

*Interrogating Neoliberalism
and Postfeminism in the
Home: A Textual Analysis of
Orange is the New Black*

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Abstract | This paper intends to analyse the different ways *Orange is the New Black* (*OITNB*) engages with postfeminist and neoliberal ideas around the subject of domesticity. I will argue that when it comes to representations of the domestic worker and the housewife, neoliberal and postfeminist values conflict, thereby disrupting the notion that neoliberalism and postfeminism operate coherently. The paper will begin by mapping out some of the feminist debates around domestic labour, from the second wave to our current postfeminist culture. I will then analyse how this labour is represented in the show, *OITNB*, by focussing on the characters Miss Claudette and Lorna Morello as specific examples. I will conclude by asserting that the show complicates the relationship women can have to the domestic, and that this is a site where the relationship between neoliberalism and

postfeminism is understood to conflict, thus disrupting previous assertions that the two consistently work in tandem.

Keywords | postfeminism, neoliberalism, *Orange is the New Black*, domesticity, motherhood, Popular Culture, Netflix

Introduction

Nina Power asserts that “if the contemporary portrayal of womankind is to be believed, contemporary female achievement would culminate in the ownership of expensive handbags, a vibrator, a job, a flat and a man – probably in that order” (Power, 2009: 1). This accurate but miserable portrayal of modern womanhood is in line with the neoliberal and postfeminist values that are often presented in western popular culture, which glorify individual success and participating in consumer culture as a marker of women’s liberation. This narrow representation of modern womanhood is visibly subverted in *OITNB* as the show focuses on a diverse range of women, particularly those who are from marginalised groups and whose stories are not often represented in modern popular culture. In this sense, *OITNB* warrants academic attention, as more than just subverting these dominant ideologies, the show continuously criticises neoliberalism and postfeminism as they both invest in normalising the oppressive power structures of capitalism and patriarchy. Whilst I assert that *OITNB* does not attempt to be a feminist text, it engages with aspects of feminism and in doing so regularly criticises the short-comings of postfeminism in being a source of liberation for women. Similarly, the show may not necessarily be anti-capitalist, but it often exposes the problems with uneven distributions of wealth and class-structures that are inherent to capitalist economic structures in the U.S., and criticises the negative and unfair impact this has on some women’s lives.

Domestic Labour and Feminism

The role of women within familial and domestic spheres has been a primary concern for feminists from as far back as the 18th century. Mary Wollstonecraft, writing in 1792, channelled her concerns about women being confined to the private sphere and the detrimental impact this was having on their lives (Poovey, 1984: vii). Since then, feminists have regularly challenged the gendered division of housework, arguably because this is where women's labour was, and arguably, is, most visibly appropriated by men.

Writing much later in the 1940s, Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* brought women's domestic labour to the forefront of popular debate once again, and became a landmark text for Second Wave feminism. By "using the figure of the housewife to encapsulate everything she saw wrong with women's lives" (Johnson and Lloyd, 2007: 7), De Beauvoir once again criticised the confinement women faced in the domestic sphere as negatively affecting their lives and driving gender inequality. It is unsurprising, then, that in many of the texts written by second wave feminists, "the housewife emerged (...) as an instantly identifiable figure that epitomizes everything that is wrong with patriarchy" (Genz, 2009: 52).

From a Marxist-feminist perspective, it is the *labour* of domestic work itself that warrants critical attention. The idea being that,

(...) if women's traditional domestic labors were seen as having productive value, and if women gained control over their labor power, the material grounds for patriarchy within the home would diminish. To this end, many feminists have argued that women's activities within the family must be conceptualized in terms of their productive value (Mann, 1994: 42).

Although it was Friedrich Engels who first applied Marx's theory of the means of production to the relationship between men and women, and asserted that "men oppressed women within the family in the same way that capitalists oppressed workers in a factory" (Mann, 1994: 42), many feminist scholars were quick to point out that women's domestic labour had been appropriated by men long before any system of private property (Mann, 1994: 42). Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that whilst Marx's model is a good starting point when conceptualising the ways in which women's domestic labour is appropriated by men, we also need to draw upon feminist theory in order to truly understand the historical and socio-cultural relationship between men and women within the family unit, and why this kind of labour still predominantly falls on women's shoulders (McCabe and Akass, 2006: 56), and why, after so many years of feminist scholarship and criticism, has the domestic recently become a site of aspiration for some young women. Angela McRobbie offers an interesting insight into this as she says:

It would be interesting to speculate as to why there is at present, despite various other feminist actions, no organisation or campaign which addresses the oppressive, repetitive, exhausting nature of daily housework and childcare and the extent to which women are still disproportionately responsible for these daily responsibilities. Perhaps this can be attributed to the legacy of a post-feminist culture which emphasises responsibility and choice (McRobbie, 2013: 128).

