

## Trespassing on Ireland's "Norms": Irish Chick Lit and Ireland's "Others"

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The contemporary women's fiction genre of chick lit is commonly recognised and understood as featuring female characters in their 20s and 30s as they make their way through their lives and tackle all the obstacles in their way, everything from finding Mr. Right (or, at least, Mr. Maybe) to finding the perfect career to finding the perfect shoes, along with everything in-between, all told in a humorous and self-deprecating tone. For a genre that has been dismissed as formulaic nonsense, chick lit has generated a lot of controversy. It has rarely been the subject of serious academic discourse, and, in what little intelligent discussion of the genre there has been, a significant proportion has tended to be from a predominantly negative perspective. Elizabeth Merrick summarises the typical chick lit novel in the following extract:

Chick lit is a genre, like the thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend. Chick lit is the daughter of the romance novel and the stepsister to the fashion magazine. Details about race and class are almost always absent except, of course, for the protagonist's relentless pursuit of Money, a Makeover, and Mr. Right. (Merrick vii-viii)

In mentioning the "white girl" and the "gay friend", this extract discreetly highlights two areas which chick lit has in common with Irish society: they are both often seen to neglect to acknowledge the existence of various races and sexualities. Despite being a genre which defines itself as chronicling contemporary women's lives, of which encounters with various ethnicities and sexualities are almost certainly a part, the norm in many typical chick lit novels seems to be white and heterosexual, and anyone who deviates from these norms, be it in terms of skin color, ethnicity, or sexual preference, tend to be criticized and condemned or ignored and marginalized (or, in terms of homosexuality in some chick lit, viewed as some

sort of fashionable accessory rather than a real person, as is evident from the charming but ultimately one-dimensional and clichéd “gay best friend” in many novels in the chick lit genre). Interestingly, and strangely, there currently appears to be no substantial, serious study of chick lit’s apparently neglectful attitude towards depicting various ethnicities and sexualities; while chick lit critics, as evidenced in the above quote from Elizabeth Merrick, have mentioned – albeit briefly – how the typical chick lit protagonist is white, and that the novels tend to, almost without fail, feature an appearance by the camp and clichéd gay-best-friend, such critiques seem to be focusing more on the genre’s formulaic tendencies, rather than the absence of more “minority” characters. The reason that such issues with chick lit have not been studied in-depth is, I would suggest, largely due to the fact that many critics do not think that chick lit is worthy of any serious study, and so the issues contained within the novels, be they positive or negative, are not deemed to be suitable subject matter for serious academic or literary study. As a result, any study of such issues is interesting, not only from the point of view of, in this case, Irish attitudes towards sexuality and race, but also in terms of chick lit’s contribution to the history of popular (and women’s) fiction.

Yet there are authors who are breaking the mould, who are not only expanding the chick lit genre to include more well-rounded discussions and depictions of various ethnicities and sexualities, but also to show how these marginalized people also have a place in Irish society. These issues are not only important individually, but there are also significant links between the two. In terms of both homosexuality (and, indeed, any other sexual preferences that deviate from the heterosexual norm) and various ethnicities/races, it is evident that much of the societal hatred and alienation was a result of fear and ignorance of the unknown and the “different”. After all, as already mentioned, both Irish society and typical chick lit have, for a long time, tended to be predominantly white and heterosexual (at least publicly, in terms of the latter), and anyone who deviated from these norms were relegated to the margins of society. After outlining these views which Ireland once held in terms of homosexuality and race, this paper will examine the work of a selection of Irish chick lit authors who are writing about an Ireland in which there now lives an increasingly diverse range of sexualities and races, but where, due to the somewhat belated nature of Irish society with respect to contemporary Anglophone and European countries, change has not always been readily welcomed in these areas. It will predominantly examine the work of Marian Keyes but will also show how other authors, such as Colette Caddle and Kate Thompson, are also starting to follow Keyes’ example by representing this marginalized groups. This paper will discuss these authors’ recognition of Ireland’s homosexual and multi-racial communities, as well as their awareness of the struggles that these communities have often had to endure, thus tracing Ireland’s slow process towards a more liberal and liberating paradigm. The fact that these Irish authors are now confident enough to not only expand the boundaries of the chick lit genre, which has traditionally been regarded as somewhat limited in terms of depictions of race and homosexuality, but to also portray these identities in terms of Irish society, despite the fact that earlier Irish writers had been heavily censored for doing so, is a huge step towards portraying Ireland as a more tolerant and racially-aware nation, or at least removing the

