


Contents

# Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture

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### 3 "I Am Not a Housewife, but . . ."

#### Postfeminism and the Revival of Domesticity

Stéphanie Genz

[I have] duties to myself . . . I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being just as you are—or, at all events, that I must try and become one.

—Nora, *A Doll's House*

When *Cosmopolitan* magazine announced in its June 2000 issue that young twenty-something women had become the new "housewife wannabes", the relationship between domesticity and female/feminist emancipation seemed to have been turned on its head (Dutton 164). While for the last century women had fought to expose the oppression and subjugation inherent in their domestic subject positions and bring about a consciousness-raising 'click' moment, now it appeared that they were eager to reembrace the title of housewife and rediscover the joys and crafts of a 'new femininity'. Suddenly, domesticity became the buzzword of the new millennium and housewives, fictional and real, were emerging in all areas, determined to regain entry into their doll's house that, not forty years ago, they seemed to have left for good. From Nigella Lawson whipping up tasty treats on TV (and simultaneously managing to look infinitely glamorous) to Brenda Barnes famously giving up her job as president of Pepsi-Cola North America (and with this, her \$2 million annual salary) to spend more time with her three children,<sup>1</sup> there was no denying that domesticity was experiencing a comeback, a twenty-first-century renaissance. Critics from all arenas were keen to comment on this cultural trend: while 'new traditionalist' politicians and journalists were welcoming this reaffirmation of family values, feminist critics denounced this retro-boom as a 'backlash' that returns women to the subordinate roles of a bygone, prefeminist era. Indeed, domesticity has reappeared as a fiercely debated concept in both popular culture and feminist criticism, proving that the meaning of 'home' is far from being domesticated and remains unresolved despite sustained attempts (from feminist, political and media quarters alike) to settle it.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter puts forward an alternative critical frame to interpret the revival of domesticity and the figure of the housewife: postfeminism. It contends that postfeminism offers a new mode of conceptualizing the domestic as a contested space of female subjectivity where women/feminists actively

grapple with opposing cultural constructions of the housewife. In particular, a postfeminist lens allows us to transcend a critical impasse (trapped by a dualistic logic) and reinterpret the homemaker as a polysemic character caught in a struggle between tradition and modernity, past and present. The postfeminist housewife is no longer easily categorized as an emblem of female oppression but she renegotiates and resignifies her domestic/feminine position, deliberately choosing to 'go home'.<sup>3</sup> As I will argue, postfeminism undermines static constructions of the housewife by reclaiming domestic femininity as a site of undecidability, of meaning in question. It is more challenging and rewarding to resist analytical convenience that looks for immutable definitions (or 'truths') about domesticity/femininity; instead, our critical efforts should be focused on the contingent and shifting relationships between women and the home—a venture that is made all the more difficult by how contemporary domestic femininities have been bent into configurations that intertwine positive and empowering elements with destructive, misogynist ones. The figure of the housewife is inscribed with multifarious significations, vacillating between patriarchal scripts of enforced domesticity and postfeminist reappropriations that acknowledge agency and self-determination. My intention is not to argue the case of postfeminist housewifery as either a new utopia or the trap of nostalgia,<sup>4</sup> but is to discover a postfeminist liminality that "moves us from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and" (Rutland 74). It is less a choice between retro- and neo-femininity (and feminism) than an endeavour to examine the ambiguities inherent in a post-position.<sup>5</sup> It is in this in-between space that the potentialities and intricacies of the postfeminist housewife are revealed.

In what follows, I use the term 'postfemininity' to depict the contradictions surrounding modern-day femininity/domesticity and its complicated interactions with feminism and postfeminism. I deliberately choose to enlist the double-edged and often denigrated post-prefix in my discussion in order to bring attention to the multiple layers of meaning of the feminine conundrum. Postfemininity is not 'new' in the sense that it no longer bears any resemblance to previously acceptable and culturally dominant forms of feminine behaviour and appearance; nor is it an old-fashioned, retrograde reembrace of phallogocentric femininity. By contrast, postfemininity carries echoes of past, present and future femininities—in much the same way that postfeminism encapsulates a range of possible relations that indicate both a dependence on and an independence from feminism. Postfemininity marks an important shift in our critical understanding that challenges us to rethink issues that still remain unresolved: Does femininity always entail victimization? Can feminism and femininity coexist? Can femininity be described as a feminist subject position? While a detailed elaboration and answer to these important questions is beyond the scope of this chapter, I here elucidate some characteristics of a postfeminine stance that accommodates the possibility of a '(post)feminist housewife'.

