowed to be single.

The women in *Sex and the City* do at times let themselves be manipulated and controlled by the societal myth that declares that women must get married before a certain age, though they also strongly oppose its discriminatory implications. In "They Shoot Single People, Don't They?" (season 2, episode 4), this contradiction appears. There, a very candid and unflattering photograph of Carrie holding a burning cigarette which was taken

after a night out dancing with her fellow-single friends, is put on the cover of 'New York'-magazine without her approval with the caption: "Single & Fabulous? Eat, drink, and never-be-married". Carrie remarks on the hostility of the caption, as Charlotte reads aloud from the article during one of the women's brunch: "Single was fun at twenty, but you want to ask these women how fun will all-night club-hopping be at forty?" Charlotte defiantly asks "Who's out all night?", after which Samantha exclaims: "Who's forty?!" "Fuck them! Exclamation point!", Miranda then decides, and clarifies: "Every few years an article like this surfaces as a cautionary tale to scare young women into marriage." Charlotte then continues reading: "Filling their lives with an endless parade of decoys and distractions to avoid the fact that they are completely alone." As Miranda snatches the magazine out of Charlotte's hands, resolutely closing it, she states that the magazine-story has 'nothing to do with them', leaving Samantha and Charlotte to conclude that they *are* indeed single and fabulous. Though they declare to be unaffected by the horror-story, we are subsequently shown all three women looking scared and doubtful, while Carrie's voice-over states that she has "a sneaking suspicion that they didn't quite believe it." Thus, while the four women are aware that the magazine story is part of an oppressive, patriarchal myth, they are unable to escape its ideological force. And indeed: later on in the episode, we see both Charlotte, Samantha *and* Miranda succumbing to their fears of ending up as old spinsters, as all three decide to date a man they have no real interest in; and Carrie lets the fear of the spinster-myth impede on her social life.

By the end of the episode, Charlotte, Samantha and Miranda all dump their 'precautionary men', and Carrie faces her fears head-on, and thus singleness is reestablished as a legitimate option. However, I must once again bring up the fact that by the end of the series, none of the four characters, now in their late thirties, end up single. The question whether singleness is really an option for women over thirty is thus not really adequately answered, as we are given no narrative example of an 'older' woman ending up single and happy. As mentioned above, sexuality and sexual freedom become important

elements to take into account, as aging and singleness (in comparison to how men are positioned within these issues) inevitably lead to questions of attractiveness. I will continue on this topic in the chapter on sex and the female body.

Equal to the societal pressure to be in a traditional relationship is the pressure to rear children. This, too, is a topic that is addressed many times throughout *Sex and the City*. The women often wonder whether they want to have children, ought to have children, and whether they are still able to at their age. After Samantha discovers she has breast-cancer in season 6, she encounters prejudices against unmarried, childless women.

In “Catch 38” (episode 15 of season 6), Samantha visits her doctor for a check-up, and inquires what may have caused her cancer. The doctor then informs her that her disease may be an effect of ‘lifestyle-choices’, and says that “some studies have shown women who haven’t had children have a increased chance of getting [cancer]”. Samantha, enraged by the male doctor’s insinuation that she may have brought the disease onto herself, storms out of the examination room, informing the man that she will find herself a woman doctor who understands her. Samantha later tells her friends: “Like it’s my fault! I shouldn’t be punished for not having kids! I should be rewarded! Since when did kids become the ‘get-out-of-cancer-free’-card? He’s basically saying I’m a whore who deserves chemo!” Here, Samantha speaks of her cancer as being a supposed punishment for her choices in life, suggesting that society/the doctor perceives staying childless as the *wrong* choice. Though outraged and in absolute disagreement with this suggestion, Samantha does seem to be familiar with this type of misogynist myth.

