

# Girl Power Discourse in Contemporary Coming-of-Age Narratives

Soňa Šnircová

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice

## Abstract

*The essay focuses on the intersections between Girl Power media discourses and literature which has thus far been scrutinized mainly in relation to the chick lit genre. Caitlin Moran's novel How to Build a Girl is analyzed as an example of the influence of Girl Power discourse on another literary genre, the coming-of-age novel. The protagonist's process of growing up is read in the context of two contrasting narratives about postfeminist girlhood and also in the context of the Bildungsroman tradition. Moran's heroine appears both as a fusion of the can-do girl and at-risk girl versions of Girl Power, and also as a postmillennial variation of the classic female Bildungsroman heroine.*

*Keywords: Girl Power, the coming-of-age novel, the female Bildungsroman, can-do girl, at-risk girl, postfeminism*

Girl Power discourse has been recognized as an important defining element of the turn-of-the-millennium socio-cultural space and an integral part of postfeminist mass media discourses concerning the situation of young women in postmodern societies. Anita Harris draws attention to the two contrasting images of girlhood that have appeared in the West following the popularity of Girl Power media constructs such as the Spice Girls, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or Tank Girl - the "can-do" girl and the "at-risk" girl (Harris 9). The can-do girls, associated primarily with white middle-class women, are defined by "their commitment to exceptional careers and career planning, their belief in their capacity to invent themselves and succeed, and their display of a consumer lifestyle" (Harris 13). On the other hand, at-risk girls are usually found among young women from marginalized, working-class and ethnic communities. Their turn to "laddish" patterns of behaviour (drug

abuse, binge drinking, violence, delinquency and sexual promiscuity) is seen as evidence that Girl Power can be taken “too far” (Harris 28).

Appropriations of the popular can-do girl image in literary texts have thus far been most noticeable in the “chick lit” genre, a form of popular literature which usually presents narratives about the “single, urban media professional” (Harzewski 4).<sup>1</sup> Considered by some as a clear example of the literary version of Girl Power discourse (Genz and Brabon 76), chick lit is, Stephanie Harzewski claims, the first genre of fiction which has been generally discussed in relation to postfeminism (8). Harzewski in her study notes that chick lit has often provoked negative criticism for its participation in the postfeminist sensibility generated by the contemporary mass media. Chick lit narratives typically feature the attempts of twenty- or thirty-something white middle-class women to combine successful careers with fulfilling personal relationships, and these themes have led to criticism of the genre for “rehearsing the narratives of romance and femininity that second wave feminists rejected” (Genz and Brabon 87). The protagonists’ obsession with their body image, their frantic search for Mr Right and their apparent complicity with commercial culture are all seen as major signs of their postfeminist lifestyles. On the other hand, critics who want to offer a more positive approach to the genre focus on the fact that the heroines are financially independent and sexually assertive, and that their stories are realistic representations of the efforts of real-life women to juggle the “contradictory demands and mixed messages of heterosexual romance and feminist emancipation” (Genz and Brabon 86).

Critics tend to relate chick lit narratives to the genres of romance, the novel of manners and the *Bildungsroman*, noticing that they are rooted in “the heroine-centered novels of the nineteenth century, novels like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*” (Smith 7). They even suggest that many chick lit narratives can be read as comic appropriations of the *Bildungsroman*, combining the typical male plot of “a protagonist’s venturing into the city for a ‘real world’ education” (Harzewski 87) with the traditional female plot of relating the heroine’s *Bildung* to her search for the right partner.

The connection between chick lit, the *Bildungsroman* and postfeminism opens the possibility to explore postfeminist transformations of another genre rooted in the female *Bildungsroman* tradition, the female coming-of-age novel. Caitlin Moran’s novel *How to Build a Girl* (2014) offers a narrative that combines the focus on the protagonist’s movements in the media world with a strong awareness of the female *Bildungsroman* tradition. In this way, as I intend to show, Moran’s novel participates in what can be seen as the conundrum of the postfeminist Girl Power discourse generated by its ambivalent anti/pro-feminist character, its simultaneous “reif[ication] of gendered social roles and reject[ion of] the cultural dualism of masculinity and femininity” (Zaslow 5).

