

Parthenogenesis (“Virgin Birth”): A Woman’s Futile Attempt at Achieving Recognition

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*This article demonstrates how a contemporary British writer, Clare Chambers, in her novel *Small Pleasures* (2020), applies fourth-wave feminist notions when describing historical events from 1955–1956, namely an actual attempt to prove parthenogenesis (“virgin birth”) by scientific methods. Such an analysis reflects important social and cultural changes that have taken place in the last six decades regarding women’s reproductive rights and autonomy, body image, and lesbianism. The paper shows that in contrast to the conservative and repressive postwar British society that viewed lesbianism and the idea of conception through parthenogenesis as a deviation from accepted norms, contemporary representations of the latter issues have undergone tremendous change. The paper also shows how Chambers insinuates a much more recent outlook on parthenogenesis often held by members of the lesbian community, particularly its members who belong to the separatist wing. This view includes both utopian and dystopian ideas. Finally, the role of sensational and tabloid journalism in influencing public opinion and, consequently, in shaping social and cultural constructs is described.*

Keywords: English literature / Chambers, Clare / gender studies / parthenogenesis / lesbianism / conservatism / sensational journalism

Introduction

Clare Chambers’s novel *Small Pleasures* (2020), among other important themes, rekindles an incident of an alleged parthenogenesis¹ (“virgin-birth”) that astounded the British public, overwhelmed the Britain’s religious institutions, and led to heated debates within the U.K. and

¹ Parthenogenesis is the development of an unfertilized egg into a new individual. Coined by Carl Theodor Ernst von Siebold (b. 1804–d. 1885) in 1871, the literal meaning of parthenogenesis is “virgin reproduction”—reproduction in the absence of males (Schwander 1).

world's medical communities. An article published in 1955 in the British *The Sunday Pictorial* claimed that in 1946, a British woman, Mrs. Emmimarie Jones, a virgin at the time of conception, while bed-ridden with rheumatism in a German hospital, gave birth to a daughter, Monica. Between November 1955 and June 1956, Mrs. Jones and her daughter willingly yielded to a set of medical experiments, set up by a team of researchers at Guy's and Queen Charlotte's Hospital, London. The results of the tests were quite controversial, hence leading to animated worldwide public and medical disputes.

The goal of this paper is to show the way in which a current fictional depiction of historical events occurring in 1955–1956 is influenced by fourth-wave feminism and by lesbian dystopian literature.² Such a literary interpretation mirrors important social and cultural shifts that have occurred in the last sixty years. The paper demonstrates that as opposed to the British post-war conservative and dismal society's judgment of and bias toward parthenogenesis and lesbian relationships, seen as deviations from accepted norms, the contemporary depiction of latter themes has undergone a tremendous change. In particular, the paper explains how this contemporary novel suggests a much more recent and complex outlook on parthenogenesis, one that is often adopted by the members of the lesbian community, especially by its members belonging to the separatist wing. For instance, while in the nineteen-fifties, Emmimarie Jones's motives for undergoing tedious medical trials aimed at proving "virgin-birth" were obscured by the press and medical institutions, Chambers's protagonist, Gretchen, a product of a contemporary writer, uses science as a means of proving her sexual prowess, hence attempting, though not quite successfully, to gain acceptance by her lesbian lover.

The novel portrays characters that generally profess self-effacement, self-denial and often resort to unjustifiably sacrificing behaviors. Quite paradoxically, though physically and emotionally fragile, the only protagonist who manages to make decisions and try to prove her case is Gretchen, the social "Other." Although quite fruitlessly, Gretchen attempts to achieve personal and sexual freedom, much before feminism has liberated British women from subordination to patriarchal and conservative viewpoints. The paper attests the centrality of the bleak, prohibitive, postwar British setting and atmosphere in

² As far as I know, *Small Pleasures*, although probably inspired by dystopian novels such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) or Joan Lyn Slonczewski's science fiction novel *A Door into Ocean* (1986), as some others that portray single-gender worlds, it is quite a unique oeuvre, as this book is based on an actual occurrence.

depicting contemporaneous female characters who struggle to achieve social acceptance, professional recognition and personal well-being. Finally, as Mrs. Jones’s actual story was expansively and internationally covered in the press, and its fictional rendering centers around the role of journalists who target the main protagonist, accompany her while performing medical check-ups, and then report extensively the results of the latter, the paper also demonstrates how publications concerning medial trials, mainly published in tabloid journals, in general, and related to parthenogenesis, in particular, have influenced the public discourse.

