

EVOLVING FEMININITIES IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH CHICK-LIT: THREE STAGES OF GENRE DEVELOPMENT (1996–2025)

ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ФЕМІННОСТІ В АНГЛІЙСЬКОМУ ТА ФРАНЦУЗЬКОМУ ЧИК-ЛІТІ: ТРИ ЕТАПИ РОЗВИТКУ ЖАНРУ (1996–2025)

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From the late 1990s to the 2020s, English and French chick-lit changed in step with new social roles and expectations of women. Its history can be traced through three main stages: the years of formation (1996–2007), the years of reflection (2008–2016), and the period of renewal (2017–2025). Each stage shows a different tone and way of speaking about women's experience, moving from irony and humour to sincerity and emotional awareness. The first stage, formed by *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, and similar novels, presents humour and self-irony as a means of coping with the demands of urban life. The second stage, shaped by *Me Before You* and *You Had Me at Hello*, replaces consumer optimism with reflection, empathy, and moral choice. The most recent stage, marked by *The Switch*, *Book Lovers*, and *Love Your Life*, combines popular narrative forms with emotional sincerity and ethical attention.

The French tradition follows the same line of transformation but moves towards calmness, stability, and collective values. Early translations of English novels prepared the ground for national versions of the genre created by Virginie Grimaldi, Aurélie Valognes, and Agnès Martin-Lugand. Their prose turns irony into kindness and transforms romantic plots into stories of care, understanding, and everyday balance.

The research applies comparative literary, cultural, and gender analysis. The results show that *chick-lit* evolves from depictions of self-irony and consumption to emotionally centred fiction that values sincerity, moral awareness, and emotional maturity. The genre, while keeping its accessible form, has become a way of expressing human connection and ethical sensibility in modern culture.

Key words: chick-lit, femininity, English literature, French literature, post-feminism.

Від кінця 1990-х до 2020-х років англійська та французька chick-lit розвивалися у тісному зв'язку із соціальними трансформаціями, змінами у сприйнятті жіночої ролі та культурними очікуваннями. Її еволюцію можна простежити у трьох етапах: становлення (1996–2007), осмислення (2008–2016) та оновлення (2017–2025). Кожен із них демонструє поступовий перехід від іронії та самоіронії до емоційної відвертості, моральної рефлексії та пошуку внутрішньої рівноваги.

Перший етап, представлений романами *Bridget Jones's Diary* Г. Філдінґ і *Confessions of a Shopaholic* С. Кінселли, характеризується поєднанням гумору та самоіронії як способу долати тиск кар'єрного й особистого життя. На другому етапі (*Me Before You* Дж. Мойєс, *You Had Me at Hello* М. Макфарлейн) жанр набуває рис психологічної прози: у центрі постають емпатія, відповідальність, моральний вибір. Третій, гібридний період (*The Switch*, *Book Lovers*, *Love Your Life*) відзначається поєднанням розважальності з етичним осмисленням буденності, увагою до почуттів, турботи й самопізнання.

Французька традиція пройшла подібний шлях, але схилилася до спокійнішої тональності та колективних цінностей. Переклади англійських романів підготували ґрунт для національних версій у творчості В. Грімальді, О. Валонь та А. Мартен-Люган. Їхня проза перетворює іронію на доброзичливість, а любовні сюжети – на історії морального зростання, гармонії й ширості.

Дослідження спирається на порівняльний літературознавчий, культурологічний і гендерний підходи. Результати свідчать, що chick-lit еволюціонує від іронічної репрезентації споживацької культури до емоційно орієнтованої прози, у центрі якої – щирість, етична свідомість та нове розуміння жіночої суб'єктності. Таким чином, жанр зберігає свою доступність, водночас стаючи формою художнього осмислення сучасних цінностей і людських взаємин.

Ключова слова: chick-lit, фемінність, англійська література, французька література, постфемінізм.

Introduction. The growing popularity of chick-lit at the end of the twentieth century reflects deep social and cultural changes in the perception of the modern woman. Since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding [6], contemporary prose has often turned to the image of a young educated woman who tries to combine work, independence, and personal life. Humour, self-irony, and the

language of everyday speech gave these novels a new tone and helped authors speak more directly about social experience and personal choice.

