

## 'Adult Games' - Gender Subversion in Miranda July's

### *The First Bad Man*

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#### **Abstract:**

This paper investigates points of contact between postmodernist / poststructuralist and feminist currents by analysing the deconstruction of stable gendered identities and the depiction of both femininity and masculinity in the performance artist Miranda July's novel *The first bad man* (2015). Although there has been doubt about a productive interplay of postmodernism and feminism, it can be shown that the playfulness inherent in postmodern discourses might support feminism's political agenda, namely by opening up the category of 'woman' to include participants who had been excluded from the framework of feminist identity politics before. The subversion of gender categories is achieved through performative acts (as described in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*), namely the simulations or 'adult games' that the main characters Clee and Cheryl employ (for example re-enactments of old self-defence video tapes), and through the repeated parody of gendered norms inherent in the novel. While the heterosexual matrix is thus foregrounded, different forms of sexuality are played out against each other and the notion of a natural gender, as well as a specifically female sexuality, is called into question. Queer studies – with Judith Butler as their representative – provide a useful focus for the post-feminist agenda applied here (post-feminist not in the sense of a backlash, but as a new and productive approach to feminism and its objectives), and Linda Hutcheon's ideas about a form of complicitous critique further exemplify the link to postmodernist theory. That subversion and destabilisation can only occur within their respective frameworks and that every deconstruction involves contradictoriness is made explicit throughout the paper and a possible escape from binary logic is proposed. The aim is to explore in how far postmodernism and feminism share certain objectives and, through their subversion of fixed identities and meanings, can create a productive intersection.

1 Miranda July, filmmaker, artist and author, frequently evades established categories and preconceptions, as in her strategy to promote her first novel, *The first bad man*: She created a website where items, seemingly taken from the intradiegetic level of the story, were sold, thereby “attempting to blur the line between fiction and reality, a boundary that she's constantly puncturing through her performance art and writing” (Alter 2015, n. p.). Arguably, the transgressive aspects of July's work place her in a framework of postmodernist currents, one that will be labelled 'postfeminist' in what follows. This term is used not to describe a “conservative backlash” against feminism or an era in which feminism seems to have run its course, but rather to explore the “shift in the understanding and construction of identity and gender categories” that relates feminism to a postmodern discourse (Genz & Brabon 1).

2 Although an alliance of feminism and postmodernism has effected optimistic responses, praising “feminist engagement with deconstructive critiques of modernist

paradigms and of their reliance upon grand narratives, universalizing categories, truth claims, and human conceptualizations of the subject” (Budgeon 26), other voices “contend that the incorporation of post-modernist and post-structuralist principles seriously detracts feminism from its proper aims and objectives” (28-29). Where postmodernism is seen to be politically disinterested and mainly philosophical in its reasoning, feminism relies on and asks for political action and subjective agency. However, as neither postmodernism nor feminism are encompassed by a single theory but include many, sometimes contradictory definitions, some of these will be used for critical analysis and tested in terms of their compatibility. Especially the emergence of queer theory is of interest here, as it “takes up the postmodern/poststructuralist concern with breaking down essentialist notions of gender and sexual identity and replacing them with contingent and multiple identities” (Genz 125). Taking as its starting point Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender and Linda Hutcheon’s ideas about complicitous critique, this paper aims to show how gender categories are opened up, subverted and deconstructed<sup>1</sup> in July’s novel *The First Bad Man*.

3 The intention behind such an analysis is to demonstrate the possibility of a productive relationship between postmodern and feminist concerns. Such an approach will prove that the playfulness inherent in “postmodern parodic modes of installing and then subverting conventions” (Hutcheon 151) does not necessarily undermine a feminist political agenda – rather it encourages a re-thinking of the feminist subject and the inclusion and exclusion of participants in and from this agenda based on their apparent gender as perceived by others. This paper will thus first give a brief overview of different perspectives on the interplay of postmodernism and feminism. Secondly, Judith Butler’s gender performativity will be explained and thirdly, Linda Hutcheon’s complicitous critique and her ideas about a feminist postmodernist parody will be summarised. Subsequently, scenes from *The First Bad Man* will be analysed and related to the theories presented before. The focus here will be on the relationship between the protagonists Cheryl and Clee, specifically on instances of simulation, gender performance and parody as postmodern strategies of subversion. The

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘deconstruction’ was first proposed and demonstrated by Jacques Derrida in one of his many influential works, *Limited Inc*: “Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing-put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system” (Derrida 21). In *Understanding Poststructuralism*, Williams claims “[d]econstruction draws out a metaphysical background and its unquestioned role within the power of statements that depend upon it” (emphasis in original; 29). It can therefore be understood as undermining claims to absolute truth or fixed meanings by “find[ing] circular arguments and point[ing] out contradictions” (29). The term deconstruction has since been used in a variety of ways, for example by feminist theorists, whose usage of it will be considered in the following.

potential inherent in a conglomeration of postmodernism and feminism will then be re-emphasised in the conclusion.