Sensational headlines that covered the front pages of tabloid journals, quoting reports published in scientific journals, fueled numerous public discussions about the pros and cons of the scientific or ethical matters reported. Chambers uses a ripped-from-the-headlines genre, a genre often used (mainly in movies and TV series) to address medical-ethical dilemmas concerning body autonomy, reproduction, eugenics, and in-vitro fertilization. Such a genre, besides presenting sensational dramas and personal tragedies, ponders on important societal issues, such as homosexuality, domestic violence, etc. The book received many enthusiastic reviews, as mainstream feminist critics praised Chambers for penetrating “the secret hopes and passionate inner lives of ordinary working people” (Johnson 44), and for ably depicting women who manage to do their best in most chaotic realities (MacMahon 1). Nevertheless, no critical response has been heard from the separatist current within feminist circles, probably since the novel depicts not just a failed attempt at parthenogenesis, but also a dissatisfactory lesbian love affair.

Parthenogenesis in medical and popular journals

On November 6, 1955, Audrey Whiting, a reporter with the British *The Sunday Pictorial* published on the newspaper’s front page a story entitled “Virgin Births—Doctors Now Say—It Doesn’t Always Need a Man to Make a Baby” (See Figure 1). In the middle of the article a bold caption stated “Find the Case,” thereby dramatically inviting potential candidates to visit Dr. Helen Spurway’s lab at Guy’s and Queen Charlotte’s Hospital, London, and perform medical tests that affirm cases of parthenogenesis in human females. The article created an immediate stir and the paper’s circulation first doubled, then tripled, reaching eventually a record number of six million issues, as

the updates about Emmimarie Jones's tests kept flowing.³ The story captured not just the attention of the British press. On November 28, 1955, the American *Time* published a report entitled "Medicine: Parthenogenesis?" in which it quoted an article from a scientific journal, *The Lancet*, claiming that there "is no reason for dismissing the idea [of parthenogenesis] entirely," while the Melbourne-based *Argus* wrote that "it's the story the whole world is talking about."



Figure 1. The story that shocked Britain: Monica Jones had been conceived without a man. *Sunday Pictorial*, June 24, 1956.

The Sunday Pictorial's article followed a 1955 lecture given by the geneticist Dr. Helen Spurway of University College London, in which she described how the female of a species of guppy fish, while being kept apart from the male, can autonomously give birth to female offspring. Dr. Spurway also observed a laboratory creation of healthy rabbits (mammals) procreated without male parents. This occurrence of artificial parthenogenesis "led Dr. Spurway to call for a re-examination of the assumption

³ Interestingly, while *The Sunday Pictorial* as other "Family Newspapers" usually promoted quite conservative approach to sexuality, characterized by disapproval of "immorality" such as divorce, homosexuality, and prostitution, there often existed an "eternal ambiguity" (Bingham 116), fearing to lose subscribers and advertisers if they became too bold in handling sexual matters, the former published in 1949 a pioneering national sex survey, the first of its kind in Great Britain, and a series of articles on homosexuality.

that spontaneous parthenogenesis—aka, a virgin birth—was impossible in humans” (Chambers, “Virgin Birth?”). At the end of her lecture Dr. Spurway invited women who considered themselves to be virgin mothers to daughters, with a striking resemblance to the mother, and who could corroborate their claims that no male was involved in the latter’s conception, to undergo scientific examinations. Nineteen women showed up, but all, except one, Emmimarie Jones, were distrusted and hence rejected. The motives behind Jones’s readiness to undergo the complicated tests remain unknown (See Figure 2). Audrey Whiting, *The Sunday Pictorial’s* journalist, who befriended Emmimarie and accompanied her during all medical procedures, wrote that in 1948, two years after her daughter’s birth, Emmimarie married a Welsh soldier stationed in Germany and moved with him to Hereford, England. It might be speculated that Emmimarie wanted to prove the truthfulness of her claim (of being a “virgin mother”) to her husband and family, though Emmimarie has never confirmed it. Curiously, Emmimarie and her daughter disappeared shortly after the tests were performed.⁴



Figure 2. Emmimarie Jones and daughter Monica in 1956. Image: Mirrorpix/Charman/Sunday Mirror.

The prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet*, published four articles (dated 30 June 1956, 7 July 1956, 21 July 1956, and 28 July 1956) describing the tests’ procedures and listing medical experts’ deliberations regarding parthenogenesis. The preliminary test results demonstrated

⁴ In an interview on BBC Radio 4’s program, *Woman’s Hour*, in 2001, Whiting, who had become quite an intimate friend of Emmimarie, admitted that surprisingly “she [Emmimarie] disappeared from the face of the Earth” (Whiting).

that Emmimarie and Monica were indeed an identical match when it came to blood, saliva, and sense of taste, with findings believed to be consistent with a “virgin birth.” Nevertheless, for the final test, the team grafted some of Monica’s skin onto Emmimarie, and vice versa, believing that much like skin grafts successfully accomplished between identical twins, their immune systems would result in the grafts being accepted. Monica’s skin fell from Emmimarie’s graft after four weeks, while Monica’s graft lasted six weeks, throwing doubt onto the claims of parthenogenesis.

While Dr. J. W. Nicholas in *The Lancet*’s 7 July 1956 issue claimed that “Dr. Balfour-Lynn [one of the researchers involved in Emmimarie Jones’ trials] is, of course, trying to do something long recognized as impossible—namely, to prove paternity by blood-grouping and allied tests” (47), Dr. Balfour-Lynn explained in the journal’s 30 July 1956 issue that though “rigorous proof is impossible [...] it remains that all the evidence obtained from serological and special tests is consistent with what would be expected in a case of parthenogenesis. Thus, this mother’s claim must not only be considered seriously, but it must also be admitted that we have been unable to disprove it” (1072).

Small Pleasures follows quite closely the factual events pertaining to the actual parthenogenesis’ story, though the names of the protagonists and some biographical details have been slightly altered. In a letter addressed to the editor of a local newspaper, the *North Kent Echo*, Gretchen Tilbury refers to the newspaper’s article “Man No Longer Needed for Reproduction” and asks to participate in a medical trial, as she has “always believed my [her] own daughter (now ten) to have been born without the involvement of any man” (Chambers, *Small* 4). While the newspaper’s male reporters mock Gretchen’s appeal, Jean Swinney, the newspaper’s only female journalist, a “features editor, columnist, dogsbody” (4), whose main task is publishing recipes or lifestyle and household commentaries, volunteers to research Gretchen’s story. Jean, a spinster aged thirty-nine, is a warm hearted and high-spirited woman, who managed to be promoted to a post of a life-style columnist, after toiling for many years in the newspaper’s printing press room. During World War II, Jane served as a driver in the medical corps, and upon release from the service, as many women in her position, hoped to get married and lead a typical suburban life. According to Caitriona Beaumont, such aspirations should not surprise us as “in contrast to the dynamic possibilities of women’s new role in postwar society, the prevailing view of women at this time, as illustrated in popular women’s magazines, was that the vast majority aspired only to marriage and motherhood” (Beaumont 148).

According to Stephanie Spencer, “in postwar Britain the Family (with a capital F) became the symbol of national character/identity, and it was to women as ‘housewives and mothers’ that the job fell to create and maintain the symbolic traditional family unit” (Spencer 338). Jane, however, failed in building a “traditional family unit.” Her lover turned out to be a married man and a liar, who upon finding out that she was pregnant, cut off their relationships. In postwar Britain, the sole possibility for unmarried pregnant women, like Jane, who had to make a living and to provide for her widowed mother, was to have an abortion, which in her case was performed by an unprofessional practitioner, hence leaving Jane with scant chances of conceiving in the future.

For Jane, Gretchen’s story becomes much more than ordinary reportage; “for reasons that were not just to do with journalistic hunger for a good story, she wanted it to be true” (Chambers, *Small* 19). For her, it is not just an intriguing mystery, but a quest to find the truth. By delving into Gretchen’s aching soul and secluded existence, Jane aspires to break away from her own reclusive way of life. Moreover, she senses instinctively that disclosing the motives behind Gretchen’s yearning to corroborate the alleged story of her alleged “virgin birth” will shed light on the latter’s forlorn and secretive life which somehow epitomizes Jane’s own confined existence. Jane first establishes close and genuine bonds, based on mutual sympathy and trust, with Gretchen, and then with Gretchen’s husband and daughter, for whom Jane becomes a model figure and a kind of a godmother or, at times, even a mother’s substitute. For Jane, Margaret turns into a surrogate daughter, and her increasing attachment to the girl somehow narrows the gap of her own childlessness. She even publishes a short piece in her newspaper, entitled “the Unofficial Aunt” in which she praises the advantageous relationship between a young protégée and “the maiden aunt” in whom the former “acquires a wise counselor and confidant, unburdened by parental expectations,” while “the childless woman enjoys the fleeting taste of the parenthood and acquires a greater understanding of the younger generation” (143).

