

## **Ambiguous and Haunted: The Representations of Urban Spaces in Sophie Kinsella's Remember Me? And You Owe Me One<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines two of Sophie Kinsella's novels, *You Owe Me One* (2019) and *Remember Me?* (2008) to analyze the representations of urban spaces as haunted and ambiguous. Drawing on Steve Pile's (2005) concept of phantasmagoria, the study argues that modernization in urban spaces, driven by capitalism and consumerism generates specific sociocultural phenomena. The analysis reveals that the novels challenge the idealized image of big cities as centers of progress. While the protagonists are educated, independent women working in London, the narratives demonstrate gender biases concealed beneath the facade of urban progress and modernity. The development in urban spaces initially seems to liberate women from patriarchal traditions; however, the characters' experiences reveal the persistence of these values, leading to anxieties of self-reliance. Additionally, the characters' embrace of materialistic values reveals a primitive brutality persisting beneath the surface of modernized urban spaces.

**Keywords:** Chick Lit; Urban Space; Phantasmagoria

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## Introduction

Chick lit often portrays female protagonists seeking independence through careers in urban environments, allowing them to fulfill personal needs and break free from traditional roles. However, these characters pave their way through the capitalist-driven urban spaces, facing intense competition, consumer culture pressures, and psychological challenges like shallow relationships. Moreover, they contend with appearance anxieties, striving to meet beauty standards dictated by consumer culture (Umminger, 2006, p.239). This urban experience reflects the context of modern city life, which George Simmel (1903, p.11) argues is deeply intertwined with the economic system. Money has transformed urban spaces and contributed to their development, but he also argues that this transformation comes at a significant psychological and social negative consequence. Simmel (p.14) proposes that the capitalist emphasis on individual talent and creativity fosters individuality while simultaneously generating feelings of alienation, leading to urban behaviors characterized by reserve, a blasé attitude, and indifference. This alienation, Simmel contends, matches with Marx's concept of alienation, where human relationships are replaced by commodity exchanges. Thus, the capitalist economic system not only drives material prosperity but also profoundly shapes the urban way of life.

Though set a decade apart, the female protagonists in Sophie Kinsella's *Remember Me?* (2008) and *You Owe Me One* (2019) struggle with the anxieties of independence within London's capitalist urban spaces. Their experiences reveal not only the pressures of this environment, but also the internal conflicts that arise from the tension between a desire for self-reliance and the fear of its consequences. This demonstrates as a need for external support and reassurance, reflecting the characters' internalization of societal expectations. In *Remember Me?*, for instance, Lexie Smart's amnesia serves as a catalyst for revealing the isolating effects of her relentless pursuit of success. As she attempts to recover her memories, she confronts the reality of her ambition: a drive so intense that it has transformed her into a selfish and isolated figure, prioritizing career advancement over genuine human connection.

In *You Owe Me One*, Fixie Farr confronts the challenge of preserving her family store's traditions for the community, while her brother pressures her to modernize and compete with luxury retailers. Fixie faces a dilemma to maintain the store's traditional values of personal attention and affordability, or to prioritize profitability by catering to wealthy customers. This conflict escalates when she ponders exploiting her loved ones and a young man she admires to advance her goals. While both *Remember Me?* and *You Owe Me One*

demonstrate the inescapable dominance of capitalism in urban life, the protagonists employ contrasting methods to cope with exploitation and oppression. This depiction of London in both novels, as sites of both opportunity and exploitation, reveals the complex and often contradictory nature of modern city life. These urban settings in the novels are not merely backdrops, but active participants in the narrative, contributing to the novels' representation of urban spaces.

### **Research objective**

To study urban representations reflected through the urban experiences of female characters in Sophie Kinsella's *Remember me?* and *I Owe You One*.

### **Literature Review**

In *Urban Spaces and Representation in Literary Study*, Shi and Zhu (2018, p.3) examine how literature represents urban spaces, revealing a connection to modernity. They argue that literary depictions of cities reflect the complexities of modern experience, portraying cities as sites for the production and distribution of economic, cultural, and social goods. This positions urban spaces not merely as physical locations, but as dynamic environments crucial for modern human society. As literature evolved from pre-modernism through modernism to postmodernism, the representation of urban spaces transformed. Modernist literature explores themes of fragmented and isolating urban environments, echoing that modernity often results in alienation within large, impersonal cities. Each literary period presents unique views on urban life. For instance, modernist texts reflect the accidental nature of modern experiences, while postmodern literature often depicts cities as unstable and in constant flux, emphasizing the complexity of urban life (Shi & Zhu, 2018, p.4). Importantly, their study demonstrates that modern cities are not just spatial considerations, but dynamic spaces related to both cultural and economic growth.