Although this societal pressure on women is confronted and criticized in the series, the right for women to bear children and to have control over their own bodies is also addressed. Throughout the series (but mostly in seasons 5 and 6), we witness the women discussing and confronting pregnancy as related to work, and it is also revealed that some of them have had abortions in the past. Above all, it is free choice that is propagated, and

indeed, having children is certainly not portrayed as necessarily the ‘wrong (or right) choice’ in *Sex and the City*, as is demonstrated by the storyline in which Miranda moves from Manhattan to Brooklyn to start a new future with her new husband and newborn.

In “Out of the Frying Pan” (season 6, episode 16), Miranda, hesitant to give up her (single) life as she knows it and worried that she will enter a life of social seclusion, is unsure whether she is willing to give up her small Manhattan apartment and move to a bigger house with a garden in Brooklyn for her new family. While viewing her potential new home, Miranda seems already decided, until her husband Steve reminds her that “this isn’t just about you anymore [...] we’re a family”. Watching her husband, son, and dog play in the yard, Miranda visibly opens up to the possibility of choosing her family’s needs over her own, as we hear Carrie’s voice-over say: “That day, Miranda couldn’t deny what was best for her family”. Though at this moment, it appears as though Miranda has shed her characteristically sober and cynical individuality (as a strong woman), slipping instead into a more passive and self-effacing position of wife and mother, she immediately reclaims her original Manhattan-self as she firmly points out to the male landlord what is not yet satisfactory about the house, and thus “negotiate her way into her future”. Miranda is still a lawyer; she is still *herself*.

Thus, opting for a more traditional family life is not always presented as necessarily being ‘unfeminist’ or un-empowering, or as being the result of societal pressure, though in earlier seasons, it *was* questioned whether family life was a viable option for an independent woman. For instance, in season 1 (episode 10, “The Baby Shower”) the four women reacquaint with an old friend who is no longer the single New York-wild child she used to be, but instead a suburban mother-to-be. The four women are astounded by the fact that a woman their age is ‘settling down’ already, which leads Carrie to comment that: “The party had turned into a preview. A preview of a life I didn’t know if I was ready for”. It is suggested in the episode that the mothers the women meet at the baby shower long for their old lives and regret giving

up their careers, forever shelving their single selves. By the end of the episode, the four friends' life as happy singles is validated, and Miranda's earlier assertion that motherhood is "a cult [...] they all think the same, dress the same, and sacrifice themselves to the same cause: babies" is underlined.

Similarly, in season 6, the gap between single women and family women is emphasized. Furthermore, family and childbearing is connected to issues of self-worth in the episode, titled "A Woman's Right to Shoes" (episode 9). Here, Carrie is disparaged for the fact that she spends hundreds of dollars on Manolo Blahnik-shoes, after she is forced to take them off at a child-friendly party and the heels are subsequently stolen. Carrie later reluctantly accepts the offer of her previously remarkably unsympathetic friend to repay her for the stolen shoes. However, after the friend discovers that the shoes had in fact cost Carrie 485 dollars, she declines her offer, saying that she, unlike Carrie, has a *real* life and responsibilities. She concludes by saying: "I really don't think that we should have to pay for your extravagant lifestyle." Carrie leaves feeling mistreated and judged and later tells Miranda that it is not the money that is at stake, but that it is a matter of 'a woman's right to shoes' and of acceptance of someone's individual choices. Carrie comes to the conclusion that "if you are single, after graduation, there isn't one occasion where people celebrate *you*" (she does not perceive birthdays as valid exceptions, because 'everyone has those') and that she has spent thousands of dollars over the years on gifts for other people's choices to get married or have a baby. Displeased by the idea that Carrie may never receive gifts for similar occasions as she may stay single and childless forever, she defiantly informs her friend that she is getting married to *herself* and that she is registered for gifts at Manolo Blahnik. Carrie sums her triumph up by saying: "One giant step for me, one small step for single womankind."