Here, McRobbie raises a crucial point: if postfeminism is all about women exercising choice and agency, what role can feminism play if women choose to return to a tradition that entails oppressive work?

Postfeminism

Since the emergence of postfeminist culture in the 1990s, female desire is often presented as wanting to go back to a domestic, feminine lifestyle, where women are

now presented as “keen to re-embrace the title of housewife and re-experience the joys of a ‘new femininity’” (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 57). The rebranding of domestic labour as a site of pleasure and freedom articulated through means of popular culture, in film and TV programmes such as *Footballer’s Wives* (2002-2006), *The Real Housewives* franchise, and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), rejects feminist concerns about housework being tedious, repetitive and exploitative. As Stephanie Genz argues, “new traditionalism centralises women’s apparently full 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” (Genz, 2009: 54). Therefore, by addressing women as freely choosing subjects, domestic labour is presented as a fulfilling and enjoyable role. More than presenting a new perspective on domestic labour, postfeminism also redefines the role of the housewife as a viable aspiration for modern women to achieve. One of the ways the perspective of the housewife has shifted in recent years is by presenting the housewife as an identity, not a job. By “drawing on poststructuralist understandings of the performativity of identity (...) the housewife has come to be seen as an inflexibly gendered “*identity*” rather than a form of gendered *labour*” (Gillis and Hollows, 2009: 7). Therefore, popular media that is oriented around the housewife figure tends to focus more on the lavish lifestyles, feisty characters, and consumer tendencies these women can afford, rather than the cooking, cleaning and child-rearing labour they (supposedly) perform.

With all this being said, it would be wrong to assert that postfeminism offers a universal definition of housework and idealises the domestic all the time. Instead, postfeminist popular culture depicts a wide range of possibilities and consequences the private sphere can offer women. Often these narratives are ambivalent or even

contradict the concept of domestic labour being empowering to women. Elizabeth Nathanson articulates this in saying:

They are surgeons, lawyers, teachers, politicians and television writers. They are journalists, fashion designers, photographers and hotel owners, oncologists and gynaecologists, police detectives and even president of the United States. Women on television seem to be able to do anything and be anything. And yet, there is one thing that a prominent handful of women in media culture just cannot do: they cannot cook (Nathanson, 2013: 1).

Rather than just representing women who only concern themselves with the domestic sphere, many women in postfeminist texts contradict this and reject domestic labour outright. Postfeminist characters who lack cooking and cleaning skills all disrupt the tradition of domestic work being women's work – and pride themselves for doing so. What is interesting about postfeminist popular culture, then, is that it often “produces two extreme character traits: there are narratives about women who cannot cook as well as narratives about women who only cook” (Nathanson, 2013: 2). According to postfeminist popular culture, then, women can choose to be housewives or choose to reject domestic work completely. But by selling the domestic lifestyle choice to young women as precisely that – a choice – means that any political/feminist opposition to these aspirations appears dated and becomes redundant.

Textual Analysis

Since its release in 2013, *OITNB* has enjoyed global success and critical recognition. The Netflix Original Series follows the story of Piper Chapman, a white, wealthy, middle-class woman who is sentenced to serve 15 months at Litchfield (a fictional minimum security prison) in New York. Based loosely on the memoir written by Piper Kerman, the “fish out of water” narrative depicts Piper trying to negotiate her new life as an inmate at Litchfield amongst a vast and diverse group of women. Although Piper

could be considered as the show's protagonist as it is her story we initially follow, *OITNB* delves into the lives of many minority women, who often render Piper's privileged life story somewhat unremarkable. In representing the stories of working-class, poor, black, Hispanic, and older women, *OITNB* has been praised for revolutionising the representation of women on TV (*Rolling Stone*, 2015).

More than representing minority women who do not fit the postfeminist stereotype, *OITNB* is also politically charged, as it often criticises capitalism, neoliberalism, the American prison and legal system, institutional racism, and heteronormativity. In fact, Litchfield Penitentiary can be understood as a microcosm for the wider political, economic, and social landscape of the U.S. As Fran Buntman states, "prisons symbolize, mirror, and shape the communities and countries in which they exist" (Buntman, 2009: 401). In doing so, *OITNB* becomes a media text that disrupts the prevailing cultural influences of postfeminism and neoliberalism which often ignore these systems of oppression whilst simultaneously re-enforcing them.