4 As neither postmodernism nor feminism comprise a single theory or set of beliefs, the following overview will single out such ideas and concepts in both sets of theories that constitute a link between postmodernism and feminism and thus work to create a postmodern feminism or a postfeminism. Especially this latter term, often (mis-) understood to denounce feminism and its roots, “is now understood as a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism” (Brooks 1). The ‘post’-prefix, for Brooks, does not imply an outright rejection, but “a process of ongoing transformation and change” (1). Likewise, Linda Hutcheon contends that postmodernism is both deeply “self-conscious” and “self-contradictory”, as well as indebted to “duplicity” (1) – one of the key aspects of the postmodern discourse is that it does not simply take up an anti-modernist or anti-traditional stance and proclaim a new ideal. It aims to question and to subvert not only modernist standpoints, but also itself, a constant work in progress. However, postmodernism’s main concern, according to Hutcheon, “is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life”, showing that many concepts we take to be “‘natural’ ... are in fact ‘cultural’” (2). Postmodernism also includes an “awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not *reflect* society so much as *grant* meaning and value within a particular society” (8). The assumption here is that it is not so much a graspable reality that is represented, but representation which shapes what we conceive to be reality. This is especially important from a feminist perspective that aims to challenge modes of representing women, precisely to re-shape a female reality.

5 Patricia Waugh tries to sum up the philosophical shift from modernism to postmodernism by opposing a modernist “epistemic subject characterized in terms of historical experience, interiority, and consciousness” and a postmodernist “‘decentred’ subject identified through the public, impersonal signifying practices of other similarly ‘decentred’ subjects” (7). This notion of “postmodernism’s deconstruction of the subject category is reinforced by anti-essentialist feminists for whom ‘woman’ as a monolithic term is unable to address the complexity of gender in relation to other aspects of identity” (Genz & Brabon 28). The female subject in a postmodern framework does not possess inherent, natural qualities that are shared by women regardless of their backgrounds, race, class or

sexual orientation – on the contrary, culture, surroundings and ‘discourse’<sup>2</sup> are seen to be decisive for subject formation. This rejection of “an essential female self” (28) broadens the spectrum of feminism to include voices that might otherwise have been excluded – namely the “multivalent, inharmonious and conflicting voices of contemporary women” (30). A focus on diversity and contradiction within the category of ‘women’ allows for a more nuanced depiction of women’s struggles instead of enforcing a singular female perspective.

6 Difficulties that arise from a post(modern)-feminism include the complexity “of the contemporary gender order, in which feminism cannot be reduced to a singular set of affects or restricted to any particular site of operation” (Budgeon 29). If feminism has developed an intrinsic uncertainty about its aims and objectives, about subjective agency and the (non-) fixity of gender categories, the common goal assumed in earlier feminisms – to overthrow patriarchy and free women from oppression – can no longer be uncontested. Instead, new ways of imagining the future of gender relations need to be evaluated. In what follows, Judith Butler’s approach to a postmodern feminism and especially her ideas on the performativity of gender will be related to show how political agency and the fluidity of gender categories can be combined.

### **Judith Butler’s Gender Performativity**

7 When Genz and Brabon argue that queer theory’s and feminist theory’s most powerful intersection lies in the work of Judith Butler, this explicit focus suggests that there are rifts between the two fields of study, just like between feminism and postmodernism (124). Thus, queer theorists seek to deconstruct notions of stable identity and especially gendered identity, thereby attacking the “heterosexual and heterosexist norm” (124). An attack on or questioning of heterosexuality as a construct is seen to be lacking in many works of feminism that implicitly support “binary configurations of the subject” embedded in a heterosexual framework (124). Judith Butler, in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, explains that there are “exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences” (viii), making it her project to contest the assumption of a natural gender as such.

8 Taking a step back, Butler contests the idea that “the category of woman maintain[s] a meaning separate from the conditions of oppression against which it has been formulated”

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘discourse’ refers to Foucault’s understanding of it. Brooks claims, “Foucault’s use of the concept of discourse . . . enables us to understand how what is said has its own social and historical context and is a product of specific conditions of existence” (49).