Here, it is not so much family life or motherhood that produces the clash between the family woman and the single woman, but the inability or unwillingness of individuals to respect other people's (other women's) life-choices. It is Carrie's friend's individual (somewhat hypocritical, as Carrie

reminds her friend that she herself used to buy and wear Manolo Blahniks) and selfish attitude which causes the conflict. Interestingly enough, family and childbearing are once again defined through consumption here, as Carrie's singleness allows her to spend great amounts of money on herself, creating a gap with her friend, who can no longer do so, as she has a family to support. In this episode, singleness is thus equated with the freedom to consume.

From being associated with a lack and an absence – no men, missing-out, on-the-shelf, unfeminine, unattractive, frustrated, unfulfilled by children – she is elevated to a position of desirability, now the envy of the woman 'stuck' in marriage and motherhood.

'The single girl' is thus: "economically independent, has some kind of 'career' with surplus money to spend on herself, indulge her own leisure, and, most important, survive in the world of *men*". This explanation fits perfectly with the just mentioned episode of *Sex and the City*, and it could also lead us to assert that Carrie's friend is unwilling to sympathize with her situation as Carrie, as a single woman, is the object of the married woman's envy.

This view could easily be applied to *Sex and the City*, as we constantly see the attractive women shopping for shoes and sexy outfits (I will return on this topic later). However, I would argue that although vast amounts of time and money are spent on shopping for shoes etcetera, it is not presented in *Sex and the City* as meant to enhance their appearance *for men*. Instead, spending money on oneself is presented as an inherently gratifying act for single women rather than a means toward attractiveness for others. During this time of shifting attitudes toward single women, a problem described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as 'the problem with no name' emerged into feminist discourse.

In *Sex and the City*, the family is not inherently presented as a site of oppression, and needless to say, the relation between the family and capitalism is never explicitly addressed. While family life *is* portrayed as possibly being detrimental to a woman's individuality, independence and,

particularly, to her career, this has more to do with individual choices and character-traits. If we would look at this question from the perspective of consumerism and mass culture, as for instance in the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer and Jameson, the suggestion would become viable that a product of the culture industry or mass culture could not present either singleness or the family as oppressive to women, as the realization that women are oppressed would endanger the consumerism on which the culture industry relies.

The last analysis is about the sisterhood. The center of *Sex and the City* is the friendship between the four main female characters. Whereas we hardly ever hear about or see their biological family, the four friends are always present in each other's lives. Indeed, (as in many 90's television series and sitcoms) the traditional family is replaced in *Sex and the City* by a non-traditional family of friends. This is visually demonstrated in the episode I mentioned earlier ("Four Women and a Funeral", season 2, episode 5), where Miranda is faced with the prejudices against single woman as she searches for an apartment. At the end of that episode, we see Miranda symbolically placing a photo of her with her three friends on her new mantelpiece, as she contently smiles. Within the context of the episode, this act of Samantha clearly signifies that she is *not* alone, she has her friends. An intense bond between the four women is similarly implied in an episode of season 4.

Within one single episode (episode 11, titled "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda"), Charlotte, obsessed over having children, discovers that she is reproductively challenged, and Miranda, having no desire whatsoever to have children, discovers that she has accidentally gotten pregnant. As Charlotte walks into the room where the other three women are celebrating Miranda's pregnancy and the fact that Miranda decided against having the pregnancy aborted, the women visibly dread Charlotte's reaction, expecting her to begrudge the woman who is able to have what she desires but cannot have (as Charlotte had done in the past). However, Charlotte's distraught expression changes into an affectionate smile as she utters: "We're having a baby?.."

Instead of feeling competitive toward her as another woman, Charlotte views Miranda as a family member, allowing her to share in the joy of new life as though it were her own. Here, the notion of a female community replacing the more traditional family is explicitly brought up by Charlotte ('we're having a baby').

