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DISSOCIATED OPPOSITION
Critique of Neoliberal Feminism in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's
Fleabag

ABSTRACT

Tuike Hakkarainen: Critique of Neoliberal Feminism in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*
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Phoebe Waller-Bridge is most well-known for her play *Fleabag* which has since been followed by a TV series of the same name. Both the TV series and the play are renowned for their distinctive view on feminism, concentrated in the main character only known as Fleabag, a 20-something year old woman navigating her life in present-day London. This thesis examines how the play and its namesake character question and reject the values set forth by neoliberal feminism. The thesis will focus on the original one woman play, but the TV show will be used to provide context for situations where necessary.

Neoliberal feminism promotes individual development within both private and public spheres as a means for women to maximise their potential and better their lives. However, neoliberal feminism suffers from a glaring neglect of systemic disadvantages, which plagues its ideology. This thesis will also discuss dissociative feminism, which is a defining feature in *Fleabag*. This orientation of feminism has been born as a direct response to neoliberal feminism's relentless and exhausting calls to self-betterment. Fleabag's own use of dissociation through breaking the fourth wall and talking directly to the audience is discussed as her chosen way of coping with her daily life and as her direct opposition to neoliberal feminism.

Through Fleabag's actions and her inner dialogue which we follow throughout the story, it is made clear that Fleabag is very aware of the structures of neoliberal feminism but does not aspire to these goals herself. She uses dissociation tactics as coping mechanisms, both physical and mental, to keep herself at an arm's length from the world surrounding her. This is done as a response to the exhaustion neoliberal feminism causes. Fleabag refuses to subject herself to the neoliberal feminism's market of self-improvement and social climbing, and she does this through her dissociative techniques, which keeps her outside of the demands of neoliberal feminism.

Keywords: Neoliberal feminism, Dissociative Feminism, *Fleabag*

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Tuuke Hakkarainen: Critique of Neoliberal Feminism in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*

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Phoebe Waller-Bridge on tunnettu näytelmästään *Fleabag*, joka esitettiin ensimmäisen kerran Edinburghin *Fringe*-Festivaaleilla vuonna 2013. Näytelmää seurasi, sittemmin kuuluisuuteen noussut, samaa nimeä kantava televisiosarja vuonna 2019. Sekä televisiosarja että näytelmä ovat tunnettuja niiden valtavirrasta poikkeavasta näkökulmasta feminismiin, joka tiivistyy tarinan päähenkilössä. Hänet tunnetaan tarinassa vain nimellä *Fleabag*. *Fleabag* on kaksissakymmenissänsä oleva nainen ja yleisö seuraa hänen haparoivaa navigointiaan elämänsä lävitse nykypäivän Lontoossa. Tutkielma keskittyy pääosin alkuperäisen yhden naisen näytelmän käsikirjoitukseen, mutta televisiosarjan ensimmäisen kauden käsikirjoitusta käytetään tarvittaessa kontekstin tarjoamiseen.

Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus on esitellä ja kriittisesti käsitellä retoriikkaa, jonka kautta näytelmä sekä sen nimikkohahmo hylkäävät ja kritisoivat uusliberaalin feminismin kannattamia arvoja ja sen suosimia toimintamalleja. Tutkielma käsittelee tähän liittyen myös sitä, kuinka hahmo toimintansa kautta korostaa uusliberaalin feminismin heikkoja kohtia. Tämä tehdään määrittelemällä mitä uusliberaali feminismi on ja kuinka se on vaikuttanut moderniin feministiseen kirjallisuuden tutkimukseen. Uusliberaali feminismi on feministinen suuntaus, joka korostaa henkilökohtaisen kehityksen tärkeyttä ja jatkuvaa sosiaalista nousua. Tämä on ideologiana osoitettu kannustamaan naisia jatkuvaan henkilökohtaiseen kehitykseen heidän lähtökohdistaan riippumatta. Uusliberaali feminismi kärsii kuitenkin ongelmista systemaattisten epäoikeudenmukaisuuksien kanssa, koska niitä ei ideologiassa ole huomioitu ollenkaan.