In the few representations there are of women participating in domestic labour outside the prison, the show does often subvert typical postfeminist stereotypes, by portraying the domestic as both a site of unattainable happiness for some, and a realm of struggle, anxiety and violence for others. The latter is especially prevalent with Miss Claudette, a character who subverts the postfeminist stereotype of the domestic worker. Miss Claudette is an elderly Haitian woman who has very strict rules when it comes to the cleanliness of her space, which Piper has to share. Miss Claudette's strict attitude and attachment to cleanliness is explained in her flashback scenes in season 1 episode 4. It is here we see Claudette as a young girl who has just arrived in the U.S. to work as a maid in order to pay off her parents' debts. Evidently there against her will, *OITNB* highlights forced labour as just one of the many forms of human trafficking crimes, and also draws attention to the global nature of female labour, where migrant women can

be forced to work for low pay for (often) wealthy, white Americans. The close-up of Claudette's distressed face makes it evident that she is anxious about her new surroundings and job role. This elicits sympathy from the viewer but not from the manager, who makes no secret about the strict rules, professionalism, and zero-tolerance environment Claudette will live and work in for the rest of her life.

Perhaps this scene would not be quite so jarring had our current postfeminist culture not so often glorified the figure of the maid in popular media; as Suzanne Leonard states, "American mass culture has recently witnessed an unprecedented rise in popular representations of maids and nannies, figures who remain paradoxically visible and invisible at the same time" (Leonard, 2009: 107). By centralising Miss Claudette's induction to domestic-worker life as a harsh and terrifying experience, *OITNB* subverts this postfeminist representation and displays Miss Claudette as a victim of human trafficking and forced labour. Popular films such as *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2001) and *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003) often erase the low paid, unfulfilling and monotonous labour of the worker by presenting her as an object of desire for the heterosexual male protagonist, and it is often through romance that the emancipation of the domestic worker is fulfilled. In the case of *OITNB*, no such "happily ever after" comes around for Claudette, thus subverting the stereotypical, modern maid trope and offering up a more realistic depiction of the industry.

By highlighting the limitations women of colour face, especially those who are working class, *OITNB* brings the struggles of marginalised women to the forefront. Often, postfeminism presents itself as making "no distinctions among the various social and cultural positions and experiences of women", and therefore, "celebrate[s] depictions of white, middle-class, heterosexual women's success as markers of all women's supposed success" (Projansky, 2001: 73). In doing so, it erases any indication

of class and race hegemony existing – and thus rarely represents the struggles some groups of marginalised women face.

This perpetuation also translates to representations of women in the world of work, as “postfeminist fictions frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labour as an economic necessity rather than a choice” (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 2). In the case of Miss Claudette, then, *OITNB* marks itself out against the backdrop of postfeminist popular culture by highlighting the limitations a young, poor, black, working-class girl might face in the U.S., and presents how industries like domestic labour can be sites where gender, race and class marginalisation is exploited both economically and socially.

The domestic as being the source of women’s happiness and emancipation is further subverted in the later flashback scenes. It is here that we find Miss Claudette years later in the managerial position for the maid service. This complicates the plot somewhat as Miss Claudette has become a key part in an industry that once put her under a lot of distress, separated her from her family, and is illegal. Miss Claudette instils the same zero-tolerance rules on one of the new, young girls, who signifies a representation of how far, perhaps even institutionalised, Miss Claudette has become. However, once Miss Claudette learns that the man this young girl has been cleaning for has beaten her and severely bruised the entire side of her torso, Miss Claudette seeks vengeance. After introducing herself as the cleaner to the man who abused the girl, Miss Claudette calmly enters his house with her cleaning products. The next scene shows Miss Claudette cleaning a knife in the sink in an immaculate kitchen, before collecting her cleaning supplies and stepping over the man’s bleeding body on her way out. Although we cannot say for certain yet, there is a good chance, given the fact that Miss Claudette resides in a minimum security prison and is not serving a life sentence, that the cleaning skills she had developed over the years as a maid actually helped her

literally get away with murder, and what she is in Litchfield for is being part of a human trafficking organisation.