In *Cinderella Syndrome of Working Women Characters in Cyber Literature*, Fatimah and Istiani (2021) examine the female protagonists in the Wattpad online chick lit novels, *Furious Boss & Naughty Secretary* and *Ex-lovers but Married*. The study reveals that despite being working women, the characters exhibit anxieties about self-reliance. Drawing on Colette Dowling's Cinderella complex, their study demonstrates how both characters, regardless of power or social status, desire rescue from their troubles. This complex is shown in several ways: a girl-child mentality, demonstrated by a childish protagonist in *Furious Boss & Naughty Secretary* and a reliance on others for guidance, particularly in marriage, in

*Ex-lovers but Married*; an 'achievement gap,' where one character is content as a husband's secretary and the other as a billionaire's wife, unlike her ambitious twin; 'helplessness,' shown in their inability to cope with male partners; and 'blind devotion,' where characters are devoted to or subdued by their husbands, even with inappropriate orders (Fatimah & Istiani, 2021, pp. 138-141). These findings suggest that even financially independent working women in online chick lit display the Cinderella complex, indicating that they remain constrained by traditional gender expectations.

Mazloomian et al. (2016)'s *Love Relationships and Identity Development in Selected Asian American Chick Lit* reveals the image of the cosmopolitan city that embraces cultural diversity provides opportunities for the female protagonists to resolve the conflicts between their ethnic cultures and American mainstream culture, and to successfully construct their gender and cultural identities. Based on the novels *Born Confused* and *The Dim Sum of All Things*, the findings show characters in chick lit adjust themselves to different cultural values and norms, later gaining self-acceptance (pp.163-167). Interactions with people around them also help the protagonists in the novels grow to the point where they recognize and accept their own identities. The protagonists in these novels are portrayed as working women who develop through experiences that reflect their self-pride and the changes in their lives. Both protagonists also receive help from male protagonists, eventually falling in love, and these relationships further support the female characters in accepting their identities. By the end of both novels, the female protagonists are able to understand their own desires with the support of their romantic partners, while the romantic relationships are reinforced by their adaptation to society as well.

Baykan (2014)'s *Women's Reading and Writing Practices: Exploring Chick Lit as a Site of Struggle in Popular Culture and Literature* explores chick lit's role in popular culture, its reception, and its impact on women's reading and writing. By examining how chick lit is produced, consumed, and received globally, Baykan (p.2) reveals its key traits and its differences from traditional romance. Drawing on theorists like Stuart Hall and John Fiske, the study discusses chick-lit's mixed reputation, acknowledging by some as empowering and by others as trivial. Instead of taking one side, Baykan examines the ongoing debates about the genre's popularity and its reflection of modern women's lives. Chick lit, typically featuring young, cosmopolitan women navigating urban landscapes, portrays the city as a space of challenges that shapes protagonists' identities. The genre reflects socio-cultural realities through themes of career ambition, romantic relationships, consumer culture, and

identity construction, all set within modern city life (pp. 4-6). Baykan emphasizes chick lit's contradictory nature, celebrating independence while critiquing social expectations, thus positioning it as a site of tension between empowerment and traditional norms in modernized urban spaces.

Agustina (2016)'s *How Chick-Lit Affects Women Through Romance Formula: A Study Case On Lauren Weisberger's Devil Wears Prada And Jane Green's* investigates the relationship between romantic relationships and the self-development of female protagonists in novels for women. The study is an example of how women's novels influence attitudes and ideas about self-improvement (pp.81-84), with this development being linked to romantic love in real life as well. Despite experiencing greater independence and freedom from gender norm in the city, the research findings show that these novels support women's desires for independence by portraying modern women's lives. They also encourage them to escape from the real world, as romantic feelings influence the way women shape their lives.