The genre developed rapidly in English literature and soon found its way into the French book market. Early translations of Sophie Kinsella's and Marian Keyes's novels made chick-lit familiar to a French readership that later produced its own versions of

this form. French writers such as Virginie Grimaldi, Aurélie Valognes, and Agnès Abécassis continued the dialogue between humour and sincerity, replacing irony with emotional warmth and moral reflection. Thus, two literary traditions, English and French, began to represent different ways of interpreting the same phenomenon: the search for femininity in the post-feminist world.

The aim of this article is to describe the development of chick-lit in both traditions through three main stages – 1996–2007, 2008–2016, and 2017–2025 – and to show how changes in cultural context are reflected in the representation of women's experience. The study is theoretical and comparative. It traces how the themes and narrative style evolve from humorous depictions of daily consumption to sincere reflections on emotions, human relationships, and moral choices.

The article provides an overview of the main research approaches to chick-lit, a description of its periodization, and an interpretation of the most typical features of each stage in the English and French traditions. The proposed model helps to view the genre not as a fixed formula but as an evolving literary and cultural system that mirrors the changing ideals of femininity.

Literature review. The study of chick-lit has become a significant part of contemporary gender-oriented literary research. Early works describe this fiction as a response to the social situation of young professional women at the turn of the millennium. S. Ferriss and M. Young [5] define chick-lit as a narrative form that combines humour, self-reflection, and a realistic portrayal of everyday life. Whelehan [22] emphasises that the main female characters of chick-lit belong to a new social generation. They are educated and independent, they work, make their own decisions, and try to build a private life on their own terms. At the same time, their personal experience shows that freedom does not always protect from emotional tension and social expectations. This mixture of success and uncertainty becomes one of the most typical features of the genre.

The ideological background of the genre has been analysed in the works of R. Gill [8] and A. McRobbie [16], who connect chick-lit with the discourse of post-feminism and consumerism. R. Gill [8] and A. McRobbie [16] note that the heroines of these novels act according to the ideals of personal freedom and self-development. They try to build their lives through work, learning, and emotional experience. However, the stories also show that such independence has its limits: social approval and financial stability still remain important conditions for success and self-

respect. Later research [18; 7] highlights the coexistence of irony and sincerity as the primary stylistic feature of the genre, which enables authors to address serious social issues in a lighthearted narrative form.

French literary criticism interprets chick-lit through the prism of cultural adaptation. According to M. Dambre [3], its translation and reception in France were connected with the growing popularity of women's commercial fiction, which had to find its own tone to appeal to French readers. J. Bessière [2] and Grimaldi [9; 10] draw attention to the fact that *le roman feel-good* gradually formed in France as a continuation of women's popular prose. In their view, these novels differ from the English pattern by a calmer tone and a stronger focus on moral values and emotional comfort. The stories often focus on simple acts of kindness, mutual understanding, and the wish to live in peace with others. They replace the theme of social ambition with attention to daily feelings and moral choices. French writers speak about ordinary life directly and without irony, emphasising that happiness may begin with mutual help and small but sincere changes. In this way, the same literary pattern assumes a different meaning, shaped by the national tradition and cultural environment.

Modern feminist criticism recognises chick-lit as an evolving discourse rather than a stable genre. It reflects how literature reacts to social change and how new cultural models of femininity appear in fiction. The research of S. Ahmed [1] and M. Evans [4] focuses on the "affective turn" in contemporary literature, where emotions become a form of knowledge and communication. In this respect, the movement from irony to sincerity and from material success to emotional awareness defines not only the development of chick-lit but also broader tendencies in women's writing of the twenty-first century.

Despite a wide range of studies, certain aspects remain insufficiently explored. The comparative evolution of English and French chick-lit over three decades has not yet been systematically described. Previous works usually focus on one linguistic or cultural tradition and analyse isolated themes or authors. There is still a lack of an integrated model that connects historical, ideological, and stylistic changes within a single framework. The present article aims to fill this gap by proposing a three-stage periodisation of chick-lit development and by outlining the key tendencies that determine its transformation from ironic narratives of consumption to emotionally oriented fiction based on sincerity and ethical choice.