Tutkielma käsittelee myös dissosioivaa feminismiä, jota tarkastellaan avaintekijänä *Fleabagissa* sekä selkeänä uusliberaalin feminismin sivutuotteena. Dissosioiva feminismi on syntynyt vastauksena uusliberaalin feminismin vaatimalle jatkuvalla itsensä parantamiselle. Dissosioivaa feminismiä tarkastellaan erityisesti näytelmän kohtauksissa, joissa *Fleabag* rikkoo näytelmän neljännen seinän puhuessaan suoraan yleisölle. Näitä hetkiä tarkastellaan *Fleabagin* selviytymiskeinoina, sekä suorana vastarintana uusliberaalia feminismiä vastaan.

Fleabagin toiminnasta ja sisäisestä dialogista on selvää, että hän tiedostaa mitä uusliberaali feminismi ja sen rakenteet ovat. Hänen toiminnastaan tarinan lomasta kuitenkin selkenee se, että nämä eivät ole arvoja, joita kohti hän itse pyrkii. Hän käyttää dissosioivia taktiikoita pitääkseen itsensä hänelle mukavalla etäisyydellä ympäröivästä todellisuudesta. Hänen toimintansa on selkeä vastaus uusliberaalin feminismin tuottamaan väsymykseen, ja dissosiointi auttaa häntä välttelemään tekemiensä asioiden käsittelemistä.

Asiasanat: Uusliberaali feminismi, Dissosioiva Feminismi, *Fleabag*

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Table of Contents:

ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ

1. INTRODUCTION	1
<i>1.1. Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Feminism.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>1.2. Dissociative Feminism.....</i>	<i>2</i>
2. THEORY AND BACKGROUND	4
3. RELATIONSHIPS SURROUNDING FLEABAG.....	7
<i>3.1. Fleabag's Sister Claire.....</i>	<i>7</i>
4. FLEABAG'S OWN RELATIONSHIPS	10
<i>4.1. Harry the Boyfriend.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>4.3. The Influence of Fleabag's Deceased Best Friend Boo.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>4.2. The Culmination of Fleabag's Desperation with Joe.....</i>	<i>12</i>
5. UNACCOUNTED PRIVILEGE	14
<i>5.1. Privilege in Neoliberal Feminism.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>5.2. Privilege in Dissociative Feminism</i>	<i>14</i>
6. CONCLUSION.....	16
WORKS CITED:.....	18
<i>Primary Sources:</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Secondary Sources:.....</i>	<i>18</i>

1. INTRODUCTION

Phoebe Waller-Bridge performed her one woman play *Fleabag* for the first time in 2013 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The play was praised for its poignant direct addresses to the audience and its exceptional nameless main character who relentlessly ridiculed the world around her, simultaneously highlighting the injustices she faced. These scenes in the play induced a discourse about the critique the play seemed to direct at modern feminism, and more specifically, on neoliberal feminism.

1.1. Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Feminism

Orlaith Darling defines neoliberalism “[A]n economic model advocating free markets with minimal regulatory frameworks” (Darling, 133). This in relation to people’s personal development refers to individuals having the freedom of endless choices for self-improvement and potential growth, without the regulations of outside governing factions. This ideology thrives on the discourse that self-reliance and individuality are at the core of personal and professional success (133). Whilst it is worth arguing that self-reliance and individuality are powerful tools at one’s disposal when progressing through certain aspects of what is deemed “successful”, in issues of systematic disadvantages they are not something an individual can overcome by mere self-improvement. Conveniently, systematic disadvantages are mostly side lined by neoliberalism (133).

The neoliberal ideology operates within various sectors as a base value system including feminism: “I understand neoliberalism not just as a set of economic policies but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents” (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg, 8). Neoliberalism’s values can be added to issues regarding feminism as well, due to its values being very mouldable and hence they can be applied to various sectors of an individual’s life. Catherine Rottenberg – who has been accredited with coining the term neoliberal feminism – has pinpointed the key balance of neoliberal feminism to be achieving both career (hence monetary success and enhanced social status) and personal success in establishing and raising a family. These two successes, however, should not interfere with each other, but exist in a mutual harmony (4). This

combination of private and public success is a theme widely examined in most academic discussions regarding neoliberal feminism, as this balance is seen as a key issue in women's personal development in modern-day society. As stated before, neoliberalism – and by extension neoliberal feminism – side-lines issues of systematic oppression. Therefore, neoliberal feminism stands at a fascinating crossroads of potential prosperity and insurmountable impossibility for women with different limitations, offering itself to rich analysis in modern works of literature.