Unlike Mazloomian et al. (2016) and Agustina (2021)'s works, where female characters are interpreted as representatives of women who successfully negotiate the pressures of capitalism, understand their values, and achieve their desires, this study agrees with the findings of Baykan (2014), and Fatimah and Istiani (2021), which suggest that the female protagonists remain under the control of patriarchal values. This research explores how patriarchal values are intertwined with the dream-like and ghostly qualities of urban society. As patriarchal values that enforce traditional gender roles are seen as outdated and oppressive, contrasting with the rapid modernized city. However, the female characters reveal that urban society fosters backwardness and violence toward women. The city is portrayed as a haunted and ambiguous space, where modernization and tradition blur, and female characters are both participants and victims in a capitalist system that commodifies their bodies, relationships, and inspirations.

## **Research Methodology**

Pile's (2005) theory of phantasmagoria is employed to illustrate how female characters' urban experiences reflect the haunting and ambiguous nature of cities. In *Real Cities: modernity, space and the phantasmagorias of city life*, Pile focuses on the cities beyond being merely composed of concrete and steel. Cities are also spaces of intense emotional and psychological experience.

The term phantasmagoria implies many things. In some ways, it describes an experience of movement, of a procession of things before the eyes. In other ways, it invokes the importance not only of what can be seen, of the experience of the immediate, but also of life beyond the immediately visible or tangible. It suggests a quality of life that is ghost-like or dream-like. (p.3)

Pile defines phantasmagoria as the overwhelming mix of images, sensations, and experiences in urban society, which creates a dream-like and ghostly effect on city dwellers. Pile suggests that these dream-like qualities stem from the fluid, shifting, and often irrational nature of urban experiences. Cities evoke a sense of unreality, where the boundaries between fantasy and reality blur. Individual and collective dreams, desires, and fears shape urban life, making it necessary to move beyond rational or materialist perspectives to understand cities. Pile argues that emotions, fantasies, and the unconscious play a crucial role in shaping urban experiences. In modern cities, appearances can be deceiving, and the distinction between what is genuine and what is artificial becomes blurred (p.20).

Pile's concept of blurring the lines between reality and illusion is closely tied to the conditions of modernity, where rapid change, technological advancement, and social fragmentation contribute to the phantasmagoria of urban space. He also points out the allure of modern urban life, emphasizing how modernization generates feelings of confusion and uncertainty in the fast-paced and ever-changing city. Consumer culture and mass media further intensify this sense of phantasmagoria. Pile argues that capitalism fosters continuous development, making it difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion. Urban modernization does not necessarily create anything new; instead, it presents old commodities in a way that feels novel and unfamiliar. As a result, consuming these commodities does not bring city dwellers closer to realizing their desires or fulfilling their dreams (p.31).

While modernity represents progress and development aimed at the future, it also conceals the past, often associated with backwardness. Pile argues that cities are haunted by their histories, lost possibilities, and the presence of marginalized or invisible groups. This haunting quality also reflects the sense of impermanence and the transient nature of urban encounters (pp.131-132). The idea that cities hold memories, and that those memories create haunting qualities, resonates with Freud's theories about the unconscious and dream interpretation. Freud's analysis in *The Interpretation of Dreams* suggests that dreams, like urban spaces, are produced through condensation and displacement, making the original ideas unrecognizable to the dreamer (Freud, 1900, p.417 as cited in Pile, 2005, p.24). Similarly, in

the city, the new blends with the old, creating an environment where people cannot always distinguish whether what they see is truly new. This idea connects to Freud's concept of the uncanny, particularly the return of the repressed, in which suppressed elements resurface in an altered form (Freud, 1919, pp. 363-364 as cited in Pile, 2005, p.140).

Pile also refers to Gordon (1997, p.8 as cited in Pile, 2005, p.131), who argues that the past continues to affect and transform present reality. The old elements in a city, are repressed because they are seen as outdated and contrary to the progress, freedom, and equality. However, these values aren't entirely erased from urban life. Instead, they persist beneath the surface, waiting to resurface, as they are never fully separated from modern society but are replaced or disguised by new forms in the city.

In summary, Pile's concept of phantasmagoria illustrates how modernized urban spaces creates a blend of illusion and reality, where individuals struggle with an environment that is both fascinating and unsettling. This idea can be extended to examine how capitalism and patriarchal values shape urban life, reinforcing systems of oppression that dictate gender norms and limit individual freedom.