(325). As long as the project of feminism relies on a shared and essential feminine self, a common identity, she argues, it becomes “exclusionary in principle” (325) – only those participants who fit neatly into the category of ‘woman’ will be included in a struggle for emancipation and autonomy. As soon as femininity and masculinity are set up as oppositions, the concept of gender comes into play. To assume that gender is a coherent expression of an internal stability is to assume that gender is something one can ‘be’, something innate and natural. Butler argues against such a conception of gender, claiming that “the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” – gender is therefore “constituting the identity it is purported to be” (34). Instead of ‘being’ a gender, one ‘does’ or ‘performs’ it through “a stylised reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalised and consolidated” (Genz & Brabon 125).

9 Butler also insists that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” – there is only an “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (186). This ‘illusion’ or fantasy is therefore created and consolidated through social practices that effectively mask the fictionality of a true gender. Butler notes that “under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality”, while the deciding factor of this operation is “the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations” (xii/xiii) – namely the subordination of women that is proclaimed by feminists. According to Butler, there is “no natural necessity to see bodies as ordered into distinct sexes” (Digeser 656) – this necessity is rooted entirely in history, as it “lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality” (Butler 153).

10 Considering Butler’s argument about gender performativity, it is important to reflect on the difference between this performativity and a self-willed and self-controlled performance. It is not possible to simply choose the gender one wants to perform. Instead, “gender is an involuntary and imposed production within a culturally restricted space and it is always ‘put on’ under constraint as a compulsory performance that acts in line with heteronormative conventions” (Genz 14-15). However, this does not mean that there is no space for a subversion or acting out against the imposed gender categories from within. Butler points to parody and drag as possible responses to the oppressive forces of consolidated gender norms. She claims that “[t]he replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called

heterosexual original” and that the “parodic repetition of ‘the original’ . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and original” (emphasis in original; 43). By performing gender in a specific or ‘unusual’ way, such as in drag, gender is revealed to be merely “an imitation of an imitation” (Digeser 660). While parodic interpretations of gender norms “are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization” (Butler 188). However, while there is a lot of agency to be found in this possibility of subversion and deconstruction of gender, not every repetition of gendered acts and gestures is necessarily disruptive – the potential for a rethinking of gender norms is always connected to a specific context and setting (189).

11      Returning to the idea of the subject of feminism, Butler does not propose to cast aside the term ‘women’ – on the contrary, she claims that “if feminism presupposes that ‘women’ designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.” (16) If ‘women’ is opened up to include many different and also contradictory meanings, and if femininity is destabilised through performative acts of subversion, this can arguably strengthen an inclusionary and powerful form of feminism.

### **Linda Hutcheon’s Complicitous Critique**

12      In her evaluation of postmodernism, Hutcheon aligns herself with theorists believing in a compatibility of postmodernism and feminism, precisely because postmodernism is not as a-political as it has been interpreted. The argument that “postmodernism is disqualified from political involvement because of its narcissistic and ironic appropriation” is dismantled as “politically naïve” because it ignores the postmodern move of “turn[ing] its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique” (3). However, Hutcheon admits that this critique is neither pure nor unproblematic. It is one that acknowledges “its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyse and maybe even undermine” (emphasis in original; 4). Postmodernism is here seen to be inextricably linked to the system it tries to subvert by contesting authorities and the construction of meaning, but at the same time aware of this position and the contradictions it implies.

13 Hutcheon's study of postmodern photography and fiction zeroes in on a "process of cultural 'de-doxification'<sup>3</sup>" that shows an "awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of cultural knowledge [...] raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation" (7). This circles back to the issue of female representation raised in the introduction to this article. Both gender knowledge and images of women, in fiction or elsewhere, are understood to be culturally constructed through discourse and signification, not grounded in an objective reality. The postmodern project, then, is to employ parody, "both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation" to point out their inherent contradictions and constructed-ness (8). Connecting this understanding of postmodern critique to a critical feminism, Hutcheon states that "complicity is not full affirmation or strict adherence; the awareness of difference and contradiction, of being inside and outside, is never lost in the feminist, as in the postmodern" (14). Just like postmodernism, feminism orients itself towards the margins of and the faultiness in dominant discourse and ideology, while constantly questioning its own place inside said discourse and ideology. These common denominators, for Hutcheon, allow for a cross-fertilisation of postmodernism and feminism, especially in the arts. If "[p]ostmodernism manipulates, but does not transform significations" in a parodic manner, feminism needs to take it a step further, as "subversion does not automatically lead to the production of the new" (168). The task of a feminist postmodern parody, then, is "to contest the old – the representations of both [women's] bodies and [...] desires – without denying them the right to re-colonize" (168).