1.2. Dissociative Feminism

Feminism has changed so drastically over the last few decades that it is easy to state that “we are living in a postfeminist era of gender equality” (Day & Wray, 113). Phoebe Waller-Bridge's one-woman play *Fleabag* (2013) plays with this idea heavily. The play and the subsequent TV series have gained notoriety for their exceptional portrayal of a different approach to feminism and their notorious depiction of dissociation through breaking the fourth wall repeatedly throughout.

The play and the following TV series have been considered as excellent examples of a very distinct view on feminism. *Fleabag*'s unwillingness to grow when faced with injustice, but rather smirking in the face of it in knowing distaste, is a direct opposition to the ideals of striving for self-improvement and the subsequent social climbing. This ideology in relation to feminism, has been termed by author Emmeline Clein as “dissociative feminism” (2019). Dissociative feminism could be seen as a by-product of neoliberal feminism's exhausting calls for continuous change. Neoliberal feminism demands constant work and improvement, whilst supplying a market which is ripe with choices and devoid of interception. The only way for a woman to succeed within the neoliberal feminism's terms is by continuously striving for bettering themselves, since this is the only way to make a metaphorical profit from yourself. As Clein points out in her essay *The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating* (2019), dissociation is a by-product of constantly having to improve yourself to the standards upheld by your surrounding structures. Where neoliberal feminism would invite a woman to keep pushing – since her fight for self-improvement would be the only way to gain more – dissociative feminism appeals to the women who have decided to not be present for this process whatsoever. Embracing nihilism and going through the motions of your day-to-day

life, whilst having the knowledge to smirk at the surrounding inequalities without feeling the need to change anything is what makes it so intriguing (Clein).

The idea of dissociation is ever-present in *Fleabag* in the instances where Fleabag breaks through the fourth wall and talks directly to her invisible audience. Dissociative feminism for Fleabag means an escape from her current surroundings. In the direct addresses to the audience, she comments on what she sees as comical, but which are occasionally points of thinly veiled patriarchal oppression. For example, as she is having a conversation with her boyfriend, he mentions how Fleabag is not like other girls since she can “keep up” to which Fleabag remarks to the audience smugly “keep up” (Waller-Bridge, 6). This remark is referencing an idea where these “other women” would not be able to keep up with a man in an intellectual sense. She does not confront issues such as this to the people she is with at any point, which is a key ingredient of dissociative feminism. These moments are used as a shield between what she is facing and her emotions.

This thesis will focus on examining the ways in which Fleabag vehemently rejects the values and aspirations set forward by neoliberal feminism. This will be done by establishing a framework of what values neoliberal feminism is built upon and how that has birthed its by-product dissociative feminism. Analytical discussion will be provided through comparisons of Fleabag to the relationships surrounding her and which she takes part in. The issues of privilege included both in neoliberal feminism and by extension dissociative feminism will be discussed in relation to Fleabag’s character.

2. THEORY AND BACKGROUND

As stated by author Eva Chen regarding neoliberal feminism's possibilities of choices:

Instead of the traditional humanist definition of unlimited, universalised and absolute freedom, neoliberal choice refers to one's ability to choose maximum material gain and profit in order to construct one's own self, and agency now means the ability to be active in this materialistic, profitable self-actualising project. (443)

Popular culture in recent years has developed an aspirational image of what a modern-day woman should be, which follows in the footsteps on neoliberal feminism's ideals. This vibrant image of a have-it-all woman is shielded under the guise of empowering women to be the best they can be (Chen, 441). However, when separating the bettering of yourself to an individualistic level, systematic change and establishing it becomes less and less visible. As pointed out by author Iulia Ivana in her thesis *In Praise of Unlikeable Women*; "Indeed, we are living in a social, cultural and political moment which is perhaps best described as incorporating both feminist and anti-feminist ideas that are deeply entangled with ideas of individualism" (32). Where feminism used to be a communal movement, with neoliberal feminism it has moved more into an individualized project for each woman, ignoring any possible need for communal change. As stated by author Angela McRobbie:

In popular culture there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, women are not being pushed back into the home, but instead there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without. (8)

This ideology of feminism not being a necessity anymore is substantiated within the play as well, as Fleabag reads a newspaper on the tube and states: "I'm trying to read an article about how the word 'feminist' has apparently become dirty. I try to engage, but it just makes me think of a bunch of dirty little feminists" (Waller-Bridge, 11). Her poignant humour

illustrating how the force behind a movement like more traditional communal feminism has slowly lost out to individualistic issues.

This is a core assumption within the dialogue and storytelling of *Fleabag*. There exists an understanding between Fleabag and us, that both the audience and the main character are aware of the issues surrounding the culture we are living in. We see this when Fleabag and her sister sit in a feminist lecture their father has sent them to. Both sisters lift their hands as they are asked if they would trade away five years of their life for the so called ‘perfect body’ and as they notice themselves to be the only people in the lecture hall doing this, they put their hands down and Fleabag slowly remarks “We are *bad* feminists” (Waller-Bridge, 16). Fleabag is acutely aware of what feminism is and how it functions. Therefore, it is valid to state that she would also know how feminism’s development has progressed. However, Fleabag is not here not to fix issues regarding daily misogyny or injustices, she is here to mock them. Therefore, Fleabag’s character is a very rich base for feminist analysis, since she refuses to conform to the ideals set forward by modern day expectations for a woman – such as those outlined by Rottenberg – unlike, for example, her sister (Darling 133).

This approach of cynical smirking as opposed to fighting for change is a direct response to the exhaustion caused by neoliberal feminism’s endless varieties of choices, which has resulted in what author Emmeline Clein describes as “internalizing our existential aches and smirking knowingly at them” (2019). Neoliberal feminism thrives on the assumption that due to the plethora of choices offered and the lack of governing forces to limit potential development, this system is nothing if not free and giving. The rhetoric of feminism no longer being needed directly correlates with the glimmering image neoliberal feminism has painted of the modern-day feminist landscape. On the surface it does in fact appear to be an era of postfeminist freedom, but the issue in this thought process lies in the impossibilities placed within neoliberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism focuses on hyper individualization, which leads to a clear distaste with movements like traditional communal feminism (Chen, 445). As feminism moves towards an independent project, it is much harder to then drive a united front of feminist progress. As stated prior, a united front is very necessary for systematic change, and since neoliberal feminism moulds women into hyper-individualistic, self-governing projects, this cause is left with little to no pursuers.

Waller-Bridges' *Fleabag* is for this reason a very valid source to consider in relation to the rejection of neoliberal feminisms' values. The main character's anti-aspirationalism towards not only repressive traditional ideals, but also toward the commodified neoliberal values provide a rich look into how neoliberal feminism's value systems are flawed, and the goals exceedingly unattainable.

3. RELATIONSHIPS SURROUNDING FLEABAG

Fleabag's family is portrayed as a deeply dysfunctional one, which applies to other heterosexual relationships in the play as well. The family is a key factor of consideration because they are the immediate point of comparison to Fleabag within the story. The dysfunctional heterosexual and familial relationships in the play provide contrast to the concept of perfection, which neoliberal feminism is fixated on (Chen, 448). The family has lost their uniting force, which was Fleabag's mother, and now the father has found himself a new spouse from their godmother, who is portrayed as a relentless and domineering woman in the TV series. Within the play – although not explicitly discussed – she is presented as an inadequate replacement for a warm and motherly figure.

Fleabag's perception of other people's relationships reflects directly into her own aspirations for love and relationships. Her unhealthy tendencies to seek validation over connection and quick gratification over longer term commitments can easily be traced back to the relationships which surround her, which showcase a concerning lack of hope for a long-term commitment.