What is key about this particular group of friends is that it is a community of *women*. The fact that they are female informs many aspects of their friendship, and often, the women form a substitution for a love-interest that is lacking in their lives. It is then the intimacy of being in the company of fellow single women which offers the friends consolation and support. This becomes apparent when Miranda's mother dies in season 4 (in "My Motherboard, My Self", episode 8). The only sibling without a 'significant other', Miranda is clearly devastated as she walks down the church-aisle by herself, crying, following her mother's coffin. Carrie, standing along the aisle, witnesses Miranda's struggling and consequently steps into the aisle to embrace her friend, walking her further down the aisle while holding her hand and consoling her. Clearly, Carrie occupies the position of the lacking male companion here, both literally and figuratively.

Similarly, in "Luck Be an Old Lady" (season 5, episode 3) the women take a trip to Atlantic City to celebrate Charlotte's 'thirty-faux' birthday. The episode centers on the theme of aging (and singleness), as Carrie is stood up by a date at the beginning of the episode, resulting in Charlotte warning Carrie that if she renounces dating, she could "end up an old maid". Carrie is initially unable to assemble her four over-occupied friends for the trip, leaving her worried about whether they will be able to maintain their friendship over time. She eventually succeeds however, and Carrie explains on the trip over that as men die before women do the four women are very likely to end up single together at old age. Just having confirmed their alliance, the women run into an unpleasant encounter in Atlantic City while at a blackjack table, as a rude male gambler impolitely yells at Miranda: "Hey red, move your fat ass!" Miranda, not yet ridden of her post-pregnancy-

weight, is visibly embarrassed and tells her friends: "Guys, let's go. It's OK." The three other women, clearly astounded and outraged by the man's misogynistic comment, cry: "No! It is most certainly not OK!", after which they continue to verbally attack the man, shouting at the man that Miranda has just given birth. Finally, the women sarcastically inquire: "What's your excuse? Ya having triplets?!..", and proudly walk away as they are applauded by onlookers.

Noticeable about the women's bond is that it is often the disappointment in men that further unites them. After everyone fails to show up at Carrie's thirty-fifth birthday party at a restaurant (season 4, episode 1, "The Agony and the 'Ex'-tacy"), she ends up alone back at her apartment, crying in the shower. Later that night she tells her friends: "It felt really sad, not to have a man in my life who cares about me. No special guy to wish me happy birthday, no goddamn soul-mate. And I don't even know if I believe in soul-mates." Interestingly enough, it is when Carrie's friends - her safety-net - are not there for her that she realizes that there is something lacking in her life. After this, Charlotte, in an attempts to console her friend, suggests that: "Maybe we could be each other's soul-mates. And then we could let men just be these great, nice guys to have fun with." Samantha replies: "Well, that sounds like a plan." It is after they establish their inability to be fulfilled in their relationships with men that the women decide they can instead seek fulfillment in their friendship with each other.

In *Sex and the City*, it is in the friendship between the four women that other aspects of their lives receive evaluation and acquire significance. It seems that any problem or worry, big or small, can be managed through discussing them among friends. Whenever the women feel let down or disappointed in life, they can rely on their camaraderie to make up for it. This is illustrated by the aforementioned resolution of the four women to regard each other as their soul mates, which is then supposed to consolidate the women with their disillusionment, caused by repeated failure of their relationships. Female community, then, can be seen as the utopian element or

fantasy message in *Sex and the City*, as it seems to resolve all other deficiencies in life. As this utopian element is part of a mechanism of repression, we could also point out how this deflects attention from those elements in society that are causing the female characters to feel unfulfilled in the first place. Structural inequalities or a possible gap between society's myth of heterosexual romance and reality are acquitted from scrutiny as the women's friendship constructs an image of happiness.

From those analysis above, it can be concluded that many feminist issues are tackled in the *Sex and the City* series, such as gender-bias, limited constructions of femininity, dependency, and prejudice against single women. From those conclusions are suitable the characteristic of postfeminist such as the modernity of the women, aggressiveness, sisterhood, sexual empowerment, power, self awareness, and choices. Those are the ideals of female subjectivity present in postfeminism, these ideals not only develop the belief but demand it as an indicator of success that women can be independent and successful individuals.

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