“taboo” nature of such discussions, in terms of positively portraying, and promoting, difference and individuality. The impact of Keyes’ work in particular is important to chick lit and contemporary Irish women’s fiction, not only because she is commonly cited as one of the “initiators of chick lit” (Pérez-Serrano), but also because of her outstanding success. Since the release of her first novel, *Watermelon*, in 1995, her work has been embraced by people all over the world, and she gradually gained, and maintained, a huge following, to the extent that her work has now been “translated into more than thirty different languages and [is] appearing in the bestseller lists of countries such as the United Kingdom (*The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*), Germany (*Der Spiegel*), the United States (*New York Times*) and Australia (Australian Publishers Association)” (Pérez-Serrano), in a sense proving that not all chick lit is merely “disposable trash” with no lasting appeal. Keyes’ appeal has become so widespread that, at the time of writing, her website claims that more than twenty-three million copies of her books have been sold around the world to date. This obvious global appeal suggests that her work appeals to more than just her native Irish market, as she covers universal topics that people of many ages, backgrounds, and nationalities are able to relate to. As a result, there is greater potential for the topics Keyes discusses, and the messages she circulates about such topics, to reach greater numbers of people around the world.

Traditional chick lit, as mentioned in the introduction, is often criticized for its apparent neglect in depicting a range of sexualities and races, as it is instead seen to focus on predominantly heterosexual, middle-class, and white characters. Particularly in terms of homosexuality, which *is* visible in much chick lit thanks to the much-used gay best friend cliché, it has been noted that these men only serve the purpose of giving the heroine advice on fashion and relationships and never appear to have any real plot of their own. Chick lit has, therefore, often been criticized for presenting homosexuality as largely one-dimensional and lacking any real depth; the gay best friend of much chick lit, it is said, is similar to:

An accessory as essential to a character as her cosmopolitan and designer handbag. These men serve to give the heroine advice on fashion, relationships, and entertaining, but never have a real plot of their own. ... In chick lit, sexuality is simple and never questioned. Some characters are homosexual, but most are heterosexual. The novels relegate any character that blurs the gay/straight binary to a passing role. (Lynch Cooke ch. 3)

Keyes’ *Last Chance Saloon* (1999), however, is an example of how this overly-used “gay best friend” cliché may be easily updated, by situating the gay best friend, not as a mere accessory who has no real existence apart from offering fashion and relationship advice, but instead as one of the main protagonists of the novel. Fintan, a homosexual male, is one of the three narrators of the story, and we learn as much about him as we do either of the two female protagonists. Keyes’ clever updating of the gay best friend cliché, to allow the gay best friend to actually take the place of a major character in the novel, proves that traditional chick lit clichés can be re-worked and updated successfully. However, depictions

of homosexuality and race in novels by Keyes and other similar authors are even more important, and unique from an Irish perspective, as they are representing communities that have traditionally been stigmatized, marginalized, and even hidden within Irish society.

Ireland has long been recognised as being pervaded by a strict puritan morality which was seen to spread itself through a large portion of Irish culture. The morality which clouded Irish society seemed to equate sin almost exclusively with sex and, in particular, the female body, though many other areas were also affected, such as popular culture, which was hindered by the application of strict censorship laws in Ireland. Many books were banned for containing scenes which were deemed morally “unsuitable” for Irish society: Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936) was banned for obscenity, while Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls* trilogy was similarly banned under Ireland’s Censorship Law for seemingly explicit sex scenes that today’s readers would barely even notice! The feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was also banned in Ireland on numerous occasions, once because it “showed women how to examine their breasts” (Wolf 138), and again “because it carried information on contraception” (Connolly 39). Neither did film escape Irish censorship laws as, for example, *Gone with the Wind* was not screened in the Republic of Ireland when it was released because of objections to the childbirth scene, which was thought to be obscene (Pramaggiore 120). Even the world of sports was, until as late as the 1970s, strictly for men, as “the conservative, Catholic ethos of the Free State effectively removed women from competitive athletic sports” (Hill 7), after Pope Pius XI decreed in 1929 that the “violent exertion” and “notable scantiness in clothing” which was associated with women’s sports, as well as the fact of women performing in front of crowds of male spectators, was an unsuitable situation for any woman to be in and still retain her purity and reserve.