### **The deconstruction of gender in *The First Bad Man***

14 While it is important to trace the common project of postmodernism and feminism in society and culture, this paper focuses on its specific influence on fiction. Robinson claims that "what we know about masculinity and femininity and what we understand as sexual norms and sexual identities are framed and limited by familiar narratives" (97). The potential for feminist writers therefore lies in the interrogation and rewriting of "the narratives that script us as masculine or feminine" (97). Miranda July's "devotion to women and their complexities . . . at the heart of all [her] creative endeavours" (Schilling n. p.) marks her work as a valuable resource for a feminist reading. July started creating a feminist film archive in the 90s that has since been contextualised "within feminist and queer history" (n.

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<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon takes on Roland Barthes' "notion of the 'doxa' as public opinion . . . and consensus" to emphasise that "postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations" (3).

p.). The remainder of this paper will show that her writing, specifically her first and to date only novel *The First Bad Man*, could and should be situated in a similar context, as it explores, questions and deconstructs notions of masculinity and femininity. Taking into account Judith Butler's ideas outlined previously, the next paragraphs will analyse the relationship between protagonists Cheryl and Clee as an example for gender performativity, especially as situated within the heterosexual matrix. Subsequently, Hutcheon's ideas about complicitous critique will be applied to the representations of masculinity and femininity explored in the novel.

### **'Adult Games', Gender Performance and Heterosexuality**

15 The relationship between Cheryl and Clee starts out as a violent and abusive one. Cheryl, in her mid-forties, living alone, takes in her bosses' 20-year old daughter Clee who attacks her both physically and verbally. When Cheryl's therapist Ruth-Anne suggests that Cheryl put an end to the violence exerted by Clee, Cheryl begins practising self-defence with the fitness DVDs produced by Open Palm, where she works as a manager. As Cheryl starts fighting back, the violent encounters first introduced and enforced by Clee become "[a]n immensely satisfying adult game" (71), where Clee and Cheryl take on distinct roles – the attacker and the attacked. This 'game' can be described as gender parody, precisely because the self-defence moves Cheryl employs stem from instructions on how to defend oneself against a 'male' attacker. By taking these moves out of their designated context and using them for an undefined kind of pleasure, they are "denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" (Butler 188). The deconstruction of gender is taken further when Cheryl presents Clee with a gift, a soy candle, and only then becomes aware of its implications in the context of their frequent physical proximity. In this encounter, Clee is presented as what would be constructed as 'decidedly masculine' – she is sitting on the couch with her "knees wide apart" and likened to "a boxer", she "cough[s] huskily and spit[s] into one of the empty Pepsi bottles" and declares that the reason for her aggressions is that she is "'misogynist' or whatever" (75-76). Clee seems to feel the need to act in a 'manly' way to distance herself from the homosexual undercurrent that she apparently finds threatening. The (masculine) dominance and aggression exerted by Clee can be linked to "heterosexuality as a normative category of sexed, gendered and sexual identity which serves both to support the binary logic by which 'hetero-' and 'homosexual' identities are produced and to perpetuate the construction of homosexual identities as deviant and abnormal" (Carroll 2). In order to re-establish a heterosexual norm, Clee performs a 'male' gender to allow Cheryl

as a female suitor and to remove herself from the realm of ‘women’ whom she claims to resent.

16 The tensions between the game-like character of and the sexual implications inherent in Clee’s and Cheryl’s fights are further revealed to Cheryl when she learns that Rick, the gardener, bore witness to one of their encounters. His reaction changes her understanding of the situation, especially when she starts seeing it through his eyes:

Before every raw impulse there was a pause – I saw us through the homeless gardener’s eyes and felt obscene. Being outside society, he didn’t know about adult games; he was like me before I met Ruth-Anne, thinking everything that happened in life was real. (85)

This opposition of ‘games’ and ‘reality’ highlights Cheryl’s fear of feeling attracted to a woman, as well as being perceived as homosexual. However, the dichotomy presented here also highlights the constructed and enforced nature of heterosexuality as such. In order to allow for physical and also sensual contact, albeit in a distorted and violent context, Cheryl feels the need to label her relations with Clee as a ‘game’, as opposed to a reality in which the “taboo against homosexuality” (86) works against the possibility of developing a desire for someone of the same sex. Butler describes the formation of the homosexual taboo in great detail, coming to the conclusion that gender “identity is constructed and maintained by the consistent application of this taboo, not only in the stylization of the body in compliance with discrete categories of sex, but in the production and ‘disposition’ of sexual desire” (86). Sexual desire needs to be distributed according to certain norms, which is mirrored in the ‘adult games’ Cheryl and Clee employ to ward off implications of the taboo against homosexuality.

