

### **The image of modern woman in *Sex and the City***

Over the past hundred years, the image and the statute of the woman got through multiple changes. Therefore, women gained the right to vote, to join the workforce, to become financially independent, to control their own bodies, and to choose the kind of life they want to lead. The woman of twenty-first century is modern, capable of competing with men in every sector of everyday life. But modernity comes with a price. In order to be independent, the modern woman has detached herself from emotions, allowing more interest in the professional life than personal, emotional life.

My aim is to analyze the image of modern woman, with the good and bad aspects of being successful and independent, living in a big city, applied on the show *Sex and the City*. Some major issues I've identified on SATC are: ageing, fear of being single, sexual discrimination, divorce, single motherhood, insecurity and the need for protection. The study *Sex and the City and Third Wave Feminism: Defining Feminisms in Popular Culture* relates the issue of modernity to a couple of questions which I found interesting to integrate in my analysis: "How do single women deal with sexuality? How do we balance traditional beliefs with modernity? How do women today deal with being single and still remain strong and independent?" (Hawkins, Howard 6)

The four main characters in *Sex and the City*: Carrie Bradshaw, Charlotte York, Samantha Jones and Miranda Hobbes, represent four different archetypes of womanhood. Each one of them shows a different side of the modernity. Alice Wignall identifies the patterns of each character: "Charlotte, the conservative, romantic, naive upper-east-side princess with sights firmly set on the right marriage to the right man. Samantha, the successful, hardworking, inviolably independent PR

executive who is a believer in sex rather than love and just as tirelessly devoted to that last cause as Charlotte is to hers. Miranda, the smart, corporate, high-flying lawyer. And, at the centre of it all, attempting to navigate a path between the options offered by her unlikely group of girlfriends, is Carrie: in her own way just as idealistic as Charlotte, as glamorous as Samantha and as dry as Miranda.”

As one can see, the four friends represent the balance between traditional and modern values; together they portray the image of independence and modernity of the woman. “Carrie’s three friends seem to represent conflicting ideals that many women today deal with. Samantha Jones is sexual freedom personified. Charlotte York is traditional. She wants desperately to get married, settle down and have kids. She ascribes to *The Rules* and never sleeps with a man on the first date. She is proper and conventional. Miranda Hobbes is unconventional. She is the answer to Charlotte’s conventionality. She vocally rejects conventional wisdom about marriage, dating and the like. She wants a partner, but isn’t willing to sacrifice herself for a man.” (Hawkins & Howard 6)

One interesting question is if women of today can deal with being single and still remain strong and independent. Hence Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda, are facets of the modern woman, it seems to me that this is not enough, because they are still looking for, dreaming and talking about the “ideal man”. This shows that the financial stability and social statute cannot replace the emotional stability, fact that makes them feel insecure. Therefore, there is a tension between the independence and the need for security.

This unfulfilled need for security makes them vulnerable in front of men. Of the four friends, Carrie is the most vulnerable, idea emphasized throughout the show especially when it comes to her relationship with Mr. Big. She is the one always playing by his rules and who is eternally hurt by his actions. When she requires him stability and protection, she confronts the harsh reality of being involved with a man who cannot be changed by women. Her bad experience with

Big makes her unable to have a serious relationship with other men. When she realizes she is obsessed with him, she even starts therapy (*Games people play*). *The freak show* illustrates how the fear of dating “freaks” makes Carrie act like one (“Miranda: I’m sorry, if a man is over thirty and single, there’s something wrong with him. It’s Darwinian. They’re being weeded out or propagating the species.”) The fear of being single determines Carrie to give up to her Manhattan life in favor of starting a new life in Paris with Alexandr Petrovsky, a Russian artist.

*Twenty-Something Girls vs. Twenty-Something girls* illustrates the problem of ageing: Charlotte pretends to be in her twenties so she could date a 26-year-old man. At the same time, Samantha’s 25-year-old ex-assistant is hired to organize a big Hampton party. This episode illustrates that older women perceive the younger ones, as being real dangers and having a more aggressive attitude than they used to have (“Carrie: And then I realized something, twenty-something girls are just fabulous, until you see one with the man who broke your heart.”)