What is particularly interesting in this scene is that it gives the audience insight into the lives of people who benefit from this cheap labour. Rather than working in luxury, corporate hotels, like in *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002), or for public figures like in *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), it would appear the maids' labour in *OITNB* is outsourced to middle-class, American households. The audience is purposefully exposed to the affluent, American townhouse, which signifies the wealth and class status of the customer, and from when Miss Claudette introduces herself to her employee's abuser, the audience can clearly see the man is white and middle-aged. In this sense, it could be said that this man represents the hegemonic norms of American society, and the physical abuse he inflicted upon the young girl is perhaps a metaphor for the micro-aggressions, attacks, and violence working class women of colour can be subjected to on the grounds of their race, class and gender identities.

The rise of the domestic worker in modern popular culture has proven problematic to the "ideological history of feminism, which has largely failed to grapple with the question of how the preponderance of domestic labourers has ensured economic gains for America's elite, while fixing others, mostly women of colour, in positions which ensure little economic mobility" (Leonard, 2009: 107). Against the predominantly white and middle-class terrain of postfeminism which has often romanticised the figure of the maid, *OITNB* brings a fresh, if disturbing, perspective to the figure of the maid. Not only through the forced labour the women living at the maid service have to endure, but also the violence and clear subordination they can be subjected to in a racist, sexist, capitalist society.

Whilst Miss Claudette is visibly forced into her domestic role, fellow Litchfield inmate, Lorna Morello, engages with the domestic in an entirely different way.

Although she is never depicted engaging in any form of domestic labour, Morello still upholds the values of a traditional, feminine, 1950s lifestyle, and emphatically wants to live as a stereotypical housewife. As someone whose “entire worldview is based on *Westside Story*” (Kohan, 2013), Morello is presented as an anachronistic character who fantasises about her future wedding with her partner, Christopher, and becoming a housewife. Her relationship with Christopher is so important, in fact, that very often it is all she talks about. From planning her wedding, looking at bridal magazines, and imagining how many children she and Christopher will have, Morello’s attachment to the home is one that is undoubtedly traditional and idealistic. Even at the mock job interview at the prison’s job fair, Morello tells the interviewer:

Morello: Well, I just wanna get married to Christopher and have his babies and make the house look nice... Maybe I’ll Pinterest, I hear that’s a thing (Kohan, 2013).

It is shown throughout the first two seasons how important Christopher is to Morello, and how much she wants to finish her sentence at Litchfield so they can be together. As the series develops, Morello’s enthusiasm to return to the domestic never wavers, thus hinting to the audience that Morello may not be as authentic as she sounds. Despite this, it is still a surprise when we discover how perverse this relationship is, as it is eventually revealed that her relationship with Christopher is completely fabricated. In season 2 episode 10, it is finally revealed that Morello and Christopher went on one date a few years ago, and since then she has harassed and stalked him relentlessly. Even after he changed his number, address, and filed a restraining order against her, Morello’s delusions of their marriage, family, and home still continued, right up until the present day.

Once again, the role of the domestic subverts the dominant postfeminist trope – but in a completely different way to that of Miss Claudette’s character, as Morello’s

dreams of becoming a housewife are based upon a fictitious relationship. From Morello's flashbacks in season 2 episode 4, it becomes clear that she is from a large, working-class family, but has always had an attachment to a highly consumerist lifestyle as she is obsessed with designer clothes – something she can only attain through fraud. Perhaps more than just becoming a housewife, Morello desperately wants the life housewives possess – that is, middle-class affluence and all the material goods that can come with it. Stephanie Genz notes that “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” (Genz, 2009: 54). By representing Morello as a working-class woman (and a convict), the show implies to the viewer that, realistically, Morello will never attain the lifestyle she dreams of because of the structural socio-economic barriers that are in place. In this sense, Morello has an incredibly warped idea of the domestic that, just like postfeminist popular culture, ignores the fact that it is only wealthy, middle class women who can often afford this lifestyle. Moreover, Morello's fantasies tend to suggest that such a postfeminist retro dream of domestic fulfilment is just that – a fantasy. Indeed, it would appear that Morello is so relentless about attaining this lifestyle, she makes up a long-term relationship in order to feel like that dream is still achievable, thus calling into question her mental wellbeing. Whilst Morello's socio-economic status will probably prevent her from achieving this goal, even women who do enjoy race and class privilege still won't necessarily attain this domesticated lifestyle, thus limiting her odds further. By once again bringing class status to the forefront of discussion, *OITNB* disrupts postfeminist and neoliberal discourse of individuals being in complete control of their own lives.