Even in contemporary Ireland, Keyes describes how Ireland’s apparent obsession with morality and chastity often left people feeling limited and repressed, as if their every move was being scrutinised by society in general:

Escaping from parental control and what I felt was the goldfish-bowl syndrome of Ireland was immensely liberating. I could be anyone I wanted to be. Hell, I could even be myself. I made full use of the fact that I no longer had anyone breathing down my neck to go to Mass. Every Sunday was spent savouring the freedom of Not Going To Mass. And I could do the Walk of Shame anytime I wanted in London and no one turned a blind eye. Whereas in Dublin if I’d returned home at seven in the morning, wearing last night’s clothes, my knickers in my pocket, I was convinced it’d get on the evening news. (Keyes *Under the Duvet* 211)

Keyes depicts the sense of Ireland’s “belatedness” in a number of her novels: in *This Charming Man*, for instance, one of the protagonists reflects on how Irish women often seem to feel embarrassed or overly-critical of their bodies, a fact which becomes more noticeable on witnessing the body-confidence displayed by women of other cultures:

Bell tinged. The arrival of Nkechi. Everyone looked. Plenty to look at. Nigerian, excellent posture, braids hanging all the way down her back, very long legs, then a really quite large bottom perched on top of them. But Nkechi never tried to hide her bottom. She was proud of it. Fascinating to me. Irish girls' lives were a constant quest for bottom-disguising or bottom-reducing clothing tactics. We can learn much from other cultures. (32)

It is interesting to note that the protagonist in the above quotation notes how many Irish women often try to hide or minimise their curves; in other words, the very aspects of their body that make them look like women. This would suggest that the traditional attitude in Ireland, which likened the female body to a source of sin, may still be impacting Irish women who feel that they may have to conceal their *womanliness*. This is further hinted at in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996), when the protagonist reflects how both her lack of body confidence and her deep-rooted "Catholic guilt", similar in that they both reflect Ireland's traditional encouragement of female "morality", have impacted on her enjoyment of a healthy sex life:

I suspected that if I had big bouncy breasts and long, slender, cellulite-free golden thighs I could have overlooked my Catholic guilt. I would probably have been a lot more likely to confidently hop into bed with total strangers. Maybe sex would have been an activity that I could just enjoy, instead of it mostly being an exercise in damage limitation, trying to act like I was enjoying myself while at the same time managing to hide a bum that was too big, a chest that was too small, thighs that were too... etc., etc. (239)

These extracts clearly suggest that the restraints many Irish people feel are imposed on them are still hard to escape. Despite the successes of the sexual revolution in many other parts of the world, it "was slow to impact on the South [of Ireland], where family life was highly valued and where, despite the liberalising tendencies of the Second Vatican Council launched in 1962, the Catholic Church retained a tight control over moral and sexual behaviour" (Hill 145).

Such descriptions serve to explain Ireland's somewhat belated progress towards being a more liberating and open-minded society. Keyes notes how Ireland is currently in a "strange position", as the "stranglehold the Catholic Church had on this country has largely disappeared, but a vacuum has been left by its departure" (Keyes *Under the Duvet* 70), which has meant that many issues which had long since been addressed in an Anglo-European context were still problematic for Irish people in the recent past, such as the legalising of contraception and divorce, for example, while other issues, such as the debates around abortion, are still ongoing. Keyes notes, "holy Catholic Ireland [is] no longer so holy or Catholic" (Keyes *Under the Duvet* 238), with many Irish people now adopting a more "*à la carte* approach" to Catholicism (Keyes *Under the Duvet* 240), and yet a type of "hangover" effect of these traditional values has meant that many Irish people have been left in a state of confusion about whether to follow the traditional mores or to espouse a more relativistic

modernist or postmodernist paradigm in order to move into the twenty-first century. Keyes again depicts similar situations in her novels, such as in *This Charming Man* where we witness the measures that many people still take in order to portray the illusion of leading a “moral” and chaste life, because they believe this is still expected in contemporary Ireland. One of the characters is dating a politician and, although she has effectively moved into her boyfriend’s home, he advises they maintain a public pretence that their relationship is “chaste”:

In actual fact, it had been months since she’d spent a single night in her own house, but Paddy said they had to pretend. The Irish electorate was an unpredictable beast, he said: one minute as liberal as you please, the next breathing ire and indignation about people ‘living in sin’. In fact, Paddy had tried to insist that they genuinely live in their separate homes until after the wedding, but this was one issue that Alicia stood her ground on. She’d waited too long for him, she loved him so much, she couldn’t not be with him. (231)

The extracts in question allude to the idea that the traditional sense of Irish morality may still be prevalent in many people’s minds and therefore still hard to escape.

Homosexuality was a major area which, according to both Catholic theology and Irish law, was also once considered a sin; it was even the case that books were banned under Irish censorship laws for depicting homosexual relationships. This was often in spite of the fact that, in some cases, homosexuality may not necessarily be approved of, or the word “homosexual” may not even have been used, as in the case of Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* (1941) which was banned due to the briefest hint at a gay male relationship. In such instances, it was argued that “even to mention or suggest the possibility of homosexuality could be read by some as a promotion of it: whether or not homosexuality is approved of in the novel was irrelevant to those who chose to be offended by it” (Breen 168). Colette Caddle’s novel *Between the Sheets* (2008) effectively highlights the long-standing negativity surrounding homosexuality in Irish society, as the protagonist learns that, when her brother was young, he was subjected to cruel treatment by their father after he learnt that his son was gay:

‘Oh my God! Is that what it was all about? He treated you that way because you were gay?’