The novel *How to Build a Girl* is written in the form of a first person present tense narrative, an approach which contributes to the feeling of intensity of the young heroine’s lived experience. However, the narrative voice belongs to the adult narrator, who combines her earlier adolescent perspective with her current knowledge and hindsight – which allow her to reflect on her behaviour in this coming-of-age period using the conceptual framework of feminist and postfeminist discourses. The story covers the three-year period between 1990 and 1993 during which Johanna, due to the pressures of her family’s economic situation, leaves school, turns herself into a successful career woman in the media (she starts

working for a London music magazine as a sixteen-year-old), and learns the difference between false and true romantic relationships. By simultaneously presenting the heroine of her novel as both a younger version of the chick lit heroine – the attractive, middle-class and well-off prototype of the can-do girl – and as a working-class, poor, fat teenager, the author explores the possibilities that Girl Power discourse opens to those whose attributes do not conform to this image of success.

Johanna, brought up on a council estate in Wolverhampton, a town immersed in post-industrial depression and anti-Thatcher sentiments, in a family that lives on state benefits, is in many respects a prototype of the at-risk girl. Accordingly, her coming of age, although ultimately a positive process of the can-do girl's development, is significantly marked by many of the negative features (drug abuse, heavy drinking and promiscuity) that usually define the at-risk girl. The fusion of femininity and masculinity implied by the heroine's adoption of laddish patterns of behaviour acquires a more complex form at the level of the plot, which combines the two main motifs that mark the difference between male and female development in the *Bildungsroman* genre.

As feminist critics (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, Fraiman, Ellis) point out, the constitutive elements of the protagonist's development identified by early critics<sup>2</sup> of the *Bildungsroman*, such as formal education, independent life in the city, two love affairs and an active interaction with society, traditionally did not belong among the social options available to women. The novels of development written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were rooted in the Enlightenment concepts of *Bildung* which associated male maturation with the public sphere and female maturation with the main role that the Enlightenment philosophers attributed to women – to maintain the private sphere of domestic retreats that men of Reason could turn to whenever they were tired by their “working for the universal” (Lloyd 82). Thus, while the classic narratives about male *Bildung*<sup>3</sup> present the protagonist's education in the public sphere and follow his apprenticeship in his vocation, the classic novels about female maturation<sup>4</sup> focus on the heroine's romantic apprenticeship, which ties her to the domestic space of wifehood and motherhood. The *Bildungsroman* heroine's engagement with the public sphere only appears in the twentieth-century narratives that reject the traditional plots and romantic motifs and emphasize the motif of female emancipation. As Rita Felski stresses, these feminist versions of the *Bildungsroman*<sup>5</sup> reject heterosexual romance and replace it by the female protagonist's “symbolic act of separation” (126) from the traditional social roles of wife, housewife and mother. Separating themselves from the domestic sphere, the heroines negotiate the opportunities available to them in the twentieth-century public space of education, work and politics. Caitlin Moran's coming-of-age novel represents a postfeminist variation of the genre which revives the heroine's focus on romance while preserving her need to find self-realization beyond the domestic sphere. The novel gives equal prominence to the female protagonist's apprenticeship in her vocation and her romantic apprenticeship, as Joanna's efforts to acquire mastery of her chosen vocation coincide with her search for the right (romantic) partner. As a closer examination of Joanna's story reveals, Moran's appropriation of the two main motifs of the classic *Bildungsroman* include certain adjustments that shed light on some of the more problematic aspects of Girl Power discourse.

In a feature shared by the classic male *Bildungsroman*, the urban environment in which Johanna lives plays a crucial role in the process of her initiation into adult life. The protagonist's move to the city to take up a vocation has long been associated exclusively with the male process of maturation and men's greater involvement in the public sphere. As Jerome Hamilton Buckley states in his seminal definition of the classic *Bildungsroman*, "sometimes at a quite early age, [the hero] leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city... There his real 'education' begins, not only his preparation for a career but also – and often more importantly – his direct experience of urban life" (17). The masculine overtones of Johanna's move from her provincial town to the big city during her work trips to London are intensified by her choice to seek her vocation in the music business, a sphere in which her father (forever trying to revive the fame of his 1960s band) had earlier tried to succeed. In addition, her well-paid work (writing reviews of newly emerging bands) also allows her, at least partly, to adopt the breadwinner role that her father (unemployed and living on disability benefits) has failed to fulfill. The masculine aspects of her apprenticeship in her vocation are also visible in Johanna's efforts to fit in with the predominantly masculine environment of the music magazine by adopting or imitating laddish patterns of behaviour. She gradually slips into a world of partying, drinking, drug-taking and casual sex as part of her effort to establish a sense of being on equal terms with men in what is an essentially male world: "Sometimes I get off with rock stars just so I can come back and tell the stories – ... This is my unique contribution to the gang: if this were *Dungeon Master*, and we were assembling a crew, then Rob's talent would be 'Drunken havoc-making, 7, Kenny's would be 'Drunken bitchery, 8' and mine would be 'Sexual Raconteuring, 10'" (Moran 267). The most significant moment of this process of the heroine's maturation in the context of the public sphere appears when she adopts a cruel, cynical persona who "specializes" in writing withering reviews of bands she does not like because it gives her a sense of participation in the power structures traditionally dominated by men:

... because rich people, powerful people, cool people or the kind of swaggering men that orm these bands, are the kind of people who would usually look down on a fat teenage girl from a council estate, and in the one place I am more powerful than them – the pages of D&ME – I want my revenge – revenge on behalf of all the millions of girls like me ... Because I am the weakest, youngest one in the gang at the D&ME, and need to kill to prove my loyalty. (Moran 260)

However, what initially seems to be a successful rite of passage into a masculine form of adulthood (the suppression of emotions and the development of the ability to "kill"), which earns Johanna her acceptance into the "gang" ("Morning Cruella de Ville!", the men would cry, fondly", Moran 267), ultimately proves to be a false turn on her journey towards adulthood. Recognizing the atrophic effect of cynicism ("Cynicism is, ultimately, fear ... [it] keeps you pinned to the spot, in the same posture, forever", 262) and the cruelty implied in the masculine form of power, she completes her apprenticeship in her vocation by (re)turning to the traditional feminine qualities – empathy and kindness: "I [learned] the simplest and most important thing of all: the world is difficult, and we are all breakable.

So just be kind” (261). As a sign of her professional maturity, Johanna abandons her “bile-filled” journalistic persona and instead “go[es] back to explaining ... why I love a thing [a band]. Explaining why you love something is one of the most important jobs on Earth” (324). This association of the heroine’s (“true”) identity with love, understanding and support points towards some similarities with the traditional conceptions of women’s nature that shaped eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives about female maturation as a preparation of the girl for marital life and motherhood. However, in contrast to the classic *Bildungsroman* heroine, Johanna is ready to spread these positive feminine qualities (the “real” source of female power) through her active participation in the public sphere. In this way Moran’s protagonist challenges not only the patriarchal relegation of the female role to the domestic sphere and the masculine construction of “power” as the ability to fight and destroy, but also questions typical Girl Power media images which tend to represent femininity (“girl”) primarily through the largely superficial aspects of style, appearance and (female) consumption patterns.<sup>6</sup>

The problematic dynamics of the fusion of femininity and masculinity in contemporary constructions of girlhood also inform the process of Johanna’s romantic apprenticeship, which the novel develops in parallel with her apprenticeship in her vocation. The romantic apprenticeship – as a process of maturation revolving around the notion of finding the right partner and concluding with a happy marriage, the evidence of its successful completion – has been identified as a central motif in the classic female *Bildungsroman* (Fraiman).<sup>7</sup> Moran’s representation of her heroine’s development into womanhood overlaps in some important aspects with the patterns of these traditional narratives, and she acknowledges their influence by some explicit allusions to this literary tradition. The fourteen-year-old Johanna constructs her self-perception in the framework of the standardized images of girlhood and womanhood provided by nineteenth-century novels, asking her mother what “[her] trousseau would be, upon someone taking [her] hand in marriage” (Moran 12) and “writ[ing her] diary in a series of imaginary letters to sexy Gilbert Blythe from *Anne of Green Gables*” (Moran 29). Later, at seventeen, she tries to perceive her sexual affair with a rich, older man as a version of Jane Eyre’s romance with Mr Rochester. The allusion to Brontë’s novel draws attention to the way in which Moran frames her heroine’s affair with Tony Rich as a more realistic (and cynical) version of Brontë’s explorations of the potential (or otherwise) of romantic relationships to overcome class, status and property differences. Johanna learns the life lesson that this so-called Cinderella status deprives women of autonomy through a greater sense of humiliation than that suffered by the protagonist of Brontë’s novel: she is merely used to satisfy her rich “boyfriend’s” S&M sexual desires and to provoke the jealousy of his real, wealthy and beautiful girlfriend, while Jane Eyre enjoys, despite all the problematic aspects of their romance, Mr Rochester’s “true love”.