### **Data collection and analysis**

This qualitative research uses textual analysis as a method. The procedures include the following steps:

1. Related literature in the following topics was studied:
  - 1.1 Phantasmagoria
  - 1.2 Chick lit and urban spaces
2. The representations of urban spaces are analyzed using phantasmagoria as a framework.
3. Discussion and conclusion of the findings were drawn.

### **Findings**

#### **1. The Ambiguity of Urban Spaces: Exploring Capitalism and Consumerism in Constructing a Dream-like City**

Pile (2005, p.17)'s concept of phantasmagoria shows how dream-like urban experiences are tied to modernization, shaped by personal and shared desires, and fears. Cities can evoke a sense of unreality, where boundaries between fantasy and reality blur. In both of

Sophie Kinsella's novels, London, as a modernized capitalist metropolis, is powerfully dominated by the phantasmagoria, influencing people's inspirations and anxieties. Consequently, the drive for economic advancement fuels a culture of intense competition, where competence is equated with the ability to surpass others, particularly for women who must prove their competitiveness.

In Sophie Kinsella's *Remember Me?*, Lexie embodies this dynamic. Her success, marked by material symbols and consumption, attracts both employers and her husband. However, after a car accident, Lexie discovers a disconnect between her perceived self and her ambitious actions.

‘Why on earth did I go on a show like that?’

‘To be the boss?’ Amy shrugs. ‘To get ahead. That’s when you had your teeth and hair done, too, to look good on TV.’

‘But I am not ambitious. I mean, I’m not that ambitious...’

‘Are you kidding?’ Amy opens her eye wide.

‘You are like, the most ambitious person in the world. ‘As soon as your boss resigned you went for his job. All the bigwigs at your company had seen you on telly and they were all impressed. So they gave it to you. (Kinsella, 2008, p. 57)

As Amy reveals, 'You are like, the most ambitious person in the world,' highlighting how Lexie's pursuit of success, including her appearance and reality show participation, led to her rapid promotion. Lexie's luxurious office and penthouse, along with her high-tech apartment, further illustrate how modern urban life links personal fulfillment to outward displays of success through consumerism, reinforcing the phantasmagoric experience.

Lexie's surprise at her own past actions underscores the illusory nature of this experience. Before her accident, she was driven by ambition, yet she didn't recognize it as such. This disconnect between her perceived self and her actions reflects the dream-like quality of urban life, where desires and social pressures intertwine to create a reality that is both compelling and deceptive. Upon learning of her achievements, defined by wealth and social status, Lexie initially feels a sense of fulfillment, a dream come true. This reaction demonstrates how deeply ingrained the values of material success and competition are within the phantasmagoria of London, shaping individual inspirations and perceptions.

While the female protagonist, Fixie, in *I Owe You One* doesn't live in a luxurious apartment and only helps her mother run the family shop, she is surrounded by the dream-like and illusory qualities of modern London. Her brother, Jake, is very successful, excelling in business deals, attending global seminars, and pursuing an MBA to connect with high-end customers. His vision for renovating the shop reflects a desire to transform it into a symbol of this inspirational lifestyle, moving away from serving the local community to attracting big spenders and cosmopolitan London.

London is full of glamorous, rich, international spenders,' Jake says, almost fiercely. 'Financers. Lawyers. Hedges. Why aren't they Fars?'

'Actually, Venessa's a High Court judge,' I tell him, but he is not listening.

'We need to move with the times,' he says tetchily. 'London is the city of international playboy. That's who we need to attract.' International playboys?

I don't know what to say. I have a sudden vision of a line of international playboys in Dolce & Gabbana suits browsing our saucepans and bite my lip.

'We need to be forward-thinking,' Jake is declaiming. 'We need to turn ourselves around.' (Kinsella, 2019, p.153)

Jake's perspective, as illustrated in his conversation with Fixie, reveals the city's pull towards materialistic values and the pursuit of a glamorous image. His remark, 'London is full of glamorous, rich, international spenders', dismisses Fixie's attempts to ground him. His desire to attract 'international playboys' with a 'forward-thinking' approach reflects the dream-like quality of this vision, where the shop is reimagined as a stage for high-end consumption. This reflects the capitalist drive to stimulate spending and resonates with modern images of success.

This phantasmagoria extends beyond Jake's ambitions to other characters, such as Fixie's sister, Nicole. Nicole's reliance on consumerism to manage her emotions and her superficial pursuit of 'compassion' through material indulgence reveal the illusory nature of urban spaces. This is vividly illustrated in a conversation between Nicole and Fixie, while Nicole styles Fixie's hair.