3.1. Fleabag's Sister Claire's abusive relationship

Claire, Fleabag's sister, is caught in a marriage with an alcoholic man named Martin, whose inappropriately affectionate son is now her stepson (Waller-Bridge 14). Martin's behaviour in certain scenes borders on abusive and downright predatory, to which Fleabag responds to by cynically stating: "Hope he hasn't beaten the shit out of her or anything. No, he'd never do something as sexy as that. I'm joking. Jesus." (25). Domestic violence is objectively a horrific subject and for Fleabag to approach it with such nonchalance is a direct juxtaposition to the seriousness of the issue. Discussing a subject as serious as this would bring Fleabag too close to the very real possibility that her sister's husband could be abusive. Due to this, she deflects the situation with humour, as inappropriate as it may be. She refuses to take anything akin to this abuse into serious consideration as this would force her to face issues of gendered violence, that she could not deflect or dissociate from.

Claire is a high-achieving career woman, with a seemingly perfect marriage. Yet her aspirations are to stay close to family, despite being offered a sizeable raise in Finland

(13). It is insinuated that this is due to her husband not wanting her to leave and Claire – embracing the expectations set for her by traditional values; not sacrificing your family for your work – does not wish to go. This showcases how hollow the nature of neoliberal feminism’s ideal is. Women are still tied down by the patriarchal expectations set in place for them:

She tells me she’s finally been offered the wet-dream of a job in Finland. Apparently they want to overpay and underwork her and she won’t have to wear power suits anymore. – But she is turning it down, because her husband says she shouldn’t go, because of Jake. (13)

Fleabag opposes Claire’s plan, because she wants her sister to go after this big promotion, which would effectively ruin Claire’s marriage. This is directly conflicted by Fleabag’s own thoughts just a few lines prior where she states that she just runs a café and never went after a high-flying career, since she would most likely just fail at it anyway (13). This disparity stands in direct opposition to what neoliberal feminism dictates. Through extensive work on herself, Fleabag could surely get to a position similar – if not better – than that of her sister’s. Her refusal to even entertain this opportunity is a direct objection to what neoliberal feminism holds sacred.

Fleabag constantly compares herself to her sister. This is done, in some instances, through jealousy. She acknowledges that, out of the two daughters their father has, she is the problem and Claire is the ideal. Claire has everything that neoliberal feminism deems ideal; a stellar career and a seemingly stable family unit (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 1905). Claire’s ability to maximize her value within a market lies in her ability to construct an enviable level of universally appreciated superficial perfection to an external observer. There is nothing in Claire, as Fleabag observes as well, that would reveal to an outside eye that there is turmoil in her life (Waller-Bridge, 12). This is another admirable, yet unspoken, quality of a neoliberal feminism. Achieving maximum material gain boils down to being able to portray an image other people can be jealous of. Claire’s life – however tumultuous it may be – seems to an outside observer like the very picture of perfection.

Neoliberal feminism is closely tied to appearance and the external; as author Ivana argues “Yet, neoliberal feminism, which I have suggested throughout this thesis that best represents the postfeminist sensibility, is closely linked with beauty and femininity” (61). Claire’s character’s poised outwards appearance is something both Fleabag and Claire are acutely aware of. Fleabag’s offhanded notion of her sister potentially being anorexic is quickly followed by a slightly disregarding and jealous notion of; “but clothes look amazing on her so...” (12). This idea that even though neoliberal feminism’s expectations might be detrimental to Claire’s health and well-being, she is rewarded with the appearance that is desirable and hence valuable.

Claire’s attitude towards her career and family life seems to stem from an idea that everyone is attempting to achieve the same level of perfection. Fleabag resents the notion that self-improvement would fix anything in her case. As we hear her inner dialogue tell us:

[T]he only thing that’s going to save me from becoming a corporate lady-slave like her, and that I know everyone thought I’d fuck it up, and now it looks like I’ve fulfilled everyone’s expectations. (13)

Her refusal to take her own career seriously is a direct juxtaposition to her sister. Where Claire was given the opportunity to move up in her line of work, Fleabag refuses to even entertain the idea of upward mobility. This is a direct representation of neoliberal feminism standing opposite to dissociative feminism; Claire is the very embodiment of neoliberal feminism’s high-achieving modern-day woman and Fleabag is the poster child for dissociative feminism’s refusal to engage in any development.