Although her realization of the utterly unromantic nature of her relationship with Tony Rich marks a turning point in Johanna’s development towards a greater degree of maturity, romance still functions as a central structural element in her coming-of-age narrative. The heroine’s need to love and to be loved influences not only her personal development but also the development of her professional career, and thus generates important points of intersection between the two types of her apprenticeship: Johanna’s creation of the “Cruella de Ville” persona with which she starts her successful journalist career is induced

both by her realization that the overtly positive music review influenced by her romantic feelings for the singer is read by her colleagues as evidence of her professional immaturity, but it is also a result of her own feelings of romantic disillusionment: “I wrote John Kite a proposal in a feature and he notably never married me” (Moran 260). The convergence of the two forms of apprenticeship appears again at the end of the novel when the heroine’s abandonment of the negative course of her professional development is related to her rejection of the “false” relationship with Tony Rich and the revival of her spiritual bond with the “right” man, John Kite.

As with the motif of apprenticeship in a vocation, the romantic apprenticeship theme of the novel also includes some innovative developments of the traditional version that draw attention to the problematic aspects of female identity construction in the context of Girl Power discourse. Feminist critics (Abel, Hirsh and Langland, Fraiman, Pratt, Labovitz) tend to see the classic *Bildungsroman* heroine’s involvement in the preparation for marital life as the main reason for her arrested development.<sup>8</sup> Annis Pratt maintains that the “growing up, according to contemporary gender norms, means [for the heroine] growing down – an atrophy of the personality, a premature senility” (30).<sup>9</sup> The inequality that the female protagonist experiences in terms of social options, such as the access to the public space of formal learning and employment, or in terms of the development of independent agency (hindered by marital and maternal roles), is seen as a crucial factor that prevents her from achieving full maturity. On the other hand, as some (Labovitz, Felski) suggest, the second wave feminist movement opened up the possibility for a new phase in the development of the genre. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz maintains that “only when *Bildung* became reality for women, in general” could the heroine of the twentieth-century *Bildungsroman* start to search for the self-realization in both the private and public spheres of life (7). From this perspective, postfeminist Girl Power media discourse, with its promotion of independent female agency and autonomy, may in fact herald a further positive stage in the process of women’s liberation.

The prominence which Girl Power discourse gives to sexuality as one of the forms of the “expression of female agency and self-determination” (Genz and Brabon 12) also informs Moran’s novel, and *How to Build a Girl* treats sexuality as a crucial factor in the process of the heroine’s coming-of-age process. This focus on sexuality draws attention to the radical changes in cultural sensibilities which have transformed this traditionally taboo subject into a “compulsory” element of the romantic motif in contemporary narratives. As Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill point out, “whereas the classical romantic heroine offered ‘virtue’, innocence and goodness as the commodities she brought to sexual/marriage marketplace, contemporary romances demand a ‘technology’ of sexiness”, which means that heroines are “required to be skilled in a variety of sexual behaviours and practices and [to perform] confident sexual agency” (56). Moran’s novel presents this (conscious) modernization of the romantic narrative, most visibly, at the moments when the fourteen-year-old Johanna reveals that the most “important” activities of her early adolescence are enjoying nineteenth-century novels (and the perfect romantic partner images that they offer) and the private exploration and satisfaction of her sexual desires; or at the moment when she reads Tony Rich’s unconventional sexual practices as signs of their deeper level of intimacy that suggests the kind of true love felt by Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester.

The Girl Power discourse is further reflected in the protagonist's constant attempts at self-invention, which are intended to give her control over her life. As cultural critics (Harris, Gill and Scharff) point out, Girl Power discourse, following the contemporary neoliberal trends, urges individuals to perceive their self-development as a process of self-invention, whose success depends solely on their own ability to make the right choices. This paradigm of personal development, though attractive in its perception of freedom of choice as the ultimate positive attribute of postmodernity, raises questions about its actual effects on the individuals who are burdened with the full responsibility for the choice of values that shape their lives.

The freedom to choose is realized in Moran's novel through the heroine's conscious process of "self-invention", in which she turns herself from a fat, provincial, teenage, working-class girl, with no greater prospects than becoming a younger version of her tired and disillusioned mother, into "Dolly Wilde", a young career woman. The creation of "Dolly Wilde" (including the choice of an appropriate name for the new unbound self and two years of autodidactic efforts to learn the basics of writing music reviews) shows the potential of the "self-invention" to transgress the limitations of one's class origin (unemployment and poverty). The fact that the invention of this new identity was initially fuelled by the energies of the new Riot Grrrl pop music subculture (an original inspiration for the later commodified media versions of Girl Power) also suggests a positive aspect of the heroine's approach to self-development; the possibility to create a new girl with her own voice in a male world: "they're making new kinds of girls in America ... Girls who dare ... They are all in the furious, messy, white-light act of self-creation, trying to invent a future they can be in" (Moran 105–106).