'Compassion is about yourself,' Nicole continues wisely, 'It's about your journey. It's about: what is your light and how do you make it shine?'

‘Right,’ I say, slightly baffled. ‘I was just thinking that some of our older customers might be a bit lonely...’

Nicole isn’t listening, I realize.

‘Compassion is actually very much a Buddhist concept,’ she informs me, plugging in the curling wand. ‘If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete, that’s a quote from Buddha. You should get into Buddhism. Fixie. It is like...’ I wait for her to tell me what it’s like, then realize she’s finished. (Kinsella, 2019, p.58)

The conversation reveals how Nicole's adoption of a compassionate philosophy serves primarily to justify her self-indulgence. Her focus on ‘shining her light’ and prioritizing her own journey reflects the individualistic values prevalent in the phantasmagoric landscape of modern London. While she projects an image of spiritual depth, her actions betray a superficiality that matches with the consumer-driven culture of the city. Additionally, Nicole, with her beauty, attracts male attention and projects her image of success through her constant posting of lifestyle photos. This behavior, crafting a desirable online persona through lifestyle photos, reflects how she uses social media to construct identity and project success. This further emphasizes the connection between outward appearances, consumer culture, and the construction of a desirable self within the phantasmagoric landscape of London, corresponding with how the city promotes certain lifestyles and gender roles through the display of consumer goods.

The ambiguous nature of modern urban spaces, as seen in *Remember Me?* and *I Owe You One*, is portrayed by both protagonists embracing materialistic values and consumer culture. In urban society, capitalism transforms dreams into commodities. As a result, people in the city consume products to get closer to their dreams. The influence of capitalism gives consumer goods a central role in people's lives, with desires being replaced by commodities. While the consumption of goods is seen as fulfilling desires or making dreams come true, it paradoxically becomes a barrier to recognizing genuine desires. This is because people can only consume desires that have already been commodified. In other words, their desires are limited to the products that have been manufactured. Furthermore, they can only become aware of reality when it is something tangible. The protagonists in the novels, therefore, demonstrate the ambiguous nature of a city where progress is driven by capitalism and

consumer culture, tricking and deceiving people into consuming products, despite the fact that these products don't fulfill their dreams.

## 2. Haunted Urban Spaces: Capitalist Exploitation of Patriarchal Legacies

Building upon Pile (2005, p.131)'s argument that cities are haunted by their pasts, lost possibilities, and the marginalized, this analysis explores how these ghostly qualities manifest in modern urban spaces. In addition to the impermanence of urban encounters, capitalism contributes to this haunting by reducing human relationships to transactional exchanges (Simmel, 1903, p.33 as cited in Pile, 2005, p.17). This illusion of progress, particularly in capitalist urban spaces, masks exploitation, where the drive for success and status can lead to a metaphorical consumption of others. The capitalism exploitation, combined with the normalization of violence, traps female protagonists in cycles of dependency and self-doubt, hindering their pursuit of independence.

The notion of lost possibilities is particularly relevant. Both economic and patriarchal systems have suppressed full equality and the realization of women's potential, creating a lingering sense of haunting in contemporary society. Patriarchal norms continue to prioritize men's needs while marginalizing women. Even today, gender inequalities persist. Patriarchal values remain entrenched in social norms and institutional practices, rendering women's labor, both paid and unpaid, largely invisible (Frazer, 2022, pp.9-10).

Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny further demonstrates this phenomenon, describing the unsettling return of what was once thought to be repressed or eradicated. Just as the uncanny evokes the familiarity of something that should have remained hidden, patriarchal values, assumed to have faded in modernized urban spaces, resurface in new forms. This persistent presence, disguised within the structures of capitalism and modernization, reveals how patriarchal control continues to shape urban life, making its return all the more insidious. These themes of exploitation, lost possibilities, and the uncanny will be explored in the novels to reveal the ambiguous nature of modern urban space.

In *Remember Me?*, Lexie's ascent to an executive position reveals a disturbing transformation. She learns to exploit her co-workers for the company's increasing profit, becoming what her subordinates describe as 'a bitch from hell.' This behavior severs her once-close friendships.

'Lexi, nothing happened.' Fi sounds awkward. It's just...we don't really hang out with you any more. We are not mates.'