The place of the housewife in the history of feminism is a contentious one. Betty Friedan was instrumental in the exposure of the "happy housewife myth" that traps women as helpless prisoners in a "comfortable concentration camp" (or, the 1950s family) that uses "the pretty lie of the feminine mystique" to enact a denigration into "genteel nothingness" (245; 180; 89). Friedan's emotive and powerful language brought to light women's institutionalized subjugation and manipulation that deceived them into believing that "the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" (38). The housewife in particular was singled out by Friedan as the epitome of female non-identity and passivity, a perfect illustration of patriarchal constructions of Woman as an apathetic, dependent and purposeless being: "I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. In a sense that is not as far-fetched as it sounds, the women who 'adjust' as housewives . . . are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps" (264–65). *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) sparked a cultural revolution by foregrounding a domestic dystopia and soon, numerous feminist critics joined Friedan in uncovering and naming a supposedly nameless problem. For Germaine Greer, the housewife is no more than a "permanent employee" whose life is "not real"; it is "anachronistic", "thwarting" and plainly pointless as it "has no results", "it simply has to be done again" (272; 312). Greer condemns the life of the full-time housewife as one of absolute servitude, turning women into "the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description" (369). Once again, however, we are presented with what Susan Bordo calls "the feminist 'anti-thesis'" that applies an oppressor/oppressed model according to which "women are the *done to*, not the *doers*" (22; emphasis in original). This not only relies on a vision of a gender war between an evil patriarchy and a sisterhood of female victims but it also creates a dichotomy between private and public spheres, between the downtrodden housewife and the feminist revolutionary. Even more importantly, this binary logic also denies domesticity a place in the changing landscape of modernity and progress. The housewife statically remains in her old-fashioned, homely prison, unable to take part in the gender developments and transformations of a rapidly changing world. In this sense, a woman's domestic place and housewife status can only evolve in one possible way or direction, in that they are to be left for good: once her consciousness has been raised by a feminist awakening, she should be immune to the feminine mystique and resist its deceptively "protective shade" (Friedan 208).

Slaves, prisoners, schizophrenics or, even more dehumanizing, robots—these labels have been branded on the housewife by second-wave feminist critics, writers and filmmakers to the extent that now, it seems, the home has become an almost 'guilty' pleasure for some women. Without doubt, the antidomestic stance was an important and necessary phase in Western feminist history and politics as it uncovered the widespread subjugation and



entrapment suffered by the vast majority of women. The housewife emerged from these critiques as an instantly identifiable figure that epitomizes everything that is wrong with patriarchy. At the same time, this positioning of the housewife as a patriarchal object and victim meant that she became exempt from any feminist approval or appreciation as she was seen simplistically and one-sidedly as a nonfeminist. While there is no denying that the housewife was and remains a pillar of patriarchal control, I maintain that her relationship with feminism has to be reassessed in order to open up the realm of possibility that has been withheld from her. My point is not to provide housewifery with a radically new meaning that wipes out its previous significations of drudgery and confinement; in a sense, invent a neo-femininity that constructs a new domestic dream of female self-actualization. These subordinating elements relentlessly continue to haunt and restrict the female homemaker, reflecting her lack of power and social status. What I argue for is a reinterpretation of the housewife as a flexible feminist subject that is liable to change and eligible for innovation and progress. The 'unhappy housewife myth' now has to be demythologized in order to keep women from objectifying and pathologizing their domestic personas. In an uncanny echoing of feminist fears of denial and backlash, the contemporary homemaker is loath to admit her existence: "I'm not a housewife, but . . .". Countering fears of housewifely stultification and brainwashing, I want to underline the fact that domestic femininity encompasses a diverse spectrum of ways of being and living that need to be reexamined in (post)feminist terms.