17 Struggling to find an “organized and respectable, less feverish” way of fighting with Clee, Cheryl turns to old self-defence “scenarios” produced by Open Palm prior to the advent of self-defence as fitness (85). The following interactions take their ‘game’ to another level, as the two women now re-enact self-defence scenarios that are meant to aid women in the decidedly ‘real’ case of an attack to foster their ‘unreal’ relationship – they are creating a simulation<sup>4</sup> of a simulation. This allows for a further subversion of gender categories through the performance of distinct gendered roles. The Open Palm scenarios, bearing titles like “A Day at the Park” (86) or “Woman Asking Directions” (87), rely on a strict separation of gender, opposing the innocent, slightly hysterical woman, albeit fierce in the face of danger,

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘simulation’ here, as in the novel, is used to describe the act of copying specific ‘role models’ and their actions, rendering it inherently playful and performative. (set document to English to make sure punctuations appear correctly)

with an aggressive, inherently ‘bad’ man. Their one-dimensionality is copied by Cheryl and Clee, with Cheryl always playing the part of the woman being attacked and Clee always playing the part of the man attacking. The irony here resides in the fact that Cheryl initiates the first attack, thus taking control of her own being-attacked-ness (86). Cheryl seems content with the even more ‘unreal’ character of her new fights with Clee, as “[t]his wasn’t anything, just a re-creation of a simulation of the kind of thing that might happen to a woman if she didn’t keep her wits about her” (July 87). Furthermore, she learns how to ‘perform’ her gender correctly:

[S]he demonstrated not just what to do but how to feel. [...] It was interesting to be this kind of person, so unself-conscious and exposed, so feminine. Dana could have had a career making videos like this for all occasions – waking up, answering the phone, leaving the house; a woman could follow along and learn what to do when she’s *not* being attacked, how to feel the rest of the time. (88)

The consequence that can be drawn from this kind of performance is that “gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing . . . but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort” (Butler 152). If Cheryl is longing for an instruction manual on how to be a woman, this clearly designates the fictional status of a ‘fixed’ gender, one that exists prior to a cultural signification – instead of ‘having’ or ‘being’ a gender, Cheryl looks to another woman to produce her gender through acts and gestures. Her fear of being exposed reflects this gender insecurity, when she worries that Clee “would see me, see who I really was. A woman whose femininity was just copied from another woman.” (July 89). This imagined instance of confrontation also plays with the postmodern notion of the decentred subject – one that is not autonomous and coherent, but constantly reconstructed and reproduced through discourse and specific situations, leaving Cheryl to ask herself the question: “*Do you even know who you are?*” and replying: “*No, I don’t.*” (emphasis in original; 90)

18 While Cheryl finds a new role model for (idealised) femininity in her simulations, Clee identifies with and performs the masculinity employed in the self-defence scenarios. This is made explicit in a scene that introduces the title of the novel:

Until now there had been no overt acknowledgement of the video or that we were anyone but our own angry selves. “I’m the first man,” she said. “The one in denim?” “The first bad man.” It was the way she was standing when she said it – her feet planted wide, her big hands waiting in the air. Just like a bad man, the kind that comes to a sleepy town and makes all kinds of trouble before galloping off again. She wasn’t the first bad man ever but the first I’d ever met who had long blond hair and pink velour pants. (91)

This instance can be interpreted as gender parody in different ways. First, it relates to Butler's remarks on drag as a subversive bodily act that "imitat[es] gender" and therefore "implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (187). Clee's impersonation deviates from this understanding of drag insofar as her clothes could be perceived as decidedly feminine (perhaps even overly so) while her whole act (gestures, posture, language) are what would appear to be masculine. However, this only seems to add another layer to the subversiveness suggested by Butler – the comic contrast between the gender that is signified through simulation or theatrical performance and the gender that is signified through superficial appearance points towards the artificiality of gender incorporation (Butler 183).