In *Where there’s smoke...* Miranda shows her vulnerable side and lets Steve to take care of her after her eye surgery. The fear of being single makes Charlotte reverse gender roles and start looking for her “Prince Charming. Samantha’s vulnerability is hidden under the mask of a tough and hardhearted woman who acts like a man, but she uses this mask to prevent the possibility of being hurt. She does not emotionally involve with men, but when she discovers she has breasts cancer, she follows a path of changes. Even though in the beginning she did not allow anyone to support her, she gets more and more touched by Smith’s support (ex. Smith cuts his hair in order make her feel better for having a short hair). His patience and kindness changes Samantha’s view towards relationships. At the same time, Charlotte realizes that being married to the perfect man (Trey) does not make her life perfect. Her vulnerability is shown when she starts dating Harry, just because he is kind and supportive, even though she dislikes his habits, behavior and appearance. As the time passes, Charlotte learns that imperfection can make one’s life perfect. Miranda, the anti-marring type of

woman, finds herself attached by a man who is socially and professionally inferior to her. Although she dislikes Steve's mother, she becomes more sensitive when his mother gets sick. On the beginning of her relationship with Steve, she is the one in control, but this fact changes after their marriage. She even moves to Brooklyn, even though she used to be a Manhattan girl (*Out of the Frying Pan*).

The only thing a modern woman in NY can rely on is friendship. The image of friendship between women changes; therefore, there is no competition between women who are friends, they do not judge one another, they are supportive. The only emotional constant they are able to keep is friendship. As Alice Wignall observes, "They identify as each other's soul mates and provide emotional, practical and moral support". The bond between the four brings into discussion the notion of sisterhood, concept used by Joy Hawkins and Judith Howard in their study, as one of the key words defining the Third Wave of Feminism. "The terms that this is based on are "sisterhood" and "forging a direct link with females." This is a very popular idea in many forms of feminism and deals with women's relationships with other women. It is to be assumed that we, as American women, all share some common experiences, which can in turn, strengthen our feminist bonds with each other. Though we all come from different backgrounds and points of view, we can find a place to understand one another as fellow women and friends." (Hawkins & Howard 34)

Their frequent lunches and the talks about men can be seen as a symbol for their bonding. This symbolizes how much the statute of women has changed over the years. Woman of the twenty-first century can have a social life, independent by men and she can talk freely about everything she wants to. The "women's talk" is unrestrained and uncensored by anyone, but more than this, it is "a present day consciousness raising and the placing of importance on female friendships over relationships with men." (Hawkins & Howard 66)

Ageing is another issue portrayed by the show. One can observe the complex of being a “thirty-something” single woman in NY. For example, Charlotte celebrates her “thirty-faux” birthday several years; she doesn’t want to turn 36 because she feels she’s getting old (*Luck Be an Old Lady*); Carrie feels hurt when Mr. Big marries Natasha, a young, thin model; Samantha dates a younger man and she never talks about her age, not even in front of her girlfriends. Her fear of ageing is shown by *The Big Time* when she starts having concerns about menopause.

When it comes to sexual discrimination one can see how women still struggle to be equal with men. For example, Miranda has to work many hours to become a partner lawyer and she does not talk about her pregnancy at work, because she is afraid of being treated differently. At the same time, she has to follow a different procedure when buying a house, only because she is a single woman (*Four Women and a Funeral*). In *Lights, Camera, Relationship*, Carrie receives a big check for her book sales, which upsets Berger— whose book deal has been dropped. This fact causes the end of their relationship, because he is uncomfortable with her being more successful than he is. Samantha has to struggle to get collaboration with Richard Wright who does not want to work with women, because they are too emotional (*Belles of the Balls*).

While sexual discrimination is a negative aspect of modern women, the positive aspect implies strength and power, which are other keywords for the Third Wave of Feminism. Men do not want to compete with successful women. At the same time, women seem to take advantage of this aspect, in order to possess control in the relationship. In *The Caste System*, Miranda and Steve argue about money and social status; Miranda is a successful attorney and Steve is only a bartender. Charlotte’s way of being in control determines her to act like men and she schedules two dates on the same night: “Miranda: You double-booked? Carrie: How do you conceive pulling this one off? Charlotte: Early dinner with bachelor number one, late supper with bachelor number two. Samantha: My god, you’re turning into a man! Carrie: Apparently Charlotte had done more than just break a pattern. She had actually changed genders“(The Sex Buddy). She also realizes that men are

threatened by powerful women: “Everyone needs a man. That's why I rent. If you own and he still rents, then the power structure is all off. It's emasculating. Men don't want a woman who's too self-sufficient” (*Four Women and a Funeral*). In *Politically Erect* Charlotte organizes a “used party” in order to find men. Samantha’s manly behavior is illustrated by the fact that she tricks her date and makes him come at this party with her, without knowing her intentions.