## POSTFEMININITY

Of course, to adopt a postfeminist frame of analysis is easier said than done. To start, the term postfeminism itself throws up so many riddles that a simple definition has proven to be elusive: backlash, Girl Power, 'do-me' feminism, poststructuralist feminism—the list of postfeminism's meanings keeps getting longer, with proponents as well as detractors wrangling and vying for their respective take on how a 'post-ing' of feminism can be effected and understood. What these debates centre on is exactly what this prefixation of feminism accomplishes (if anything), what happens to feminist perspectives and goals in the process and what the strange hybrid of 'post-feminism' entails. I choose to leave out the hyphen in my spelling of postfeminism in order to avoid any predetermined readings of the term that imply a semantic rift between feminism and postfeminism, instantly casting the latter as a negation and sabotage of the former. My own usage and understanding of postfeminism are less motivated by an attempt to determine and fix its meaning than by an effort to acknowledge its plurality and liminality. In this sense, the problem is not so much to choose between the various appropriations of postfeminism than it is to adopt a postfeminist framework that transcends binary divisions and allows for multiple

interpretations and resignifications.<sup>6</sup> Postfeminism is both retro- and neo- in its outlook and hence irrevocably post.<sup>7</sup> It is neither a simple rebirth of feminism nor a straightforward abortion (excuse the imagery) but a complex resignification that harbours within itself the threat of backlash as well as the potential for innovation. This double movement is at the root of the difficulty of attributing a meaning to postfeminism and containing it within a definitional straightjacket; a futile endeavour in my view that ultimately serves only as a critical shortcut.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of how the term has been (ab)used, postfeminism's changeable life indicates a move away from binaries, including the dualistic patterns of (male) power and (female) victimization on which much feminist thought and politics are built.<sup>9</sup> Thus, postfeminism does not refer to a denial (or worse, death) of feminism but to an altered stage of gendered conflicts and transformations, a diversification of feminist issues that women face in a postfeminist age. As Rhonda Wilcox has recently put it, postfeminism denotes a cultural moment "after feminism has started, not after it has ended" (44).

To place domestic femininity and the housewife in such a postfeminist frame has a number of advantages: it both keeps intact feminism's critique of domesticity without foreclosing other significations and possibilities of renewal and loosens women's historic connections with *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* without breaking those ties completely, instead exposing the tensions between domesticity and feminism, home and work, tradition and modernity. In *Micro-Politics* (1994), Patricia Mann argues for the existence of a postfeminist "cultural frontier" that "bring[s] us to the edge of what we know, and encourage[s] us to go beyond" (208). Mann succinctly points out that living on the postfeminist border has become an unavoidable reality for most women:

We may be described, without undue exaggeration, as operating within a tangle of motivations, responsibilities, rewards, and forms of recognition unmoored from traditional male and female, public and private identities. Given the chaotic state of individual motivations and responsibilities in this scenario, it may be wholly unrealistic to expect anyone to worry very much about establishing firm social identities—feminist, feminine, maternal, or otherwise. (115)

Once we have been propelled onto this frontier, there is no going back to previously stable and uncontested gender 'truths'. The housewife is caught up in this array of relationships and tensions within both domestic and public arenas, renegotiating her place in a changed social context. I suggest that we 'unsettle' femininity by pushing it over the postfeminist edge and I put forward the term postfemininity to highlight the challenges and paradoxes of a postfeminist femininity/domesticity that can no longer be conceptualized along a sharp split between feminism and housewifery, agency and victimization, work and family life.<sup>10</sup> This is

to acknowledge that femininity is changeable and can operate in a variety of ways, acquiring a range of different meanings that have come to the fore in our postfeminist present.<sup>11</sup> Post-ing femininity (like post-ing feminism) thus involves a certain amount of rethinking, not a reversal of well-established dualisms, but a process of resignification that threatens to reinscribe what it also transposes.