Methodology. The article is theoretical and comparative in nature. The study is based on the method of comparative literary analysis supported by ele-

ments of cultural and gender interpretation. Each period – 1996–2007, 2008–2016, and 2017–2025 – is viewed as a separate stage in which the themes, tone, and narrative strategy of the novels undergo visible transformation. The analysis focuses on how authors depict female experience, everyday reality, and emotional values under changing social conditions.

The material of the study includes well-known novels representing the most typical tendencies of each tradition. For the English corpus, these are works by Helen Fielding, Sophie Kinsella, Marian Keyes, and Beth O'Leary. The French part includes novels by Virginie Grimaldi, Aurélie Valognes, and Agnès Abécassis. The choice of writers is determined by their influence on the formation of national variants of the genre and their wide readership, which allows us to consider the texts as cultural indicators rather than individual artistic experiments.

The research employs a combination of chronological, thematic, and descriptive approaches. Each period is analysed through its dominant themes, the typical image of the heroine, and the narrative tone. The first stage is associated with irony and self-observation; the second with emotional balance and domestic focus; the third with sincerity and ethical awareness. Such division enables the genre to be presented as a dynamic system that reflects changes in society and in the perception of femininity.

The three stages of genre development. The Genesis Period (1996–2007). The first decade of chick-lit formation is associated with the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding [6], which established the tone and narrative structure of the genre. The heroine speaks about her life in the first person, openly records her doubts, and uses humour as a means of self-protection. The world of these novels is the urban middle class with its rhythm of work, friendship, and endless self-improvement. The language is simple and expressive, closely resembling everyday speech, and the diary form further enhances the illusion of authenticity.

English writers such as Sophie Kinsella, Marian Keyes, and Meg Cabot further developed this model. Their heroines are active, ironic, and self-critical; they strive to find a balance between their career and private life. The narrative voice combines comedy with emotional sincerity, creating a tone that became a hallmark of early chick-lit. This period reflects the optimism of the late 1990s, a belief that social success and personal happiness can be achieved through individual effort. As I. Whelehan [21] and S. Genz [7] observe, this optimism is part of a wider post-feminist culture that links self-confidence with consumption and independence.

The early form of chick-lit is most clearly seen in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* [6], Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* [13], and Marian Keyes's *Watermelon* [12]. These novels portray a young professional woman who struggles to balance her life between work, friends, and romantic expectations. Humour in these novels comes from ordinary situations: work, family conversations, small misunderstandings – not from big dramatic events. Irony helps the heroines to cope with uncertainty and to keep emotional distance. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the diary form turns daily experience into a personal record of doubts and small victories. The heroine writes about her appearance, job, and relationships with the same mixture of anxiety and self-mockery that many readers recognise from real life. Kinsella's fiction links self-irony with consumer culture: the heroine measures her identity through what she buys and later questions this habit. Keyes's stories combine comedy with compassion and family conflict, widening the emotional range of the genre. Together, these writers established the language and tone that defined chick-lit at its beginning – a mixture of humour, self-reflection, and belief in personal improvement.

In France, readers first met this type of novel through the translations of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. The books presented a light and humorous view of women's everyday life and were quickly noticed by publishers. Critics, however, treated the new form with caution and preferred to speak about its commercial rather than artistic value [3]. These translations attracted steady attention to the new kind of women's fiction and created interest in stories written about ordinary life. Within a few years, French writers began to use this pattern in their own way, keeping its humour but softening its tone. In this sense, the early stage of the genre shows both the birth of a new female voice and the first signs of its adaptation to another cultural setting.

The Transitional Period (2008–2016). After 2008, chick-lit entered a new stage of development. The years of economic uncertainty affected everyday life and changed how writers spoke about women's experience. The cheerful tone of the early novels became quieter and more reflective. Instead of stories about success and consumption, authors began to describe emotions, trust, and ordinary human relations.

After 2010, the new direction of chick-lit becomes more distinct. In *Me Before You* [17], the light romantic plot develops into a reflection on moral responsibility and the value of care. The story shows how love can involve choice, sacrifice, and growth, not only emotion. The heroine's independence is tested

by the need to understand another person's pain, and humour appears in quiet details of daily life rather than in parody. Mhairi McFarlane's *You Had Me at Hello* [15] turns to similar questions. The novel tells about people who meet again after years of separation and have to face what has changed in themselves. Everyday speech, hesitation, and self-irony help the characters to express feelings without sentimentality. Both writers keep the rhythm and recognisable tone of chick-lit but use it to speak about emotional maturity and trust.