‘I’m afraid so. He did everything he could to knock it out of me – literally. He even dragged me down to Father Flynn and made me confess. He asked him what saint we should pray to in order to turn me back to normal. If he caught me even looking at another boy he dragged me out to the shed and took the belt to me.’

‘Oh, Ed, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. Did Mum know that was the reason he treated you so badly?’

He frowned. ‘I’m not sure. We never talked about it. I’m not sure the ever did either – too disgusting to put into words. When Dad was angry or drunk, though, he’d refer to me as a perverted little bugger.’ (Caddle 414)

Even when Irish censorship laws became less severe, to speak of, for instance, “sex between women would still have been inflammatory” (Enright v) as it was seen to provide a threat to Ireland’s Catholic ideologies, “whose ideal of the lovely Irish girl did not include her falling in love with other women” (Enright viii). Novels such as Keyes’ *Anybody Out There?* (2006) recognize the mixed, and often negative, views surrounding lesbianism in Ireland as the protagonist’s mother feels that being a lesbian – women she views as “exotic creatures” rather than “normal” women – would be the very worst thing that one of her daughters could possibly do:

Angela Kilfeather is the most exotic creature that ever came out of our road. Well, that’s not really true – my family is far more dramatic what with broken marriages and suicide attempts and drug addiction and Helen, but Mum uses Angela Kilfeather as the gold standard: bad and all as her daughters are, at least they’re not lesbians who French-kiss their girlfriends beside suburban leylandii. (Keyes *Anybody* 8)

Of course, it was hardly surprising that homosexuals felt alienated in Irish society; along with the criticism and censorship of sexual relations, and stressing the importance of marriage and family life, homosexuality was an area which saw the Church and state working in accord with one another. Both Irish Church and state argued that the criminalization of homosexuality served to benefit public health, Irish morality, and the institution of marriage, and so homosexuality remained illegal in Ireland until as recently as the 1990s. In *Last Chance Saloon*, published in 1999, Keyes makes reference to how “gay” was, at that time, still seen as “the taboo word” and that having “a gay friend still carried kudos and novelty value” (107). The fact that homosexuality was only recently legalized in Ireland is portrayed in *This Charming Man* (2008), as one of the protagonists, Alicia, realizes on her honeymoon that her husband - who, in his fifties, is a lot older than her – is in fact gay. Although Alicia and Jeremy remain firm friends, Alicia cannot understand why Jeremy is still not publicly gay, forgetting that a man his age still remembers homosexuality as being illegal: “ ‘Why not just be openly gay?’ she sometimes asked him. ‘Ireland has changed. It’s okay now.’ ‘I’m from a different generation to you ’” (Keyes *This Charming Man* 239). Keyes also, however, attempts to show how Ireland’s previous hostility towards homosexuals has lessened, and she renders homosexuality unexceptional, by including homosexual characters in major roles, most notably *Last Chance Saloon*, in which, as mentioned above, one of the main characters, Fintan, is a homosexual male, and, of the three main protagonists in the book, Fintan’s relationship is shown as the strongest and most loving. *Last Chance Saloon* also discusses the link often made between homosexuality and AIDS. Although he is eventually diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Disease, a form of cancer, when Fintan originally repeatedly complains of not feeling well, the automatic assumption is that, as a gay man, he has contracted AIDS: “That was the problem whenever a gay friend became sick. The A-word always cropped up. Then she felt uncomfortable with her train of thought – did she think gay people and Aids were uniquely linked?” (Keyes *Last Chance Saloon* 130).

Fintan is quick to remind his friend Tara that someone in a heterosexual relationship is just as susceptible to AIDS as homosexuals, thus helping to normalize homosexuality and to show that HIV and AIDS are no longer solely “gay diseases”, as was once believed:

‘Look me in the eye,’ she interrupted forcefully, ‘and tell me that you’ve had an HIV test recently.’ ...

‘Have you had an HIV test?’ Fintan surprised her by asking.

‘No, but...’

‘But what?’

She paused delicately. How could she say this?

Fintan interrupted, ‘Do you always use a condom with Thomas?’

In different circumstances Tara might have laughed as she remembered the song-and-dance Thomas had made on their first night when Tara had tried to get him to wear a condom. ‘Like eating sweets with the wrapper on,’ he’d whinged. ‘Like going paddling in your shoes and socks.’ She’d never suggested it again. Luckily she’d still been on the pill from the Alasdair days.

‘Well, no, we don’t always, but...’