At the same time, life as a single woman appears as a threat to married couples. It also makes the women with children to discriminate them. One example is shown by *Bay of married pigs*, when Carrie is invited to visit Patience and Peter’s beach house and she bumps into her friend’s husband who is almost naked. When Carrie tells to Patience that she couldn’t understand why she was so upset, her friend told her that she couldn’t, because is single. Miranda’s opinion regarding that event is that “When someone gets married, they become married and we become the enemies”. The episode *They Shoot Single People, Don't They?* asks the question: “Single and Fabulous...?”, which expresses the concern that being single is not necessarily the best thing for a woman. Carrie appears as sad woman in her thirties, whose active and independent life led her to destruction. “Carrie: When did being alone become the modern-day equivalent of being a leper? Will Manhattan restaurants soon be divided up into sections -- smoking / non-smoking, single / non-single?” When Carrie’s shoes are stolen at a party, she is blamed for spending too much money on shoes when others have to care about children. The single women’s aversion towards children is show by Samantha’s gesture of throwing a non-baby shower, as a response to a baby shower to which the four attended (*The baby shower*).

The empowerment of the modern woman is illustrated by *The real me* when Samantha’s decides to take nude photos of herself. Her gesture of immortalizing herself shows that she is proud of her statute. Her self-confidence becomes a trophy - the position of independent women.

The third season casts a look at the issue of divorce. The modern woman with traditional woman goes through difficult times when she realizes that “Prince Charming” is not perfect. Trey’s physical condition makes Charlotte unhappy, because she dreams of being a mother.

The issue of motherhood relates especially to Miranda and Charlotte. Miranda hates children, she is the child-phobic woman: “Miranda: I just realised, maybe it's maturity or the wisdom that comes with age, but the witch in "Hansel and Gretel"—she's very misunderstood. I mean, the woman builds her dream house and these brats come along and start eating it.” (*The Baby Shower*). Miranda’s fear of motherhood leads to a second break-up with Steve whom she considers silly because he wants to have a baby. On the other hand, she seems to take into consideration the idea of being a mother, but with a kind of irony: “Miranda: I do want [a baby] eventually and my clock is running out... I mean, I've only got like a million viable eggs left” (*The Big Time*). The irony is that she is the one who gets pregnant. Charlotte, on the other side, loves kids and tries desperately to have one. She feels that a marriage without children is incomplete, fact that makes her break-up with Trey.

The consumerism is negative aspect of the financial independence. Usually the four women go to extravagant events, dine in the newest places, they are invited to exclusivist events. Carrie’s weakness for shoes made her spend almost 40.000\$ on designer shoes, but she cannot afford to buy her own place. They are very thin and they always look good which shows that, in a big city such as NY, a modern woman has to look good. Clothes and shoes are a way of stating the social statute, a method of empowerment. Although they look very good, SATC shows women eating; therefore the show does not promote eating disorders which is a good aspect.

A misinterpretation of women’s modernity appears in *The Power of Female Sex*, when Gilles, a French architect leaves Carrie \$1000 on the nightstand, after they spent the night together. His gesture shows how the aspects of modernity can differ in different cultural spaces. Even though for a big city as New York, Carrie can do everything she wants, when she interacts with a foreign

man, he perceives her as being a woman without moral values, which is interested only in money. "Carrie: We had such a fantastic connection. Then he leaves me money. I don't understand. What exactly about me screams "whore"? Miranda: Besides the thousand dollars on the end table? Samantha: Money is power. Sex is power. Therefore, getting money for sex is simply an exchange of power."

Modern women are also undecided. For Carrie it is not enough that she has a serious relationship with Aidan. Her need of independence makes her cheat on Aidan exactly with the man who cannot offer her security: Big. This shows that too much independence can transform a woman into a self-destructive person. The episode *Splat!* is representative for the consequences of being too modern and independent. One of Carrie's old party friends dies after she loses her balance and falls from the window, because she was drunk: "Carrie: Well, she wasn't always so tragic. Remember the 80's? She was the it girl."

In conclusion, the show *Sex and the City* addresses many problems of the twenty-first century women. Being independent and powerful is good, but too much liberty leads to a lack of emotional stability, competition with men, and it reflects women's fear of ageing, being single etc.

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