Negra and Tasker (2014) note that post-feminist culture at this stage began to question the ideals of autonomy and self-confidence that had shaped earlier works. The heroines of chick-lit still value independence, but they understand that comfort and career achievements do not always lead to happiness. The idea of continuous self-improvement loses its appeal, and emotional honesty becomes central to the narrative.

In English literature, this tendency appears in the novels of Jojo Moyes, Beth O'Leary, and Mhairi McFarlane. Their stories keep the humour typical of the genre but focus on empathy and psychological growth. The heroines learn to face uncertainty, accept their feelings, and build relationships based on equality. The narrative techniques also change: in addition to diary entries, writers use alternating viewpoints and dialogues that reveal different sides of experience. The style becomes more flexible, and the tone of entertainment turns into quiet reflection.

Writers now pay closer attention to emotion as part of human communication. S. Ahmed [1] and S. Genz [7] describe this cultural shift as an "affective turn," when feelings are recognised as a natural form of knowledge. In the novels of this period, emotions are shown as part of everyday behaviour rather than as signs of weakness. The texts stay within popular culture but display greater psychological detail and sincerity. In Moyes's fiction, for instance, love and care replace shopping and irony as key metaphors of self-definition.

In France, chick-lit develops its own character in the prose of Virginie Grimaldi, Aurélie Valognes, and Agnès Abécassis. These writers move away from direct humour and focus on moral balance and emotional warmth. According to J. Bessière [2] and M. Dambre [3], French readers often prefer stories that emphasise kindness and understanding in daily life. The heroines are more thoughtful and emotionally stable. The action takes place in familiar settings: at home, within the family, or among friends, where sincerity and support matter more than social success.

This period shows a movement from the external to the internal, from self-presentation and irony to reflection and empathy. Chick-lit evolves into a means of exploring emotion and responsibility, retaining its popular form while adapting to new cultural realities.

The Hybrid Period (2017–2025). The last stage in the development of chick-lit is connected with the rise of digital publishing and new forms of feminist reflection after 2017. The social context changes: the discussion of gender equality, emotional well-being, and everyday ethics becomes more open. The tone of the novels written after 2017 becomes quieter and more personal. The humour of the earlier books remains, but it is softened by sincerity and attention to feeling. Irony no longer dominates the narrative. Writers describe everyday life through understanding and care, showing how people support one another and look for meaning in simple things.

In English literature, these tendencies can be traced in the novels of Beth O'Leary, Emily Henry, and Sophie Kinsella's later works. In *The Switch* [19] the story contrasts two generations of women who change their lives by exchanging roles, combining humour with quiet realism. In *Book Lovers* [11], the story of two editors turns the romantic plot into a reflection on work, ambition, and attachment. Success is shown not as a barrier to feeling but as a part of personal identity. The same quiet tone appears in Kinsella's *Love Your Life*), where humour is mixed with patience and everyday compromise. Both writers convey affection through simple details and daily routines, avoiding exaggeration and moralizing. The heroines of these novels still seek balance between work and personal life, yet they act with more self-knowledge and less dependence on external approval.

The hybrid quality of this stage appears in the coexistence of popular entertainment and moral reflection. In *Book Lovers* [11] the story unfolds in a small publishing world where work and affection are part of the same daily routine. The main characters learn to keep both career and feeling in balance. The tone is calm, and humour grows from simple conversations and quiet observation. In *Love Your Life* by Kinsella the plot contrasts imagined love with everyday experience. The writer keeps her usual lightness but adds more attention to compromise and emotional detail. Humour becomes calmer and more thoughtful, and small scenes of daily routine replace exaggerated situations. The private world of the heroine connects with broader questions of social respect, mental health, and ethical choice.