‘And has Thomas had an HIV test?’

As *if*, Tara thought. He’d be the last man on earth to have one. ‘No, but...’ ...

She said nothing, damning her misplaced, knee-jerk concern. There was probably more chance of *her* being HIV positive than Fintan. (*Keyes Last Chance Saloon* 158-159; emphasis in original)

This normalizing of homosexuality is also witnessed in novels such as Caddle’s *Between the Sheets*, in which, as the following extract shows, a gay man discusses his feelings about a previous relationship. Although he is having the conversation with a heterosexual woman, both characters can empathize with each other, therefore portraying gay and straight relationships as being no different from one another; in other words, love and feelings are the same, no matter the gender of the people involved:

Dana squeezed his hand sympathetically. It was almost two years now since Wally had broken up with his partner. They had been together for an astounding twelve years when he discovered that Giles had been unfaithful at least twice. Even then, Walter was ready to forgive the love of his life but Giles decided to leave anyway. The agent hadn’t dated since, and although he pretended interest in every gorgeous young man he met, Dana knew that it would be a long time before he trusted anyone again.

She could relate to that now as she never could before. (Caddle 31-32)

*Last Chance Saloon* is also effective in portraying the injustice and discrimination that homosexuals were once, and unfortunately are still, often subjected to, even in contemporary Irish society. When Fintan is hospitalized with Hodgkin’s Disease, even his own mother does not believe that he has cancer, despite his friend Katherine’s protests that he does not have AIDS:



'Fintan is sick? Sick? Is it serious?'

'Yes, I'm very sorry, he's got -'

'Aids,' JaneAnn interrupted. 'I've been waiting for this. There was a thing in the paper about it.'

'No, Mrs O'Grady,' Katherine forced herself to be gentle, 'he hasn't got Aids.'

'I know all about it.' Her voice was dignified. 'Just because I live in the backs of beyond, don't think I don't know.'

'Mrs O'Grady, Fintan has a form of cancer.'

'I'm his mother. The truth is bitter but tell it out to me anyway. Don't fob me off with talk of cancer.'

'Mrs O'Grady, I swear to you, Fintan really has cancer.'

'And you're not just putting sweet words in my ear?' JaneAnn sounded suspicious.

'Trying to spare my feelings?' (Keyes *Last Chance Saloon* 245)

Around the same time, Fintan finds out that his boss has fired him because she fears that, as a gay man undergoing hospital treatment, he may bring a bad reputation to the company, again highlighting the level of discrimination regarding sexual orientation:

'You mean she came into the hospital and sacked you in bed? But why? Can you be sacked for being sick?'

'She was concerned – get this – that I'd give the wrong image of the company.'

Suddenly Katherine understood. 'She thinks you're HIV positive.'

Fintan nodded. (Keyes *Last Chance Saloon* 351)

As well as homosexuality, Keyes also attempts to repeat this recognition regarding another similarly marginalized gender category: cross-dressing and transvestism. *This Charming Man* features a sub-plot in which one of the protagonists, Lola, befriends a group of secretive cross-dressers in a rural Irish village. As she helps them to choose clothes and express themselves (she is a stylist by profession), her residence becomes a type of "safe house" where these men can perform this other "part" of their gender without fear of being ridiculed. As with *Last Chance Saloon*, which helped to articulate the discrimination and mistreatment that homosexuals have often been subjected to, the following two extracts from *This Charming Man* similarly attempt to articulate how similar mistreatment is often experienced by those whose gender does not "conform" to what society expects. The first extract discusses how the man's experiences of cross-dressing in the past have led to feelings of shame and depression, while the second extract discusses how, when one's gender deviates from the "norm", it can result in the person in question feeling ridiculed and even disgraced or alienated in society:

Fascinating. 'And did your parents know?'

'Oh yes. Every time they caught me, my father'd belt me black and blue.' Curiously upbeat delivery. 'But couldn't help meself, Lola. Tried a million and one times to stop. Have suffered desperate shame.'

Chattier than he'd originally seemed.

'And what are your current circumstances...er...Blanche? Married?'

'I am indeed.'

'And does your wife know?'

Heavy pause. 'I tried telling her. She thought I was trying to tell her I was homosexual. She reared up on me. 'Twas easier to leave it be... But it's been hard. I've been living a lie, Lola, living a lie. Then Natasha told me I could come here. 'Twas a lifeline, nothing less than a lifeline. I was thinking I couldn't go on. I was thinking of putting a rope around me neck.' (Keyes *This Charming Man* 283)

Over course of next hour, got his life story. Had lusted after women's clothes since late teens. When he had house to himself – only happened rarely – he tried on wife's make-up and underwear. But not her clothing – 'too dowdy.'