Postfemininity remains difficult to pin down and critics have often given in to the analytical temptation to retreat to a safe binary order that differentiates housewives from feminists, mothers from career women, domesticity from paid work.<sup>12</sup> Detractors often detect a veiled attack on feminism that hides behind the deceptively stylish façade of professional TV homemakers and domestic goddesses (most recently incarnated by the impossibly groomed but nonetheless desperate housewives of *Wisteria Lane*). Susan Faludi for example dismisses the renewed interest in the housewife as a conservative backlash that packages domesticity in feminist activist rhetoric (77). This is concomitant with "new traditionalist" discourse that articulates a vision of the home to which women have freely chosen to return (Probyn 152). New traditionalism centralises women's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favour of family values. The domestic sphere is rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and independence, far removed from its previous connotations of drudgery and confinement. In *The Meaning of Wife* (2004), Anne Kingston comments on this romanticization of domesticity that lures the housewife into a dream of "mystique chic": "Increasingly, women's psychiatric problems, as the very root of female oppression—was presented as both fashionable and, even more perversely, a surefire route to female satisfaction. Call it mystique chic. Call it the ultimate backlash to *The Feminine Mystique*" (65). Kingston explores how in a chiasmic reversal of the home/work dichotomy, domesticity has been mythicized into an Edenic space of fulfillment and freedom from the shackles of working life. Whereas work outside the home is now an inevitable economic requirement for most women, 'homework' has become the sanctuary of a few privileged, financially secure housewives. This refuge from the workplace is at best a nostalgic illusion and at worst a ruse to return women to "the same kind of idealized domesticity that, ironically, had given rise to the twentieth-century feminist movement in the first place" (102). These doubts and critiques are often justified and reinforced by contemporary writers and filmmakers who struggle to depict a postfeminine/postfeminist stance and instead present us with a number of compromises.

## DOMESTIC POSTFEMININITY

In the aptly entitled *Having It All* (1991), Maeve Haran describes a wife's dilemma to reconcile the conflicting demands of public and private life,

"[re]veall[ing] everything we won't admit about being a working woman" (cover page). The main character, "high-flying executive" Liz Ward, finds herself "torn in two" and "pulled two ways" in her effort to personify "the classic nineties woman" who has "a glittering career and kids", a "brilliant degree", a "job in TV" and a "handsome husband" (1; 176; 70; 3; 96; emphasis in original). Having been appointed "the most powerful woman in television", the "first woman Programme Controller of any major TV company in the UK", Liz is determined "to show not simply that a woman could do it, but that a woman could do it brilliantly" (9; 31). However, in the pursuit of her professional ambition, she realizes that she has lost touch with "the things that really matter" as her "obsession with work" causes her to neglect her domestic responsibilities and duty to care for her husband and children (118; 32). Liz has also been remiss about her femininity and physical attractiveness and, by "playing men's rules" to advance her career, she has effectively "become like them" and "taken on their aggressiveness and their competitiveness" (225). While fighting "tooth and nail to be treated the same as men" and join their "club", Liz has deviated from her "natural" path as a wife and mother, denying that she "belong[s] to another species" and is essentially and fundamentally different from men (75; 6). Confronted with her husband's unfaithfulness and her own feminine failure, Liz has to reassess her priorities and admit that she cannot "have it all" but has to make a choice between "success and happiness" (80): "it was time to tell the truth. That women had been sold a pup. Having It All was a myth, a con, a dangerous lie. Of course you could have a career and a family. But there was one little detail the gurus of feminism forgot to mention: the cost to you if you did" (53).

In this novel, rather than improving and alleviating women's personal and social station, the feminist movement has placed them on double duty at home and work, saddling them with both female and male burdens. In a nostalgic search for a simpler life, Liz chooses to become a "mommy-tracker", leave her urban surroundings—"the whole melting pot of crime and dirt, greed and tension"—and settle in a "lovely, peaceful" rural idyll, "almost chocolate box in its beauty" (73; 195; 197). The novel is intent on depicting her "return home" as a quasi-feminist act: Liz "dares to be a housewife", despite her husband's assertion that he does not "want a wife at home", he "want[s] an equal . . . a woman who's her own person with her own life" (224; 177). After leaving her doubtful husband, the newly single Liz surrenders to "the joys of home-making . . . guiltily, as though she were taking a lover" (213). In this scenario, the domestic realm is redefined as an "enjoyable" environment, far removed from "the drudgery she'd gone to any lengths to avoid" (212). As a conscious and supposedly empowering lifestyle choice, this modern haven of "security and comfort" ends up seducing Liz's husband and luring him back to his wife and children (241). The novel integrates feminist ideas of social enfranchisement in a domestic tale as Liz decides to reenter the career path on a part-time basis and alongside her



husband as the Managing Directors of the employment agency "Woman-Power" whose motto is particularly appropriate: "half a woman is the best man for the job" (431). The dichotomy between women's private and public desires is resolved by this part-time solution that allows Liz to have the best of both worlds and enjoy "a life in balance" (539). As Liz notes, "Being at home *part* of the time gave a spice to working, and working made the time off seem all the more precious" (417; emphasis in original).

