



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Laughing Through The Pain: Chick Lit's Affective Contradictions And Trauma Narration In *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*

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Abstract

Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017) redefines chick lit's narrative boundaries by centering trauma recovery through a paradoxical blend of dark humour and affective tension. This study argues that the novel subverts the genre's conventional focus on romantic resolution, instead prioritizing psychological healing through platonic connection, fragmented narration, and the strategic use of comedy as both a coping mechanism and a bridge to empathy. By analysing *Eleanor*'s deadpan humour as a reflection of her dissociation and delayed recall of childhood abuse, the novel challenges scholarly dismissals of chick lit as trivial, demonstrating its capacity to engage with complex trauma theory. Drawing on Caruth's (1996) concept of "unclaimed experience" and Ahmed's (2004) framework of affective economies, this article explores how Honeyman reframes chick lit as a space for politicizing mental health struggles. The rejection of romantic closure in favour of therapeutic progress critiques neoliberal individualism, positioning commercial women's fiction as a vehicle for social advocacy. This analysis contributes to ongoing debates about genre legitimacy, advocating for scholarly recognition of chick lit's evolving emotional and thematic depth.

Keywords: Chick lit, trauma narratives, affect theory, dark comedy, genre subversion, Gail Honeyman

1. Introduction

Since its emergence in the 1990s with Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, chick lit has undergone notable transformation, moving beyond its early reputation as light-hearted romantic comedy focused on the lives of young, urban women in pursuit of love and career success. While the genre was initially dismissed as trivial or superficial women's fiction, it has progressively incorporated more nuanced psychological narratives that engage with contemporary social issues, all while retaining its broad commercial appeal. Traditionally, chick lit novels centred on "flawed" young women navigating fulfilment through romance, consumerism, and humour; however, recent works have significantly expanded the genre's emotional and thematic scope, addressing subjects such as mental health, family trauma, and existential isolation.

Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* marks a notable shift in the chick lit genre by challenging its usual patterns and placing the protagonist's journey of trauma recovery at the centre, rather than focusing primarily on romantic fulfilment. Honeyman uses humour as an essential tool to bridge the gap

between the character's deep psychological pain and the lighter tone of the narrative. This use of comedy not only offers readers brief respite from the novel's heavier themes but also makes the story more approachable and highlights the dissociative coping strategies that trauma survivors often use. By weaving dark humour into the narrative, the novel reimagines traditional chick lit conventions, turning them into a means for deeper psychological

The narrative of Eleanor Oliphant *Is Completely Fine* centres on Eleanor Oliphant, a socially isolated 30-year old employed at a graphic design firm in Glasgow. Beneath her meticulously ordered daily routines marked by repetitive lunches, solitary crossword puzzles, and regular consumption of vodka on weekends lies a history of profound childhood trauma. The novel gradually discloses that Eleanor is the sole survivor of a house fire intentionally set by her mother, an event that resulted in the deaths of her mother and younger sister and left Eleanor with lasting physical and psychological scars. Her current life is defined by acute social withdrawal, weekly phone conversations with her abusive mother (who is ultimately revealed to be a hallucination), and an elaborate fantasy involving a local musician whom she imagines as a future romantic partner. Eleanor's journey toward recovery is set in motion when she and a colleague, Raymond, assist an elderly man who collapses in the street. This encounter initiates a series of social connections that begin to break through Eleanor's isolation and ultimately compel her to confront the realities of her traumatic past.

2. Trauma, Affect, and Genre

2.1 Trauma Theory

Caruth's (1996) seminal work on trauma as "unclaimed experience" provides a critical lens for analysing Eleanor's fragmented recollection of the fire that killed her sister. Trauma, Caruth argues, resists linear narration, existing instead as a "missed encounter" that haunts survivors through flashbacks and somatic triggers (p. 4). Eleanor's delayed recall during therapy sessions where she finally verbalizes her mother's role in the fire, aligns with Herman's (1992) stages of recovery, particularly the transition from silence to testimony. Herman posits that survivors must reconstruct traumatic memories into coherent narratives to reclaim agency, a process mirrored in Eleanor's gradual articulation of her past.

2.2 Affect Theory

Ahmed's (2004) concept of "affective stickiness" elucidates how Eleanor's trauma adheres to mundane interactions, such as her visceral reaction to the smell of smoke. Ahmed contends that emotions circulate through "economies" where certain affects become "sticky," attaching themselves to objects or memories (p. 11). For Eleanor, the smell of smoke triggers panic attacks, linking present sensory experiences to past violence. The novel contrasts emotion-narrativized through Eleanor's journaling with pre-linguistic affect, such as her dissociation during social interactions. Humour temporarily suspends overwhelming psychic pain, creating moments of relief that allow readers to engage with traumatic content without becoming overwhelmed.

2.3 Chick Lit as Contested Genre

Chick lit occupies a contested space within literary studies, often derided for its commercial appeal and perceived lack of depth. Montoro (2012) argues that the genre's focus on women's interiority offers "subversive potential" (p. 34), particularly when authors blend conventional tropes with socio-political critique. Honeyman's novel exemplifies this approach, merging chick lit's accessible prose with trauma theory to interrogate societal neglect of mental health. By situating Eleanor's struggles within systemic failures, including inadequate foster care and workplace alienation the novel transcends individual pathology, framing recovery as a communal responsibility.