Over the years he had assembled one outfit of his own – dress, accessories, wig, make-up but no shoes – was making do with open-toed slingbacks in size 8, biggest he could get, but toes and heels stuck out over edges and were painful to walk in. He kept outfit in bag in boot of his car. Lived in fear of wife finding it ...

I had sudden thought. 'Would it be so bad if she knew?'

'Jesus!' He buried fizzog in hands. 'Don't even want to think about it! No one must know! I have three young children. I am respected in community. I am taking massive risk telling you all this.' (Keyes *This Charming Man* 272-273)

These passages also serve the purpose of helping to open the readers' minds to such a marginalized gender category, increasing our awareness of the hardships, criticism and shame that they are made to feel for the cross-dressing element of their personality. Additionally, as each man describes cross-dressing as a time when he can be his "true self" (Keyes *This Charming Man* 273), Keyes is attempting to render cross-dressing, not as something to be hidden or shamed, but as unexceptional; it is seen as just another interest that some men have, almost in the same way as some men like sport or films. Even Lola, who initially felt uncomfortable around the cross-dressers, eventually realizes that there is no harm in these men enjoying nice clothes. As a stylist, she spends her time "trying to make women beautiful. No different now just because women were men" (Keyes *This Charming Man* 285).

*This Charming Man* also serves another purpose: as well as helping to open readers' minds to the hardship and discrimination that "other" genders are subjected to, Keyes also presents a type of hope for the future in terms of the acceptance of these marginalized "others". In the later part of the novel, as Lola learns more about cross-dressing and opens her mind to the existence of different gender performances, we are presented with a near-utopian image of a disco where the cross-dressers no longer have to hide their "true selves", but can be fully expressive and are supported, rather than ridiculed, by the people around them:

Sue, Chloe and I found a ledge to balance our sticky pink drinks on. Stared out at dancefloor. Some cross-dressers looked like real women.

'Because they are,' Chloe shouted above the music. 'Wags. Wives and girlfriends of cross-dressers, who come to be supportive.' (Keyes *This Charming Man* 449)

On a related topic, lesbianism was an area that largely divided feminist discourse, because, although meant to liberate all women from patriarchal confines:

Feminist discourse was and still is dominated by heterosexual women, and the area of sexual identity itself was often neglected as a potentially divisive subject, which meant that lesbians felt alienated and unrepresented by mainstream feminism. Heterosexual women themselves appeared to be threatened by lesbian dissenting voices in the movement. (Whelehan 160)

Irish society typically rendered lesbians invisible, an occurrence which was "rooted in pervasive gendered societal attitudes to Irish women and their sexuality" (Connolly 173). Particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was noted that the Irish women's movement appeared unwilling to address the issues and experiences of lesbian feminist activists in Ireland, and so "the question of lesbian feminism became one of the points of dissonance within the Irish women's movement" (Connolly 176). Although it is difficult to estimate the extent to which lesbianism was a common experience among Irish women, it was around this time that we can pinpoint an emergence of specific lesbian communities in Ireland, in response to the apparent neglect of specifically lesbian issues within general feminism. More recently, while there is an Irish lesbian community which has been noted for its political activism, it has been recognized that academic, political, and media analysis has placed more of a focus on gay men than on lesbians in Ireland:

The public face of activism in the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities in Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s was mainly focused on service provision around the HIV/AIDS crisis and on rights-based activism (principally the campaign for the decriminalisation of male homosexuality). Although many lesbians participated in this work, women did not have the same kind of public or media profile as their gay male counterparts, and many made deliberate choices for one reason or another to work 'behind the scenes'. (Connolly 172-173)

Although attempts are now being made to compile a specific history of what it is to be gay, lesbian, and bisexual in Ireland, this process is still in its very early stages. It proves to be problematic when we realize that a "marked difference between contemporary LBT communities in Ireland and those in other Western countries can be discerned in terms of the age profile of such groups – there is not a visible presence of 'out' lesbians/bisexuals over the age of sixty in this country, which is telling" (Connolly 192). Perhaps this is because, while the decriminalization of homosexuality occurred in Britain in 1967, it was not decriminalized in Ireland until as recently as 1993. Additionally, while there have been remarkable changes in the attitude to LGBT communities in Ireland in the past two decades, it is nevertheless obvious that some prejudices remain:

So for example, although current equality legislation guarantees protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, there have been few cases taken so far involving lesbians. To make such a case involves taking a public stand, and clearly few lesbians are ready to take this step. (Connolly 173)