19 Second, the phrase 'the first bad man' implies that there is an original masculinity, an ideal that can be copied. As Clee and Cheryl are simulating a simulation, the 'bad man' in the simulation who seems to be the original (the first) is "nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (43). While it is not made explicit that this gender performance is parodic, it strongly relates to Butler's claim that "it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (emphasis in original; 199). The repeated simulation of a male gender, although it can consolidate its 'naturalness', can also, in specific situations, point out the contradictions inherent in such a univocal understanding of identity. Thus, the man who "makes all kinds of trouble" (July 91) also makes what Butler refers to as "gender trouble" (xii). The simulations acted out by Cheryl and Clee make Cheryl reflect on the differentiation between 'game' and 'reality' that becomes increasingly difficult. When talking to her therapist about the scenarios with Clee, she claims that "[f]or her it might not be a game, it might be real" and then goes on to "describe[] the wolfish intensity that came over her when she simulated" (July 92). Ruth-Anne's comment also reflects the fluidity of (gender) identity: "Real comes and goes and isn't very interesting" (92).

20 Finally, the simulations that Cheryl deemed safer than unscripted fights lead to a sexual obsession that further deconstructs a fixed gender identity. When Clee invites guests for a house party, Cheryl closely watches her, for the first time openly realising her attraction to Clee, describing her hair as "sleepy and golden" and her mouth as "too tender to be in public" (105). Soon afterwards, Cheryl imagines herself in the position of Philip, her twenty-two years older co-worker, whom she has feelings for and who has repeatedly asked her advice about whether or not he should sleep with a 16-year old girl he is entranced with. On the night of the party, Cheryl finally tells him to go along with it and then uses her imagined

connection with him to experience his sexual pleasure. However, instead of Kirsten, the girl he is sleeping with, she imagines Clee as a more suited partner: “This was the kind of young woman he deserved – a bombshell, not a rat-faced little girl” (108). The identification with Philip opens up new sexual realms for Cheryl, who now has “so much energy vibrating in [her] groin” (July 108) that the simulations take on a different nature: “I was playing something else now . . . , awkwardly wheeling around a phantom erection” (110). The aggressive, forceful sexuality that for Cheryl is strongly connected to the (imagined) penis can be related to Butler’s thoughts about “literalizing fantasy”: if “[p]leasures are said to reside in the penis, the vagina, and the breasts or to emanate from them, . . . such descriptions correspond to a body which has already been constructed or naturalized as gender-specific” (95). The need for a gender-specific separation, to support what Butler calls “melancholic heterosexuality” (96), leaves Cheryl unable to fantasise about Clee without inserting a penis that she thinks of as her own into her, reconfirming a heterosexual desire. In another session with Ruth-Anne, Cheryl’s somewhat enigmatic therapist, the discontinuity between Cheryl’s understanding of her own desires and the ones imagined through Philip becomes more obvious:

I described tapping into Phillip’s lust, his overwhelming appetites and aggressive explosions that convulsed through me. . . . “Right. And perhaps we don’t even need to call it Phillip’s lust? Maybe it’s just lust.” “Well, it’s not *mine*. These just aren’t the kinds of things I would think about, on my own, without him.” (July 111)

Cheryl’s refusal to mark the desire she experiences as her own also brings to mind “a matrix that accounts for all desire for women by subjects of whatever sex or gender as originating in a masculine, heterosexual position” (Butler 72). Only by performing, albeit in her fantasies, a ‘male’ sexuality, a form of desire is constituted because “[t]he libido-as-masculine is the source from which all possible sexuality is presumed to come” (72). This is reflected in Cheryl’s contention that she does “masturbat[e herself] to orgasm”, but that this is “just, you know, behind the scenes” (July 111).

21 While this conflation of masculinity and sexuality, as well as the consequent undermining of female homosexuality, could also be seen as a confirmation and consolidation of gender categories, the equalisation of Cheryl’s fantasies and an unhealthy obsession that she eventually conquers suggests otherwise. When using Phillip’s lust no longer achieves its aims, Cheryl goes through all the men she herself has ever known and imagines them having sex with Clee, the different penises “getting more abstract and unlikely” (118), only realising that she has a problem when Clee finds out about her fantasies. When the two women indulge in another fight, Cheryl seems to have “an

aggressive or manly facial expression”, leading Clee to believe that she is “shitting on [her] face or something” (127-128). Realisation then hits Cheryl: “While I totally wasn’t, in general terms I guessed I was. I guessed I had been shitting on her unceasingly for the last month” (128). Cheryl likens her very physical obsession to a “spell”, something like an outside force that has taken possession of her and that she needs to counter with an “antidote” (121). Exaggerating male sexual aggression and then defining it as something poisonous or tainted that can be warded off with the right determination, responds to the way men are presented in the self-defence videos Cheryl and Clee have been re-enacting. However, by making Cheryl the vessel for this sexual energy that at the same time liberates and confines her desires, a fixed gendered identity is called into question and subverted again. Masculinity is not seen as an innate characteristic that belongs to or constitutes a male body, but as a tool that helps Cheryl in coming to terms with her desires. The necessity of a distinctly ‘female’ desire is therefore called into question as well.