3. Affective Contradictions: Humour as Trauma Mediation

3.1 Dark Comedy and Trauma Disclosure

Eleanor's deadpan humour functions as both a defence mechanism and a narrative device to mediate traumatic content. Her literal interpretations of social rituals, such as describing office small talk as "scripted absurdity" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 102), generate comedy that masks profound alienation. Unlike Bridget Jones's slapstick mishaps, Eleanor's humour stems from dissociation, reflecting Caruth's (1996) assertion that trauma survivors often adopt "performative normalcy" to navigate daily life (p. 62). This performativity is evident in Eleanor's meticulous grooming rituals, which she describes as "applying my work armor" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 23), a phrase that humorously underscores her need for emotional protection.

3.2 Affective Dissonance in Key Scenes

The novel's most poignant moments arise from abrupt tonal shifts between comedy and trauma. During a therapy session, Eleanor deflects vulnerability with a joke about "fast-tracking" her recovery, only to collapse into a raw confession: "She locked us in. She wanted us dead" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 214). This dissonance mirrors the instability of traumatic memory, destabilizing reader expectations of comic relief. Similarly, the office birthday scene where Eleanor critiques (Honeyman, 2017, p. 45) juxtaposes her anthropological detachment with profound loneliness, illustrating how humour both conceals and reveals pain.

4. Trauma Narration: Subverting Chick Lit Tropes

4.1 Rejecting Romantic Closure

Honeyman explicitly subverts chick lit's "happily ever after" trope by rejecting romantic resolution in favour of therapeutic progress. Eleanor's delusional crush on musician Johnnie Lomond parodies the genre's "Prince Charming" archetype, ultimately exposed as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Her eventual bond with Raymond, rooted in mutual care rather than romantic idealization, critiques neoliberal narratives of self-reliance. Ahmed (2010) argues that happiness is often tied to heteronormative milestones, a paradigm Eleanor dismantles by finding fulfilment in friendship and self-acceptance.

4.2 The Body as Trauma Archive

Eleanor's body serves as a physical archive of trauma, marked by facial scars and somatic triggers. The smell of vodka, for instance, evokes memories of her mother's alcoholism, embodying Ahmed's (2004) concept of "sticky" affect. Her dissociation- "I hovered above myself, watching" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 147), contrasts sharply with chick lit's traditional focus on bodily transformation through makeovers. Unlike Bridget Jones, whose narrative arc culminates in romantic success contingent on physical appearance, Eleanor's scars remain unaltered, symbolizing the indelible impact of trauma.

4.3 Voice and Silence

The novel's first-person narration mirrors Eleanor's psychological fragmentation, oscillating between verbose internal monologues and stark silence. Early chapters feature elaborate descriptions of mundane routines ("two frozen pizzas, one for Saturday and one for Sunday" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 15), which mask her inability to articulate trauma. As therapy progresses, her voice shifts toward authenticity, culminating in the stark admission: "I'm angry. I'm so angry I could burn the world" (Honeyman, 2017, p. 311). This evolution from performative speech to raw testimony aligns with Herman's (1992) assertion that verbalizing trauma is essential for recovery.

5. Implications for Chick Lit Studies

5.1 Genre Legitimacy

The novel's critical acclaim including the Costa First Novel Award (2017) challenges rigid distinctions between literary and commercial fiction. By integrating trauma theory with chick lit's accessible prose, Honeyman demonstrates the genre's capacity for psychological depth, countering accusations of triviality. This evolution suggests that genre legitimacy derives not from rejecting popular appeal but from leveraging it to explore complex themes.

5.2 Feminist Reclamation

Honeyman's focus on communal healing over individual resilience aligns with feminist critiques of neoliberal self-help narratives. Ferriss and Young (2006) argue that chick lit often reinforces postfeminist ideals by framing personal success as a matter of "choice" (p. 12). *Eleanor Oliphant* subverts this by situating recovery within systemic support networks, including therapy and workplace accommodations. Eleanor's progress depends on Raymond's patience, her therapist's guidance, and Sammy's generosity is a narrative choice that politicizes mental health as a collective responsibility.

5.3 Future Directions

The novel's success signals fertile ground for analysing trauma in contemporary chick lit. Works like Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* (2012) and Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (2014) similarly employ humour to navigate dark themes, suggesting an emerging subgenre that merges commercial appeal with psychological complexity. Future studies might explore how these narratives leverage genre conventions to destigmatize mental illness or advocate for systemic reform.

6. Conclusion: Redefining Chick Lit's Affective Possibilities

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine expands chick lit's emotional and thematic scope, using humour to render trauma legible without trivialization. By subverting romantic tropes and centring platonic solidarity, Honeyman redefines the genre's cultural significance, positioning it as a vehicle for social critique. For scholars, this underscores the urgency of engaging popular women's fiction as a site of narrative innovation, one that bridges academic theory and public discourse on mental health. As chick lit continues to evolve, its capacity to balance accessibility with emotional depth offers a model for storytelling that resonates across literary and commercial divides.

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