4. FLEABAG'S OWN RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout the play we follow Fleabag as she engages in sexual encounters with multiple partners, none of which she necessarily enjoys. For example, after inviting a man into her apartment for the night, the audience is told after the act itself by Fleabag that what transpired barely made an impression on her; “He says that last night was incredible – which I think is an overstatement – ...” (Waller-Bridge, 23). This is a key example in how Fleabag searches for momentary fixes to keep herself separated from reality. The encounters themselves, or the people she engages with, mean almost nothing to her, but they are enough to keep her distracted.

For these quick fixes she is willing to disrupt almost everything else in her life. This is seen, for example, when she is assisting a belligerently drunk woman into a cab but ends up coming onto her and asking her to come home with her. This leads to the drunken woman mistaking Fleabag for a man, due to her aggressive behaviour and calling her a “naughty boy” (Waller-Bridge, 19). This is a stark contrast against the ideals of neoliberal feminism, as the ideal would be for a woman to seek a partner that would not only give her the sacred private success of a family, but also aid in her journey towards a public sphere’s acclaim of a high-status career. This opposes the neoliberal feminist concept that all choices under should promise maximum profit within personal growth. Fleabag’s constant search for external approval from people she deems not worthy echoes loudly against the values of neoliberal feminism. If the ideal is to constantly improve, this kind of torturous following of unfulfilling external validation from any person willing to give it to you – especially when this is done with the self-abusing glint of dissociation as motivation – will not help with that.

4.1. Harry the Boyfriend

Within the story we are introduced to one constant partner in her life, her on and off boyfriend Harry. He is described as quite feminine and sensitive. This is specifically highlighted in the TV series, in which he is comically seen wearing a towel wrapped around his head as he sits at the kitchen table waiting for Fleabag to come home (Waller-Bridge, 65). Fleabag never truly discusses his personality; we only see her interact with him out of necessity. She even explains that she has considered planning their continuous break-ups around the times when

her apartment needs cleaning, as he always cleans the apartment before leaving (Waller-Bridges, 6). It could be argued that her upholding an unsatisfying relationship – seemingly for aesthetics – with an easily pushed around man, is her way of trying to uphold herself to neoliberal feminism’s values, by creating the appearance of a stable romantic partnership.

When her actions finally drive Harry over the line, he leaves a note, which simply states: “That was the last straw”, to which Fleabag simply remarks: “I didn’t know he was counting straws. But nice to know he was paying attention” (Waller-Bridge 6). There clearly exists no circumstances in which Harry could hurt her feelings, not even by leaving her and packing up all his belongings. This is another example of her dissociation from the relationship she is upholding. The relationship exists purely for societally approved aesthetics, and she is not even present enough in it to get hurt.

4.3. The Influence of Fleabag’s Deceased Best Friend Boo

In the beginning of the play, we are told that Fleabag has recently lost her best friend Boo, with whom she used to run the café with. We are told that she killed herself by accident, as she was simply trying to scare her boyfriend who she thought was cheating on him (Waller-Bridges, 7). At the end of the play, we find out that it was Fleabag who the boyfriend cheated on her with, but this detail does not come to us from Fleabag, but from her sister (34). The argument could be made that if this detail was to be told by Fleabag herself, we the audience would never hear about it. This is in direct response to her refusal to cope with the fact that what she did led to her friend accidentally killing herself. This is a key factor in making Fleabag who she is: as we see in the TV series, she and Boo used to talk in-depth about their self-images. Boo even dressed herself in Fleabag’s clothing and told Fleabag to talk to herself like she was Fleabag, which prompted Fleabag to have big revelations about herself and the way she lives (Waller-Bridge, 154). This is something we never see Fleabag do in other relationships. This is an astounding level of vulnerability for her when compared to her current dissociative approach to herself.