### **Feminist Postmodern Parody and Complicitous Critique**

22 Hutcheon claims that “postmodern parodic representational strategies have offered feminist artists an effective way of working within and yet challenging dominant patriarchal discourses” (167). One of the ways this is done in *The First Bad Man*, is the juxtaposition of different ideas about femininity and masculinity, as held by different characters that are then subverted or ‘de-doxified’ through irony, creating a feminist postmodern parody. From her very first appearance, Clee is defined by a contrasting and seemingly contradictory mixture of attributes that are sorted by Cheryl as belonging to and escaping categories of femininity. Cheryl’s first thoughts when opening the door to her are: “She was a woman. So much a woman that for a moment I wasn’t sure what I was” (July 22). She also uses the word “bombshell” to describe Clee, explaining that “[i]t was more than just her chest dimensions – she had a blond, tan largeness of scale” and therefore placing a strong emphasis on (voluptuous) physicality as an indicator for femininity (23). Thus, Cheryl seems to be ‘male gaze-ing’ Clee, objectifying and categorising her, before this impression is subverted. Clee’s messiness and apparent disinterest in personal hygiene go against Cheryl’s conceptions of a (young) woman’s behaviour:

A smell began to coagulate around Clee, a brothy, intimate musk, that she seemed unaware of, or unconcerned by. I had presumed she would shower every morning, using noxious blue cleansing gels and plasticky sweet lotions. But, in fact, she didn’t wash. (26)

While underlining Cheryl's inability to get accustomed to another person sharing her living space, this paragraph also stresses some of Cheryl's ideas about femininity, namely that women should be neat and clean, as well as contained. This thought is made explicit in one of the therapy sessions with Ruth-Anne. Cheryl here describes Clee as "a dense, stenchy bull" and, reacting to Ruth-Anne's statement that "[b]ulls are male", Cheryl's words are: "A woman talks, too much – and worries, too much – and gives and gives in. A woman bathes" (53). Cheryl here suggests a 'naturally' female way of being: submissive, passive, anxious. However, while Cheryl only seems to reflect and project her own character, these ascriptions are clearly produced and upheld by the social discourse surrounding her.

23 Another feature that alienates Clee from Cheryl's understanding of what it means to be female is her tendency towards physical aggression. When Clee starts both physically and verbally abusing her host, Cheryl is too shocked to react (July 35) because this kind of behaviour evades the categories she knows. As Cheryl is uncomfortable with "these kinds of thoughts . . . just go[ing] on and on with no category" (42), she forms a conclusion for herself: "Whereas girls in my youth felt angry but directed it inward and cut themselves and became depressed, girls nowadays just went arrrrgh and pushed someone into a wall" (42). Thus, Cheryl seeks an explanation for Clee's behaviour in a generational gap and changing concepts of femininity, instead of blaming Clee's personality. This implies the complicity of women in the patriarchal discourses feminism seeks to disrupt. Female complicity, albeit one in feminist discourse itself, and the parodic critique that can ensue from it are rendered obvious in another short incidence taking place at the Open Palm office. When one of her co-workers brings her baby to work, Cheryl tells her off: "She gave me a betrayed look, because she's a working mom, feminism, etc. I gave her the same look back, because I'm a woman in a senior position, she's taking advantage, feminism, etc" (14) While this short exchange of looks underlines female complicity, suggesting a shared history and struggle, the exhaustive "feminism, etc." ironically disrupts this complicity, rendering it critical.

24 Deconstructive measures can also be found in the interactions between Cheryl and Phillip, especially in the ascriptions he makes and in his behaviour. When his character is introduced early on in the novel, an incident at an Open Palm fundraiser is described that gives the reader an impression of the kind of man depicted here:

He had lifted the heavy beads off my chest and [...] used the beads to pull me toward him. "Hey," he said, "I like this, this is handy." An outsider [...] might have thought this moment was degrading, but I knew the degradation was just a joke; he was mocking the kind of man who would do something like that. [...] The joke was, *Can you believe people? The tacky kinds of things they do?* (emphasis in original; 6-7)

The action itself is reminiscent of the assertion of male dominance – Phillip pulling Cheryl towards him, taking away her agency. Cheryl’s explanation of this behaviour as ironic or mocking, instead of letting her reclaim subjectivity, exposes her wish to see him as ‘more’ than “the kind of man who would do something like that” (6-7), ignoring the possibility that he might be just that, and that no irony is involved. However, the ambivalence regarding Phillip’s intentions also creates a certain tension between one-dimensional depictions of masculinity. This can be linked to a “double process of installing and ironizing” with which “parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Hutcheon 93). Both a continuity, Phillip asserting male dominance, and difference – Phillip ironically asserting male dominance – are present and create a tension between representations of masculinity, thus deconstructing the notion of masculinity as such.