In France, chick-lit merges with what critics call *le roman feel-good*, which dominates the market of

women's prose in the 2020s. The novels of Virginie Grimaldi, Aurélie Valognes, and Agnès Martin-Lugand [14] preserve the clarity and optimism of popular fiction but treat them with greater seriousness. Grimaldi's *Et que ne durent que les moments doux* [10] and Valognes's *L'envol* [20] portray heroines who overcome loss, loneliness, or family conflict through empathy and solidarity. Their humour is gentle, their tone emotional but never sentimental. The narrative world is defined by care for others and by gratitude for small joys of daily life.

This final period shows that chick-lit has evolved from a social commentary on women's independence into a literature of emotional ethics. The English and French traditions move in parallel directions, combining humour with sincerity and turning personal experience into a space of understanding. In this form, chick-lit preserves its accessibility while achieving a new depth that links entertainment with reflection.

The development of chick-lit in English and French literature can be seen as a gradual shift in tone, theme, and moral orientation. Each stage reflects a specific cultural background and a new model of femininity. The periodization below illustrates the evolution of the genre from ironic urban stories to emotionally centered fiction that prioritizes care, sincerity, and balance.

The table summarises the main tendencies described in the three stages. The formation of the genre in the late 1990s brought humour and self-irony into women's prose. The transitional stage replaced irony with reflection and empathy, while the hybrid period of the 2020s united entertainment with moral attention and emotional depth. Together, these tendencies illustrate how chick-lit moved from depicting social ambition to exploring ethical and emotional self-understanding.

Conclusions. The study shows that chick-lit, originally created as a light and humorous form of women's fiction, has developed into a flexible mode of cultural reflection. In both English and French traditions, it keeps the balance between popular form and social meaning. The English version follows a movement from irony and consumer optimism to sincerity and emotional realism. The French version builds its identity on moral calmness, domestic values, and collective sympathy.

The comparison of three stages demonstrates that the evolution of chick-lit mirrors the broader change in post-feminist culture from external success to inner awareness. The heroines of the later novels seek not recognition but understanding, not material comfort but emotional stability. The genre still speaks to a large audience but has changed its inner direction. The stories are no longer only about success or romance. They focus on understanding, care, and the value of simple experience. Chick-lit keeps its accessibility and becomes a part of modern prose that describes everyday feeling and quiet reflection.

Perspectives for future research. Further research may continue the comparative study of English and French chick-lit by focusing on its linguistic and pragmatic dimensions. One possible direction is the analysis of lexical and pragmatic profiles of femininity and consumption in the novels of different periods. Such work could reveal how language encodes values, emotions, and social expectations associated with modern womanhood.

It would also be helpful to trace the transformation of humour and self-irony into empathy and moral reflection, linking the stylistic features of the texts with their cultural context.

Table 1

Stages in the Development of English and French Chick-Lit (1996–2025)

Period	Cultural and literary context	Main themes and tone	Representative writers and novels
1996–2007 – The Genesis Period	Rise of <i>chick-lit</i> after <i>Bridget Jones's Diary</i> (1996); formation of post-feminist values and urban female identity.	Humour, self-irony, everyday life, consumption, search for balance between work and love.	H. Fielding – <i>Bridget Jones's Diary</i> ; S. Kinsella – <i>Confessions of a Shopaholic</i> ; M. Keyes – <i>Watermelon</i> ; early French translations.
2008–2016 – The Transitional Period	Impact of the financial crisis and cultural fatigue with consumerism; growing interest in emotion and empathy.	Reflection, emotional realism, moral choice, family and friendship, ethical awareness.	J. Moyes – <i>Me Before You</i> ; M. McFarlane – <i>You Had Me at Hello</i> ; B. O'Leary – <i>The Flatshare</i> (draft period); V. Grimaldi – <i>Le premier jour du reste de ma vie</i> ; A. Valognes – <i>Mémé dans les orties</i> .
2017–2025 – The Hybrid Period	Digital publishing, new feminism, and post-#MeToo discourse; merging of popular fiction and ethical reflection.	Sincerity, emotional maturity, solidarity, care, inner stability; humour becomes softer and introspective.	B. O'Leary – <i>The Switch</i> ; E. Henry – <i>Book Lovers</i> ; S. Kinsella – <i>Love Your Life</i> ; V. Grimaldi – <i>Et que ne durent que les moments doux</i> ; A. Valognes – <i>L'envol</i> .

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