This relationship dynamic illustrates how, even when she is with someone she seems to truly love and care for, Fleabag cannot shed the habits and destructive cycles that she has fallen into. When Fleabag is confronted with what she has done, all she can do is try and divert the blame: “That wasn’t my fault. He wanted me...he...wanted me so...” (Waller-

Bridge, 34). This is clearly the incident that has led to Fleabag's changed attitude towards her day-to-day life and what she now deflects and dissociates from.

Fleabag's chosen form of dissociation, aside from her direct address to the audience in moments of distress or humour, is her masochistic search for casual sex. Her behaviour is largely driven by the quick gratification she receives from continuous sexual encounters as she herself states: "I'm not obsessed with sex. I just can't stop thinking about it" (7). This is a key element in how Fleabag operates in her life. Her aspirations do not stretch too far, only about the distance from the doors of the pub to her apartment.

4.2. The Culmination of Fleabag's Desperation with Joe

In the play there is a character not mentioned in the TV series, which for the beginning of the play seems almost like a replacement father figure for Fleabag. He seems to live life with a positive attitude not matched by other characters in the story. He is a regular at her mostly empty café and he genuinely seems like he cares about Fleabag's wellbeing.

"Joe's always here at eleven. Proper old geezer, cockney from the toes up, one of life's good people. – Nothing touches Joe." (9).

Their relationship takes a turn, when Fleabag in a fit of shameful rage – after having to confront the wrongdoing of her and Boo's ex-boyfriend – bares herself to Joe, hoping for a form of gratification from him as well. After Fleabag bares herself to him, he simply states: "Put your clothes back on darling" (34). The rejection from Joe seems hit her particularly hard, as after this encounter she proceeds to strangle the guinea pig – that she had gotten as a gift for Boo – to death with her bare hands (36). This scene – where horrific and shocking – serves as the moment where Fleabag seems to, for a second, touch reality.

There is no monologue necessarily directed to the audience, but we just listen to her thoughts as her entire self-worth crumbles around her and she is left truly living with what she has done. In this moment she cannot escape or dissociate, and when forced to confront what she has done, she simply cannot. This gap between her dissociative tactics and neoliberal feminism's unavoidable grasp is unbearable for her. There are no options for her in this situation; she cannot face reality, nor choose to accept neoliberal feminism's ideals of self-

improvement and simply push through. In this moment she is outside the sphere of dissociative feminism's security and since she rejects the neoliberal feminism's calls for self-governance, she completely crumbles.

5. UNACCOUNTED PRIVILEGE

5.1. Privilege in Neoliberal Feminism

As mentioned prior, neoliberal feminism stands at the crossroads of prosperity and impossibility. Because the ideology of neoliberal feminism is based on ultimate freedom of the market, it takes no account of systemic privileges (Darling, 133). This is due to the idea that with enough perseverance and self-improvement, anyone would be able to gain success with limitless opportunities. Neoliberal feminism speaks from the point of view of privilege. One must have nearly unlimited resources and significant amounts of free time to dedicate to self-improvement to succeed in a neoliberal market.

As such, people with insufficient income, or denied access to certain services or possibilities due to disabilities, are left outside the realm of neoliberal feminism's calls for improvement. With the rhetoric of neoliberal feminism, they can simply be told to work harder, and their lack of success can be attributed to what can be perceived laziness. As stated by Rosalind Gill, neoliberal feminism "is still largely characterised by relentless individualism, that exculpates the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blames women for their disadvantaged positions" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg, 16). Women that have systemic privilege, whether it be due to their race, financial status, or other factors are in a position highly beneficial to them when it comes to bettering themselves.

Neoliberal feminism assumes that the lack of improvement in a woman's life is directly linked to her own motivation and will to work, rather than actual limitations which might stand in her way even before this self-improvement project could even begin. Neoliberal feminism's aspirations for individualism do not include women with limitations in their way, as it tells them that with enough hard work and perseverance, they could surely pull themselves up to their maximum potential.