25 The ascriptions Phillip uses for Cheryl, on the other hand, demonstrate the arbitrariness of the signifiers ‘female’ and ‘male’. Phillip asks Cheryl’s blessing to begin an affair with Kirsten, allegedly because he trusts her opinion most:

I explained how strong you are, how you’re a feminist and you live alone, and she agreed we should wait until we got your take on it. . . . And I told her how perfectly balanced you are in terms of your masculine and feminine energies. . . . So you can see things from a man’s point of view, but without being clouded by yang. (July 47)

By ascribing a perfect balance in terms of masculinity and femininity to Cheryl, Phillip, at the same time, removes her from the realm of women he can find sexually attractive and puts her in a seemingly ungendered role: an advisor who can take on both the male and the female perspective. However, the irony lies in the equation of ‘feminist’ and ‘living alone’, as it suggests that a middle-aged woman who lives alone must surely be ‘strong’ and a feminist, because she does not allow a man into her life. This irony is underscored by other characters perceiving Cheryl as lesbian solely for superficial reasons: “People sometimes think this because of the way I wear my hair; it happens to be short. I also wear shoes you can actually walk in” (6). Kate, one of Clee’s party guests, contends that her father, after a date with Cheryl, thought she was “dressed like a lesbian”, “making a big show out of [Cheryl’s] failure to attract him” (109). This breaking down of signifiers like ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘lesbian’ and the exposure of the radical discontinuity between signifier and signified (Genz 144) is an integral part of a (feminist) postmodern parody that seeks to explore “the way in which narratives . . . structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self” (Hutcheon 7).

## Conclusion

26 This paper has shown that postmodernism and feminism, especially in the last two decades, share many aims and objectives, like the questioning and subversion of (gendered) identity, unity of the subject and a “single epistemological truth” (Brooks 92). Marginalisation occurring inside the feminist project, namely of voices contesting the white middle-class position feminism seems to be grounded on, can be thematised by postmodern debates around “nationality and difference” (Brooks 92). Concerning the destabilisation and deconstruction of a fixed gender, Judith Butler’s gender performativity was related and then applied to the novel *The First Bad Man*. The relationship between Cheryl and Clee was shown to be situated firmly within the heterosexual matrix, while at the same time foregrounding the construction of the institution of heterosexuality. Their ‘adult games’, simulations of simulations, effectively displace and defer a fixed gendered identity. (Female) sexual desire and its production is called into question as well when considering Cheryl’s fantasies as involving a ‘male’ desire. While the analysis of gender categories, their instalment and their subversion, could be expanded to include for example the role of motherhood (as Clee eventually becomes pregnant, but leaves the baby with Cheryl who is then forced into an ‘unnatural’ form of motherhood), this would go beyond the scope of this discussion.

27 Recalling the framework of postfeminism, the different representations of women and men employed in this novel are reminiscent of what Genz calls the “hybrid qualities” of “modern-day femininity”, in that it “allows for multiple layers of signification and female identification that go beyond the dualities of subject and object, perpetrator and victim, power and powerlessness” (7). This hybridity was linked to Linda Hutcheon’s complicitous critique, a subversion that is only possible from within the discourse that produces it. Through irony and the creation of a feminist postmodern parody, seemingly stable notions of masculinity and femininity are challenged and opened up in *The First Bad Man*. This includes the representation of women like Cheryl and Clee and of men like Phillip, the assumptions they form about each other and, emerging from these, their ideas about what it means to be male or female. As pointed out before, these modes of installing and then subverting gender expectations and relations are necessarily limited to the frameworks that produce gender expectations. However, this subversion from within can be seen as a first step towards a more open and flexible understanding of gender and, going further, of the subject of feminism today. Tanja Nusser argues that feminism today “is about keeping ever present the contradictions and synchronicities that do not let themselves be incorporated into

one (dominant) narration” (141), meaning that there is not a single answer to the problems of directionality and agency that emerge from an intersection of postmodernism and feminism. Nevertheless, this paper provided one possible productive intersection between the two fields, as “engaged in a multivalent and contradictory dialogue, forging a postmodern feminism and/or postfeminism that exceeds binary logic” (Genz & Brabon 110).

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