Perhaps this is partly the reason why representations of lesbians in Irish fiction are still quite rare; as the protagonist in Keyes' *Watermelon* (1995) points out, although Ireland has admittedly become more tolerant to sexual relations and sexual diversity, noting that although there is no longer any "shock value left" in issues such as prostitution – thereby using a somewhat extreme, even exaggerated, example of Ireland's recently-increased tolerance – issues such as "lesbianism hadn't been done to death yet. People still got a little bit hot under the collar about it" (Keyes *Watermelon* 343). Although Keyes has made real and noticeable efforts to present gay men and even cross-dressers, she may be accused of neglecting any real discussion of lesbians, adding to the above claim that lesbian existence in Ireland has tended to be ignored and neglected. Keyes' representations of lesbians have, thus far, been limited to secondary, minor characters; in *Angels* (2002), for instance, the protagonist, Maggie, leaves Ireland and goes to stay with her friend in Los Angeles, where she is awe-struck to meet what she calls a "real-life lesbian" (81). Maggie admits that, in Ireland, she had never met a lesbian, alluding to the aforementioned "invisibility" of lesbians in Ireland, despite the increasingly visible presence of gay men: "Lara was a *lesbian*. I'd never met a real-life lesbian before. Not knowingly, anyway. Plenty of gay men, of course, but this was a new one on me and I had no clue what to say. Congratulations?" (Keyes *Angels* 81; emphasis in original). Even when Maggie has a brief lesbian encounter with Lara, rather than it being developed into a lesbian relationship and therefore presenting lesbianism as a healthy lifestyle choice for women, it is instead merely shown as Maggie's brief moment of rebellion, her chance to do something "crazy", before she returns to her husband and her marriage in Ireland. Kate Thompson, in a number of her novels, similarly relegates lesbianism to a secondary role but she does make attempts to present lesbian relationships as being more enduring than heterosexual unions. The surprise lesbian affair that begins in Thompson's *Living the Dream* (2004) – between the protagonist's sister and her partner's ex-girlfriend, both of whom were thought to be heterosexual – is still going strong in her next novel, *Sex, Lies and Fairytales* (2005), and shows no signs of ending any time soon. These women are, however fleetingly, shown as being in a happy, stable, and loving relationship, in which they are truly happy. By associating lesbianism with positive and desirable attributes, as Thompson is beginning to do, these novels are helping to portray lesbian existence as "a healthy lifestyle chosen by women" (Zimmerman 79), thus helping to eliminate the stigma historically attached to it.

Despite such difficulties in finding ways to present homosexuality as a healthy lifestyle chosen by some of the population, the "ongoing development of LGBT communities and cultures in a variety of locations is indicative of a thriving and active community moving into the twenty-first century" (Connolly 193). In terms of this realization, we can be optimistic that Ireland will continue to advance its tolerance and acceptance of

homosexuals, just as it is raised its awareness of other areas which were once considered to deviate from the “norm”.

As with homophobia, racial prejudice, it is said, “is often based on ignorance or fear, particularly when there is little contact between people of different nations or ethnic groups” (Fitzgerald 249). Although becoming more diverse in terms of ethnicity and cultures in recent years, Ireland, in particular, is viewed as a society that has traditionally been, and perhaps to a point still is, predominantly white, and its struggles with racial prejudice have therefore tended to be just as problematic as its battles against sexism:

The emerging struggle of minority groups for equal rights and protection against discrimination in Ireland has its parallel in the feminist movement. After long and hard battles sexism is now at least recognised as existing, though we have not yet managed to free Irish society of sexist thinking and behaviour. Racism is still struggling to be recognised as an inequity. (Fitzgerald 253-254)

Ireland’s slowness to accept “other” races is evident in novels such as *Sushi for Beginners* (2000), in which one of the protagonists, Lisa, recalls her mother’s shock when Lisa first introduced her to her new boyfriend:

Her heart had nearly stopped with fright the first time she’d met Oliver. If only she’d been *warned* that her daughter’s boyfriend was a hard, gleaming, six-foot tall black man. Coloured man, African-American man, whatever the correct phrase was. She had nothing against them, it was just the unexpectedness of it. (Keyes *Sushi* 39; emphasis in original)

Oliver realizes that he is treated differently in Ireland than he is in other countries; when he arrives at the airport to meet Lisa, for example, he feels that he is victimized by security because of his skin color:

‘Sorry, babes,’ his lips curved around his shockingly white teeth, ‘but I was stopped by Immigration. Only person on the whole plane to be.’ He put his hand on his hip and said with exaggerated curiosity, ‘Now, I wonder why *that* was.’  
‘Bastards!’  
‘Yeah, just couldn’t seem to convince them I was a British citizen. Despite having a British passport.’  
She clucked with concern. ‘Are you upset?’  
‘Nah, I’m used to it. The same thing happened the last time I visited here.’ (Keyes *Sushi* 351; emphasis in original)