Family and job are described as congruous and reconcilable life components that complement each other in a symbiotic alliance. Reunited with her husband, Liz optimistically proclaims that "perhaps together anything *would* be possible": she could "have it all" and fulfil her dream of "a life where I had enough work to keep my brain alive, and enough space to enjoy my children, and fun, and sex, and food, and love . . . and gardening" (559; 453; emphasis in original). In this utopian vision, modern woman has achieved a compromise between her feminine and feminist personas, between professional and personal happiness. This resolution relies on a romantic egalitarian fantasy where men and women jointly abandon their short-lived spell as a single mother in favour of an all-embracing partnership. Liz's fusion during which wife and husband renegotiate the boundaries between work and family and then, reenter their stable and newly equilibrated relationship. Although Haran advocates the extension of women's qualities from the private to the public sphere, she also naturalizes their domestic role and reifies traditional notions that women's most important work is at home. As Liz notes, she "needed to work" but "never again would she put her career before her family" (347). Haran's endorsement of a part-time settlement of the feminist/feminine, public/private dilemma understates women's economic and social pressures that might prohibit such an equilibrium. "Having it all" is qualified and downgraded to "having it part-time", allowing privileged women to avoid the conflicts between professional and private fulfilment and providing a personalized answer that might not be relevant or achievable for the vast majority of working women.

A similar scenario is replayed in a number of narratives, with slight variations depending on the heroine's familial situation. In Allison Pearson's bestselling *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002), protagonist Kate Reddy spends her time agonizing over her life as a working mother and her own failure to live up to the high, apple-pie-baking standards of the "Muffa—the powerful, stay-at-home cabal of organised mums" (50). In her own mind, Kate is constantly called before the "Court of Motherhood" that enumerates her shortcomings and chastizes her for the satisfaction she gains from her job as a fund manager. In "the grey survival zone" between work and home, she is taken to almost breaking point: "When I wasn't at work, I had to be a mother; when I wasn't being a mother, I owed it to work to be at work. Time off for myself felt like stealing" (104). Kate's cynicism for "equal opportunities" legislations—"Doesn't make it better; just

drives the misogyny underground" (124)—and her frustration with feminist idealism—"Back in the Seventies, when they were fighting for women's rights, what did they think equal opportunities meant: that women would be entitled to spend as little time with their kids as men do?" (273)—ultimately drive her to resign from her job and become one of "the domestic Disappeared" (176). Although the epilogue ("What Kate Did Next") points towards a potential compromise between job and motherhood (in this case, an opportunity for a global doll's house business), the underlying message is clear: high-flying women will have to be brought down one way or another as a successful businesswoman *and* successful housewife/mother remains a postfeminist conundrum.

As Imelda Whelehan has recently discussed, "mumlit" (the 'grown-up' version of chick lit where the singleton settles down and has children) is characterized by a particularly "anguished" tone as the heroines encounter a set of new, more serious, problems posed by the demands of their long-term relationships and their transition to parenthood (196). While such novels are successful at highlighting the limits placed on women and their unresolved struggles between workplace and home, they also show "depressingly, that there is no solution to the work/motherhood dilemma" (195–6). Pierson's novel is a case in point: Kate might find an individual solution to the conflicts of working motherhood but her recipe for resolution is ultimately conservative and utopian: drop out of the rat race, escape to the country and work from home. As Joanne Hollows notes, this "downshifting narrative" abandons urban in favour of rural femininities and promises the achievement of a "work-life balance" through geographical relocation (108). Obviously, this proposed change of lifestyle is not readily available to everyone and the rural idyll remains out of reach for the majority of city-dwelling mothers. As such, the downshifting narrative is "profoundly classed" and "thoroughly commodified" centring around "choices for those who inhabit specific middle-class femininities" (110–11). The restrictiveness/restrictiveness of this move to the country is reinforced symbolically by Kate's final choice of business as she ends up perpetuating the domestic dream, potentially indoctrinating a new generation of girls and confining them to the respectable confines of their doll's houses.