Although postfeminism often glorifies the figure of the housewife, neoliberalism generally does not, especially if it is working-class women who abstain from the

productive workforce in order to take on domestic duties. In this sense, neoliberalism regards the housewife and the domestic worker in two different ways. Mainly, this comes down to what work constitutes productive labour. As discussed previously in this chapter, many Marxist-feminists have advocated for a change in the way we think about housework to be considered productive work; however, academics such as Rakhi Sehgal argue that for productive work to have value, it must be exchanged in one way or another. Therefore, if we consider the idea that housework never goes through an exchange process, value cannot be attached to it.

(...) value can only be assessed via exchange relations, and since domestic work does not enter the circuit of exchange, it cannot be said to produce value (...) the same domestic work, however, is categorized as employment and paid productive labour when it is commodified and purchased on the market' (Sehgal, 2007: 62).

What Sehgal asserts here is precisely the difference in domestic labour representations present in *OITNB*. Where Miss Claudette carries out domestic work as part of her “employment”, this is considered productive labour as her services have been bought and sold. Of course, the illegality of this exchange and whether she actually earns any money never really becomes an issue from a neoliberal perspective. Morello, on the other hand, would be treated very differently under neoliberalism’s discourse, as the approach to the housewife, or anybody who carries out housework in lieu of participating in “productive” work, is very different to that of the domestic worker.

Where postfeminist popular culture invests heavily in the figure of the housewife and the importance of the return to home trope, housework is not generally seen to benefit a neoliberal capitalist economy at all. Moreover, “domesticity has traditionally been associated with immobility and stasis, and against the adventurous spirit of modernity” (Hollows, 2006: 110). However, the relationship of neoliberal values and the housewife is not quite this black and white.

A study conducted by Shani Orgad and Sara De Benedictis (2015) found that, when analysing stories of the stay-at-home mother in UK news coverage, their “findings confirm existing research (...) [which] shows that criticism and derision of mothers who are not in paid employment are predominantly directed towards working-class mothers” (Orgad and Benedictis, 2015: 15). However, middle-class women who abstain from paid, productive labour to raise children and carry out other domestic duties generally “emerge as a largely positive figure, whose ‘choice’ is valued, recognized and endorsed, including by government” (Orgad and Benedictis, 2015: 17). Therefore, the real issue at hand seems to be whether the woman can afford to choose the domestic lifestyle or not. It would appear that as far as this study is concerned, working-class women who choose to stay at home with their families tend to be demonised because they will generally require state assistance to do so. Conversely, middle-class women who opt for this lifestyle tend to be applauded for exercising their “choice agency, individualization, and female liberation” (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015: 17). Although this study is specific to British press coverage, neoliberal capitalism is a dominant force in both UK and U.S. politics, economics, and society. This creates conflicting messages around the domestic, and further complicates the apparently coherent relationship neoliberalism and postfeminism are understood to have.

Conclusion

By considering the realm of domesticity specifically, it is clear that *OITNB* critiques a global system of domestic labour, and interrogates the idealisation of the housewife, thus subverting this mainstream depiction in popular, postfeminist culture. When it comes to neoliberalism, however, the show offers a much more complex reading when considering the domestic. Where domestic labourers in postfeminist popular culture are usually depicted as *Cinderella-esque* characters, who are freed from domestic work

upon being saved by a male love interest, neoliberal media often remains ambivalent to the low-paid conditions of domestic workers. In doing so, the investment capitalism has in low-paid female labourers remains unchallenged, as does the class-structure that sees the middle- and upper-classes exploit this kind of labour. Conversely, the figure of the housewife has made a come-back in recent popular television and is glorified by postfeminism; however neoliberalism recognises that women who become housewives are a loss to the labour force, particularly if they are young and working-class. As Angela McRobbie articulates,

female labour power is far too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be an advocate of long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers. Moreover (...) having a career does not just provide women with an income and independence, it also reduces the cost of welfare to government. It thus makes sense for government to champion women who will enter the labour market and stay in it (McRobbie, 2013: 121).

Given that, in *OITNB* the relationship women have to the domestic can be considered negative, as Miss Claudette's relationship to domestic labour is forced and unsatisfying, just as Morello's fantasy of the domestic life is nothing more than a dream. The show works to show the "reality" of the domestic as an idealised, consumer lifestyle which is vastly unattainable, or a site of struggle and exploitation of women's labour in a capitalist and patriarchal system. In this sense, *OITNB* can be understood as being critical of the domestic labour that falls disproportionately on women's shoulders, and exposes that domestic work (paid or otherwise) is inherently oppressive, particularly for minority women.

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