5.2. Privilege in Dissociative Feminism

As this privilege is assumed in neoliberal feminism, it is also ever present in its by-product, dissociative feminism. To be able to simply dissociate as you go through the motions of your day-to-day life and to use whatever, and whoever you feel like to do so, stems from having access to a variety of tools and experiences. As stated by Clein "The characters of Sex and

the City and Girls — not to mention Nekrasova, Jamison herself, and even Plath — belong to a subset of women who undeniably have it much easier than most. They are white, attractive, have a certain amount of class privilege, and are intelligent and witty”. Dissociation is a tool that can be used when you need to check-out of your daily life for the sake of protecting yourself. Dissociation requires time and funds, which enable a woman to detach from reality, which are not available for everyone. Where Fleabag’s quick witty remarks are amusing to us and certainly serve as a tool for the entertainment value of her storytelling, it is vital to note that even for her to be able to dissociate is a privilege.

Fleabag’s character is most likely aware of her privilege but chooses not to discuss it. There is no recognition from Fleabag’s character at any point that she has substantial privilege over certain factors in her life. A prime example of this is the conversation she has with her sister about her failing café and Claire’s potential in financing this:

“How much do you need to save Boo’s café?

About five grand.

Okay I’ll transfer it tomorrow. But I don’t want to come to these anymore.” (15).

This is a substantial sum of money that, at this point in the story, Fleabag has already attempted to secure from a bank as well. For her sister, this sum seems to be completely manageable and her only opposition to giving this money to her sister seems to be her distaste for her sister’s character. This generational wealth is not noted by Fleabag at any point, even though in this moment it guarantees her livelihood for the foreseeable future. As stated prior, when engaged with issues of dissociative and neoliberal feminism, unaccounted privilege seems to be a non-issue. It would be easy to state that a practise like dissociation would be available for everyone, however this is not the case.

It is vital to discuss these privileges, since they are an integral part of both feminist theories this thesis discusses. They are factors, which describe to us how Fleabag can use dissociative tactics in her life. Dissociative feminism seems like an inevitable reaction to something like neoliberal feminism, but it is not available to all women the same way it is to Fleabag.

6. CONCLUSION

Neoliberal feminism has emerged from the rhetoric that feminism is now over, and that women are free to choose whichever path they want in life. This ideology is pushed upon women and used to silence voices still yearning for traditional communal feminism. Since they could all now move on individually and be exactly who they want to be, there should be no need for any pursuit of better circumstances. However, this possibility of achievement is filled with small silent impossibilities that cannot be conquered by women from different circumstances.

Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and its dissociative namesake character is a glaring portrait of what a worldview ripe with opportunity and unaccounted privilege breeds. Dissociative feminism is born as a response to the constant call for bettering and fighting to be the best at each thing you do, and *Fleabag*'s character is a portrayal of the women that see no point in associating with neoliberal feminism anymore. Her style of walking through life with the ability to – when necessary – turn to us and amuse us with the idiocy of the modern world talks loudly about how neoliberal feminism refuses to face its own pitfalls.

In the end of the play, we return to the beginning of the story, where *Fleabag* is being interviewed for a job. After their pointed exchange in the beginning of the play we see how the interaction continues. The interviewer mentions that he thought *Fleabag*'s CV was funny and to him, *Fleabag* finally unloads her poisoned perception of herself:

“I know that my body as it is now really is the only thing I have and when that gets old and unfuckable I might as well just kill it, --- Either everyone feels like this a little bit and they're just not talking about it, or I'm completely fucking alone. Which isn't fucking funny” (38).

This outburst that *Fleabag* has at the end of the play completely crystalizes the core issue of neoliberal feminism. The idea of hyper individuality and outward perfection leads to women feeling that what they are on the outside is only usable whilst it is considered valuable in the surrounding market. Once that prime has passed you by, and there are outward factors about you that simply cannot be improved, you are excluded. *Fleabag*'s final quote also expresses

the anxieties which hyper individualism causes. Women are made to feel isolated with their issues. Since the improvement they are supposed to pursue is personal, there is no justification for concerning the communal. Personal issues are for the individual to fix and for the surrounding world to not take notice of. Dissociative feminism exemplified in *Fleabag*, while not the most productive one, is a tool used to oppose this neoliberal feminist ideology.

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