When Lisa and Oliver are considering getting a divorce as they both have different aims in life, Lisa’s mother even cites the fact that they have different skin colors as the reason for their separation, again representing the narrow-mindedness and ignorance which some people have towards race: “ ‘Was it because you were ... different?’ ‘Different, Mum?’ Lisa

was tart. ‘Well, with him being ... coloured?’ (Keyes *Sushi* 39). In order to combat racism, we are encouraged to “change both our thinking and our behaviour in order to develop anti-racist practices. We need to monitor our conscious and unconscious attitudes if we are to bring about individual and collective change” (Fitzgerald 252). Such “conscious and unconscious attitudes” are reflected in novels such as *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009), as Lydia’s Polish flat-mate discusses how Polish people are often subjected to unfair treatment and discrimination in Ireland because of misconceptions and misjudgments that are often placed on them, often largely drawn from people’s own ignorance and a reliance on unfair and inaccurate stereotypes: “Ire rose in Andrei. Everyone misjudged them. They thought Poles were simply hard-working but passion-free builders. They had no idea of what they were really like” (Keyes *The Brightest Star* 174). The same novel also suggests that the problems that Irish people may have in accepting people from other countries and cultures may be as simple as a language barrier; that, as different cultures speak differently and have different customs, it is taking time for such people to bond because they have not yet spent enough time together to *understand* each other: “ ‘I vos jokingk.’ He sighed with abrupt gloom. ‘Ukrainians are a joke-loving people. Like you Ireesh, we, as you say, love the craic, but the language barrier... I joke, joke, joke all the day long but Ireesh do not understand’” (Keyes *The Brightest Star* 582-583). Although not yet as common, Irish authors such as Keyes are beginning to show a recognition that we now live in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society, and a gradual but growing acceptance of different races and ethnicities among Irish people. In *Sushi for Beginners*, despite Lisa’s mother’s original shock at her daughter’s relationship with Oliver, as discussed above, she does eventually come to genuinely like Oliver, and, as Lisa says, “once she’d got used to him, she was able to get beyond his color and see that he really was a nice-looking boy. To put it mildly” (39).

*The Brightest Star in the Sky* also contains a large number of characters from various parts of Africa and Eastern Europe: protagonist Lydia’s boyfriend is “a native of Lagos, Nigeria, [though] he had made Dublin his home for the past six years” (123). Lydia is housemates with a couple of Polish men, and meets people from the Ukraine and other areas through her job, again acknowledging how the races and ethnicities located in Ireland have expanded in recent years. It is refreshing that these changes are being portrayed, and if such trends continue – and, as Ireland is becoming more diverse in terms of race, it is likely that they *will* continue – Irish authors such as Keyes may be viewed as actively influencing “the role Ireland plays in ensuring that we live in a society which respects fundamental rights and rejects all forms of discrimination” (Fitzgerald 265).

Some Irish theorists have noted that any discussion of the changes in Irish society over the past few decades “tends to illicit two views: that it has changed completely, and that it has not changed at all” (O’Connor 1). While it is certainly possible to argue for the latter view, it is also important to note that Ireland has changed considerably in recent years, even if change seems slow in some cases, and “in modern Ireland things which were once hidden are now being told” (Hill 218). An article by Kathy Cremin cites Keyes’ popularity as being largely due “to the fact that she is narrating a different kind of Irishness” (Cremin par. 18), which would suggest that her novels, as well as the novels of other authors

like her, are showing how Ireland is a changing nation, in this case in terms of its homosexual and racial communities, even while she recognizes that some old prejudices still exist, resulting in change appearing to be a slow and gradual process.

Until recently, there existed a “notion that the only sexuality compatible with Irishness is marital heterosexuality” (Pramaggiore 118), and issues of race and ethnicity were rarely discussed in Irish fiction. That Irish writers, such as Marian Keyes and Colette Caddle, are beginning to tackle such topics is a huge step towards portraying Ireland as a more tolerant and racially-aware society, therefore helping to diminish the traditional “homogeneity of the Irish nation in terms of race, gender, and sexuality” (Pramaggiore 118). Their discussion of such a variety of characters allows a greater understanding – and, as a result, less fear and ignorance – of these traditionally marginalised people, an understanding which would, in time, mean that these people could move away from the margins of society and instead be integrated and accepted more freely, without fear of alienation, ridicule, and abuse. The implications for this seem obvious: if more forms of popular culture (in other words, forms of culture which are circulated among a wide audience) begin to tackle issues relating to society’s marginalised groups, to present them as the norm, then these ideas would hopefully be no longer stigmatised, but instead part of mainstream thought. The work of these authors may therefore be viewed as developing into becoming more socially-aware, in terms of positively portraying, and promoting, difference and individuality.

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