

Consuming Critique and Romanticizing Retreat in the Postfeminist Present

Contemporary cultural production frequently wrestles with late-capitalist austerity and patriarchal strictures, yet it often placates these systemic anxieties through the comforting trappings of the romance plot. My paper examines Sally Rooney's novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) and Greta Gerwig's film *Little Women* (2019) to interrogate this impasse. Building on Rachel Greenwald Smith's conceptualization of compromise aesthetics, I argue that the stylistic hybridity of both works enable them to perform radical feminist critique while quietly reinstating the status quo through their heteroidealist endings.

In *Little Women*, financial precarity is absorbed into a sumptuous visual grammar that renders poverty and domesticity aspirational. Its ambiguous dual ending saves the audience from choosing between Jo's artistic autonomy and her romantic capitulation, proffering instead a middle-ground that flatters its audience's self-image while delivering the sentimental relief it claimed to outgrow. Rooney's Alice and Eileen perform an analogous manoeuvre, offering limp admissions of complicity with structurally inequitable global systems, a spineless form of activism that is accepted — even applauded — for its realistic, relatable cynicism. Their retreat to the status quo extends from their political to personal lives, shepherding them from intellectualized despair toward coupledness and finally to motherhood. *Beautiful World* attempts to plant socialist politics within the germ of heteronormative love, positing private intimacy as the requisite precondition for the flourishing of self, partner, and other. Both works mistake this privatizing logic as the antidote for social and political fragmentation, when in fact it is the cause.

I contend that both works manufacture the illusion of political agency by romanticizing the conditions they ostensibly critique. The result is a seductive, lucrative utopianism that encourages audiences to feel critically alive to the neoliberal, postfeminist present while quietly insulating them from demands for structural change. In place of reckoning, both works offer reconciliation through generic resolution.

Stephanie Ng is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Languages, Cultures, and Societies, where her project extends past doctoral work on compromise, gendered self-effacement, and the ethics and aesthetics of belonging into new linguistic and geopolitical contexts through a study of migrant mother-daughter narratives. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from UCL, and her research is forthcoming in *Comparative Critical Studies*, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, and *Memory Studies Review*. Alongside her literary scholarship, she is co-authoring an interdisciplinary book with geneticist Kim Zayhowski, *The Genomic Social Contract* (UC Press), a transdisciplinary intervention into the biopolitics of psychomedical normalcy.