Although Johanna's freedom to invent herself in a world full of choices is in direct opposition to the situation of the classic *Bildungsroman* heroine whose story includes limited choices, "compromise and even coercion" (Fraiman 6), it does not provide the contemporary girl with a less complicated journey towards female adulthood. Just like her apprenticeship in her vocation, her (anti)romantic apprenticeship in the dynamics of the relations between men and women is marked by the masculine patterns of behaviour which problematize her personal development. Her teenage obsession with the need to lose her virginity as an important step towards adulthood, the business-like arrangements of the experience of her first kiss, her sharing of details of her casual sexual affairs with her colleagues as "proof" of adult expertise, her playing the role of the "sexual predator" by picking up boys for one night stands – are all signs of behaviour traditionally associated with men, and are tolerated as a (relatively) positive form of male "laddishness" in contrast to the female "whorishness" identified in similar displays of sexual freedom. Although in postfeminist Girl Power media discourse these masculine forms of sexual behaviour appear to have become a new norm for the can-do girls (as a "compulsory" sign of their free agency),<sup>10</sup> in Moran's novel they tend to coincide, in a conflicting way, with more traditional perceptions of female sexual behaviour. Thus Johanna, although enjoying her "Lady Sex Adventuress" persona, cannot help perceiving herself as a "massive slag" (Moran 235), a phrase which she finds hurtful; and her attempts to construct a strong, independent identity through a form of sexual agency which objectifies men lead her in the opposite direction. She repeatedly positions herself as a pure object of male

desire, which she later reflects on in terms of feminist discourse: “In later years, I find this is called ‘physical disconnect’, and is all part and parcel of women having their sexuality mediated through men’s gaze” (243). This fills her, once again, with an intense sense of loss of the self, a state of nonexistence which she first experienced as a child when she had to pretend to be dead in order to attract her parents’ attention, and later as a teenager who believed that her real ‘me’ could be constructed only in the world of adult social and sexual relations. The repeated regression to the sense of non-existence that Johanna experiences in the course of her apparently successful construction of her “real” self is overcome only when she finds her way towards a spiritually and emotionally rewarding relationship with the “right” man.

Although Moran’s novel provides the reader with a happy ending conclusion of the protagonist’s coming-of-age crisis, ultimately it suggests that the contemporary girl is no less prone to the problematic issues of female maturation than her eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterparts. Johanna’s story shows that “growing down” in the process of maturation is a possibility implied not only in the effects of the traditional patriarchal norms that arrested the development of the classic *Bildungsroman* heroine, but also in the norms of postfeminist female sexuality that pervade Girl Power media discourse. As a fusion of the successful can-do girl and the at-risk girl who loses herself in the process of her search for Girl Power, Moran’s protagonist suggests that the line between the two contrasting versions of girlhood can be rather thin.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The best example of the genre is one of its founding texts, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996).

<sup>2</sup>See the studies by Buckley and Howe examining the English *Bildungsroman* in the context of the German tradition.

<sup>3</sup>Famous British variations of the German prototype, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, include Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* or W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*.

<sup>4</sup>Typical examples are Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

<sup>5</sup>Rita Felski’s examples include, among others, Doris Lessing’s *The Summer before the Dark*, Marge Piercy’s *Fly Away Home* and Fay Weldon’s *Praxis*.

<sup>6</sup>A good example of the fusion of the superficial signs of femininity with masculine power is provided by the teenage heroine of the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who, “conventionally attractive, petite, anblonde”, is the “butt-kicking girl par excellence” (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz 43).

<sup>7</sup>Although the motif of romance naturally appears also in the classic male *Bildungsroman* – whose protagonists usually experience two forms of involvement with women, “one debasing, one exalting” (Buckley 17) – the romantic relationship never acquires the same centrality on the structural level of the text as in novels about female development.

<sup>8</sup>The examples that are used to illustrate the point include Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Emily Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Shirley*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, or Frances Burney’s *Evelina*.



<sup>9</sup>Annis Pratt uses Jo Marsh from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* as an example of female development thwarted by the limitations that the patriarchal convention imposes on women by tying them to the domestic sphere.

<sup>10</sup>The American TV series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) is the most obvious example of this change in the norms of female behavior.

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*Address:*  
*Pavol Jozef Šafárik University*  
*Faculty of Arts*  
*Dpt. of English and American Studies*  
*Moyzesova 9*  
*04001 Košice*  
*Slovakia*  
*sona.snircova@upjs.sk*