‘But why not?’ My heart is thudding but I’m trying to stay calm. ‘Is this because I’m the boss now?’

‘It’s not because you’re the boss. That wouldn’t matter if you were---’ Fi breaks off. She shoves her hands in her pockets, not meeting my eye. ‘If I’m honest, it’s because you’re a bit of a...’

‘What?’ I’m looking from face to face in bewilderment. ‘Tell me!’

Fi shrugs. ‘Snotty cow.’

‘Total bitch-boss-from-hell, more like,’ mutters Carolyn.

‘I...I don’t understand,’ I stammer at last. ‘Aren’t I a good boss?’

‘Oh, you’re great. Carolyn’s voice drips with sarcasm. ‘You penalize us if we’re late. You time our lunch hours, you do spot checks on our expense... oh, it’s a bundle of fun in Flooring. (Kinsella, 2008, p. 138).

The ensuing confrontation reveals the extent of Lexie’s transformation, with colleagues labeling her a ‘snotty cow’ and a ‘total bitch-boss-from-hell.’ Carolyn’s sarcastic description of Lexie’s management style—penalizing lateness, timing lunch hours, and scrutinizing expenses—underscores the dehumanizing effect of her actions. In this context, Lexie’s pursuit of success becomes a form of metaphorical consumption, where she ‘consumes’ her colleagues’ goodwill and personal relationships for professional gain.

Similarly, in *I Owe You One*, Fixie’s feelings of inferiority render her powerless against her siblings’ capitalist ambitions. When her brother proposes transforming the family store into a purveyor of luxury goods, or when her sister prioritizes self-indulgent yoga over promised baking lessons, Fixie remains silent. Though she recognizes the flaws in their plans—her brother’s ignorance of their customer base and her sister’s self-absorption—she cannot bring herself to oppose them. Here, the metaphorical consumption manifests as the erosion of Fixie’s agency. Her siblings ‘consume’ her voice and her ability to influence their decisions, prioritizing their own desires over her concerns and the family’s legacy.

These protagonists embody the metaphorical consumption inherent in modern capitalist cities. Lexie’s transformation demonstrates how the pursuit of professional success can devour personal relationships, while Fixie’s passivity illustrates how familial bonds can be exploited for individual gain. The transactional nature of these interactions, where human relationships are reduced to means of advancement, echoes a primitive form of social

exchange. This resurgence of a 'primitive' dynamic within the supposedly advanced context of modernized London reveals a disturbing backwardness. The city, despite its veneer of progress, perpetuates a social Darwinist struggle, where individuals 'consume' one another in a relentless pursuit of status and success, echoing the brutal dynamics of earlier, less civilized eras.

Despite previous discussion, urban spaces are products of a complex interplay between the new and the old, the cities are often perceived as stronghold of gender equality, they continue to exert subtle control over women's autonomy. Similarly, in dreams, elements from the dreamer's subconscious are condensed and displaced, rendering the original ideas unrecognizable. Urban development not only creates an illusion of progress but also conceals the persistence of traditional gender expectations. The female protagonists in both novels inhabit spaces that superficially promote autonomy and empowerment, yet subtly impose restrictive norms that shape their identities and choices. This paradox, the coexistence of progress and oppression, illustrates the intricate nature of gender dynamics in urban society, revealing how deeply embedded patriarchal values persist beneath the veneer of liberation. This phantasmagoric quality of urban life, shaped by modernization, influences not only people's perceptions but also the dynamics of control over gender and women's roles. In the modern city, traditional forms of gender control have evolved into less overt, yet equally potent, methods.

Lexie, in *Remember Me?*, exemplifies this subtle control. Despite her professional success, she hesitates to assert her own desires. When faced with the prospect of job losses in her department, she struggles with self-doubt and fears confronting male executives. Similarly, she avoids confronting her husband about their emotionally distant marriage, even when he treats her with transactional detachment—sending her bills for damaged furniture or relying on a guidebook to instruct her on wifely behavior. Her anxiety about divorce reveals her lingering dependence and fear of asserting her independence.

Fixie, in *I Owe You One*, becomes a victim of both familial and romantic exploitation. Her naivety and deference to her siblings' perceived superiority silence her own opinions.

'I have opinions. I have ideas. I really do. When I'm managing the store alone- or alongside Mum- I can tell people what to do.