If guilt is not the right lever, then nostalgia will convince the working woman that home is where her heart should be. This is what drives Sophie Kinsella's heroine Samantha out of the courtroom and into the kitchen. *The Undomestic Goddess* (2005) depicts the domestication of a high-powered lawyer who 'downshifts' by fleeing her city job—interestingly portrayed as an abusive partner, "a bad relationship" (112)—for the "freedom" of being a housekeeper in the Cotswolds. Initially uneducated in the arts of cooking and cleaning, she is soon initiated into this secret world by "a cooking witch", the mother of Samantha's love interest Nathaniel. Samantha experiences this domestic realm as a revelation that transforms her "old conventional, monochrome" persona into a more colourful (that

is, blonder) and feminine self, "a new me. A me with possibilities" (162; 163). The novel does not engage in the home/work debate and is careful to avoid any standpoint that could be politicized. "What about feminism?" a journalist asks after Samantha's double life (a housekeeper with a degree from Cambridge and an IQ of 158) has sparked a public tabloid discussion on "The Price of Success". "I'm not telling women anything", she replies, "I'm just leading my own life . . . I don't want to be a role model!" (318; 326); tellingly the only openly and undeniably feminist figure in the novel is Samantha's mother, a successful lawyer who disapproves of housewives and unapologetically puts her career before her family. The solution sits well with a neo-liberal individualism that gives primacy to 'choice' ahead of all other political dictums. Samantha's final farewell to her city friend Guy is a telling example: "Don't define me! I'm not a lawyer! I'm a *person*" (361; emphasis in original). Yet, her desire for "a simpler life" (334), like "the Waltons" (329), cannot escape a smack of nostalgia that puts into question this conversion to domesticity.

Here the domestic is being held up as a rural fantasy that Samantha has unjustly and unnaturally been kept away from by her supposedly superior academic education and feminist enlightenment. As the media furor caused by the exposure of Samantha's double life demonstrates, in today's society 'being *only* a housewife' is no longer acceptable and, for a highly trained, successful professional, it is an unthinkable, forbidden pleasure. Samantha's voluntary domesticity is not only an anachronism but also an affront to her own mother and decades of feminist struggles. In this sense, the character's domestication can clearly be read in terms of a generational conflict that pits the domineering feminist mother against her rebellious postfeminist daughter. A model of a 1980s Superwoman, Samantha's mother is depicted stereotypically as a career-focused workaholic and strident feminist who is thoroughly antidomestic ("She disapproves of women taking the name of their husband. She also disapproves of women staying at home, cooking, cleaning, or learning to type, and thinks all women should earn more than their husbands because they're naturally brighter". [32]). She has no qualms about missing her daughter's birthday and her only maternal advice consists of a capitalist battle cry: "You have to be better than the others" (34). Samantha repudiates the values handed down from the feminist motherhood in favour of a long repressed domestic dream, a nostalgic site ruled by individual fantasy rather than collective reality. We are shown, yet again, that 'something's gotta give' in women's public/private predicament and in case of doubt, female ambition should always be directed towards hearth and heart.

## THE POSTFEMINIST HOUSEWIFE

Perhaps it is not fiction then that we should be looking at in our search for a postfeminist housewife. On screen and in print, her biggest shortcoming

always seems to be her inability to come to terms with her chaotic situation and the impossibility of embodying work and home personae to perfection. The answer thus lies not in an attempt to fight and resolve the chaos that torments so many fictional heroines but in an acknowledgement of the latter as the starting point for an examination of the cultural contradictions that women face in a postfeminist age. We cannot limit our discussions of domestic femininities to a dualistic dilemma between home and work where popular culture champions the first half of the binary while feminism supports the second. The connections between domesticity, feminism and popular culture have to be understood in more dynamic terms where all three sites act (and mutually recognize themselves) as areas of change that inform one another. Moreover, we need to get away from laments about women's dividedness towards a recognition of their contradictory and chaotic wholeness. As regards the relationship between the domestic, feminism and femininity, we could start by abolishing the image of the self-sacrificing housewife who likes nothing better than baking pies and polishing floors. For most, housewifery will never have any utopian or dream-like quality but simply be a routine part of our lives. However, this does not imply that being a housewife has to be confined to a singular, unvarying meaning. As Jean Railla emphasizes in her "Crafty Manifesto" on her "feminist home economics" website ([getcrafty.com](http://getcrafty.com)): "Being crafty means living consciously and refusing to be defined by narrow labels and categories. It's about embracing life as complicated and complex, and out of this chaos constructing identities, which are feminist and domestic, masculine and feminine, strong and weak" (par. 23). The route to this new domesticity cannot be uncovered by approaching the housewife as a problem that demands an *either/or* answer and forces us to take sides.<sup>13</sup> To see the housewife through a multifaceted postfeminist lens is thus a challenge facing critics, writers as well as home makers in the twenty-first century. The housewife has to become again an object of enquiry that needs new ways of seeing and living. The task then is to rethink domestic femininity itself and analyse its various resignifications without resorting to predetermined definitions and demarcations. The key to postfeminist domesticity can be found in the myriad ways women deploy in their daily lives to negotiate their place in contemporary society. Post-femininity is not a fiction but an everyday reality.

## NOTES

1. Barnes' parting line that she "didn't want to miss another birthday party" has often been quoted by new traditionalists who see the workplace as a source of female frustration and uphold the joys of home and motherhood as an antidote to work-related stresses (qtd. in Kingston 96).
2. In this way, the concept of domesticity plays a central part in the 'feminism and/in popular culture' debates that seek to understand the complex interconnections between the two sites and the viability of the term 'popular



feminism'. What makes the contemporary focus on domestic identities so equivocal and even contradictory is that feminism is now part of the cultural field and its meanings are increasingly mediated, to the extent that, as Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley note, "most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture" (2).

3. Notions of 'choice' have become increasingly problematic in postfeminist rhetoric where on the one hand they resonate with an individualist perspectival (politically aligned with the 'enterprising subject' demanded by neoliberalism) that emphasises empowerment and personal freedom whereas on the other, 'choice' has also been presented as a burden that makes women's lives more complicated and anxious. The question of how much 'free choice' women have needs to be examined and differentiated by issues of class, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality and status that all, to a varying degree, interpellate them as subjects.
4. For more on domestic nostalgia, see Stephanie Coontz (1992) who argues that the 'happy' 1950s household is a cover-up that is neither traditional nor accurate.
5. Linda Hurchon discusses the paradox of the "Post Position" that signals "its contradictory dependence on and independence from that which preceded it. . . . It marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it; it is both and neither" (17).
6. Following Judith Butler, meaning can never be fully secured because "signification is not a founding act" (145) but a site of contest and revision or deviation that creates new and unanticipated meanings. The notion of resignifiability is important for my understanding of postfeminism and the housewife as it opens up the process of meaning construction and allows for multiplicity and polysemy without foreclosing any interpretations.
7. See Rostislav Kocourek (1996) for more the programmatic indeterminacy of the prefix post- in contemporary English terminology.
8. Postfeminism's "philosophical positioning of 'both at once'" (Harris 19) aligns it politically with New Labour's "Third Way" that steers a middle course between right and left ideologies. For more on this politicised interpretation of postfeminism, see my essay on the topic (2006).
9. In this sense, postfeminism brings into question "the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated" (Butler 148). As Butler notes, "The identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics . . . simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up" (147).
10. For more on the relationship between postfeminism and postfeminism, see my *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (2009).
11. Of course, the ways in which femininity signifies depend to a large extent on personal, social and cultural contexts, in particular issues of age, class, sexuality and ethnicity.
12. One particularly pertinent example of this withdrawal is the 'Mummy Wars' that are fought out in the media between stay-at-home mums and working mothers. The January 2007 edition of *Marie Claire* pointedly puts forward the question in its review article "Modern Mothers: Who's Doing It Best?" While the article mainly discusses privileged women who can afford to choose between staying at home and going out to work (such as Calista Flockhart and Vanessa Paradis), it also makes the important point that for most mothers, work is an unavoidable economic necessity: "There's a very narrow band of upper-middle class women who exercise choice. The rest of us simply try to make the best of it" (Moore 242).

13. This deconstruction of domesticity will necessarily also involve a restructuring of work, including changing the definition of what an "ideal worker" is. Joan Williams argues for a shift in feminist strategy that eliminates the ideal worker norm and moves away from the "full-commodification model" that privileges market work over family work. Williams' goal is a "reconstructive feminism" (or "family humanism") that no longer separates home and work but instead reflects family values and "the norm of parental care" (85).

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