I can assert myself. But around Jake, and even sometimes Nicole,

I think twice before I venture my thoughts.' (Kinsella, 2019, p. 207)

This pattern extends to her romantic relationship with Ryan, where she prioritizes his needs over her own, even enlisting Sebastian's help to secure him a job. This willingness to sacrifice her own aspirations reflects the enduring influence of traditional gender roles, which prescribe selflessness and subservience for women.

Additionally, Fixie's adherence to her late father's motto and her efforts to maintain the family shop as he did highlight the persistence of patriarchal legacies. Her mother's continued deference to her father's memory reinforces the idea of male authority, casting Fixie in his shadow. The shop's decline during her mother's absence forces Fixie to confront the limitations of this legacy and ultimately assert her own agency, as her name suggests. This journey reveals the uncanny return of repressed patriarchal norms, disguised within the seemingly progressive context of modern urban life.

Family first, runs through my mind. Family bloody first. I'm not saying Dad was wrong. I'll never say that, but maybe I'm starting to see 'family' differently. It's not just the people you share genres with, it's the people you share loyalty and friendship and respect with. It's the people you love. (Kinsella, 2019, p. 343)

As Fixie struggles with the shop's crisis, she reflects on her father's guiding principle. This reminiscence, triggered by the shop's dire situation, her brother's disruptive management and the threatened departure of a loyal staff member, reveals Fixie's internal conflict. She recognizes that strictly adhering to her father's motto would mean passively allowing her brother's actions and the staff member's resignation, potentially leading to the loss of both loyal staff and regular customers. While she adapts her father's motto to her own understanding, this adaptation still occurs within the framework he established, demonstrating his enduring influence.

This pattern of patriarchal influence persists until the novel's conclusion. When her mother, brother, and sister collectively agree that Fixie should manage the family shop, they symbolically place her in her father's chair at the dining table. This gesture, while seemingly supportive, underscores Fixie's inability to fully escape her father's shadow, representing the continued presence of patriarchal power. Despite her growing agency, she remains bound by the tradition he established, illustrating the uncanny persistence of patriarchal norms in modern urban life.

Both characters suffer from a fear of self-reliance. Lexie sees herself as a Cinderella figure, relying on a 'prince' to rescue her, especially when work becomes too competitive.

She consoles herself with the belief that her husband, who loves her, will always stand by her. Similarly, Fixie fears trusting her own judgment. She feels inferior to her siblings and lacks confidence after her failed catering business, where unpaid bills ruined her chances of success. Even after she fixes the store's problems and gains confidence, it is with the help of a male character. Despite inheriting the shop from her father, she continues to run it under his influence. The final scene, where she sits in her father's chair at the dinner table, suggests she remains bound by male dominance. Although she takes over the shop, it is in her father's place and according to his ways.

The lives of these female characters in the urban space link to Freud's concept of the uncanny, particularly the return of the repressed, where what has been replaced returns in an altered form. Patriarchal values, much like regressive behaviors within a modern city, are repressed. This repression manifests in the way female characters, such as Lexie and Fixie, cope with capitalist exploitation, as they manage their personal and professional struggles within a modern city. On the surface, these women appear to enjoy autonomy, freedom, and modernity, yet patriarchal norms continue to shape their choices and limit their independence.

## Conclusion

As portrayed in both novels, cities are not merely physical locations but psychological landscapes. Pressured by capitalist demands and haunted by patriarchal values, the female protagonists exhibit anxiety regarding self-reliance, where independence becomes a source of fear rather than empowerment. Despite working and living in modern cities, they remain psychologically bound to traditional expectations that link security with dependence on male figures or social norms. This internal conflict mirrors the contradictions inherent in the city itself. Urban spaces promise progress and individual freedom, yet remain deeply entangled in outdated gender norms.

The female protagonists, living amidst modernized London, encounter gender bias rooted in patriarchal values. These values, perceived as antiquated, are initially unfamiliar to the characters, who are led to believe they are free and independent. However, they soon find themselves haunted by these lingering norms. Additionally, the protagonists' mentality, shaped by the competitive environment of the modernized city, reflects the cruelty of human interactions within urban society. This cruelty is symbolized by the metaphor of consumption, representing how individuals metaphorically consume one another in the pursuit of success, status, and personal gain. Consequently, the characters, haunted by patriarchal values and pressured by capitalist demands, seek security through dependence on men.

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