It should be noted, however, that Jane’s attempt to deal with “serious” journalistic matters is quite ironic. Firstly, her newspaper, the *North Kent Echo*, like its factual counterpart, *The Sunday Pictorial*, is a tabloid that promotes scandals and sensational fiction and journalism. Second, *The Sunday Pictorial* was notorious for publishing articles opposing any future legislation that could one day decriminalize homosexuality.

In 1952, Douglas Warth published in *The Sunday Pictorial* several articles concerning homosexuality, stating that “the chief danger of the

perverts is the corrupting influence they have on youth. Most people know there are such things—‘pansies’—mincing, effeminate young men who call themselves queers. But simple decent folk regard them as freaks and rarities. [...] If homosexuality were tolerated here, Britain would rapidly become decadent” (Warth 6). Hence, not just the public was prejudiced by the negative tone of the newspapers, homosexuality began to be defined and understood in negative terms by everyone, including homosexuals themselves (Buckle 47). The discourse concerning homosexuality had complex rapports with mainstream media, since the British media’s treatment of this “social problem” was kept almost undercover. Just in late 1950s some newspapers chose to end “their self-censored relationship with homosexuality” (46); but the reportage remained often contradictory and confused. “Newspapers that presented a negative image of homosexuality on one issue at one particular time,” says Buckle, “could then promote a much more liberal image on another issue—and vice versa.” (47)

The lack of legal measures against female homosexuality and the effect of social prohibitions meant that depictions of lesbianism in literature, movies and the media were particularly limited in postwar Britain. Rebecca Jennings maintains that “the press depicted lesbians only infrequently, and then within the scandalous contexts of divorce” or “in the context of failed relationships and social isolation” (Jennings 886). Therefore, on the one hand, Gretchen’s story falls into the category of “scandalous contexts,” as she leaves her husband and daughter and moves to her lesbian lover’s apartment; on the other hand, such a story takes place outside mainstream journalism, which precludes Jane from becoming a “serious” journalist.

Gretchen’s futile attempt at proving parthenogenesis

Gretchen is a young and pretty woman in her early thirties who grew up in England since she was nine. Born to strict Catholic parents, who immigrated to England from the German part of Switzerland, Gretchen has always felt as an outsider. In 1946, the seventeen-year-old Gretchen, while being hospitalized due to arthritis, and almost totally confined to her bed for four months in St. Cecilia Nursing and Convalescent Home, rigorously supervised by nuns, much to her surprise became pregnant, and seven months after her release from the hospital, gave birth to a daughter, Margaret. Her quiet, suburban life in a neatly kept house and well-tended garden seems almost perfect. Her

husband, Howard, a kind and respectful, middle-aged jeweler, claims that he has always believed Gretchen’s story about Margaret’s birth. He married Gretchen when Margaret was a baby and has raised the girl as his own daughter. Gretchen is seemingly a perfect homemaker, a skilled cook and a talented dressmaker who creates her daughter’s and her own beautifully designed clothes. Yet, throughout this almost idyllic setting, Chambers manages to disseminate some seeds of doubt, especially when Jane finds out that only herself visits the house, or when Jane notices that Gretchen and Howard do not share a bed, or when Margaret, a lively and intelligent girl, implies that Gretchen is not keen on participating in fun weekend activities such as picnics or any other familial outings or visits.

Meanwhile, while Jane is busy first locating and then interviewing Gretchen’s former female friends at St. Cecilia Nursing and Convalescent Home and the Home’s supervisor, reading the Home’s matron’s diaries, written during Gretchen’s confinement, and escorting Gretchen and Margaret to their medical check-ups at the hospital, her relationships with Howard grow closer. She also realizes that on several occasions, for unexplained reasons, Gretchen pushes her husband into Jane’s arms, which eventually, after Gretchen’s marriage unexpectedly breaks down, leads to Jane’s and Howard’s love affair.

One of the most interesting and disturbing encounters Jane’s thorough investigation into Gretchen’s past brings about is that with Martha Campkin, Gretchen’s closest friend while in St. Cecilia. The hospital’s former matron describes Martha, a vicar’s daughter as a rebel, as “spiky [...] and very brave,” and not “as compliant as Gretchen” (Chambers, *Small* 56) who is described as “innocent as a lamb” who “wouldn’t have known one end of from another” (52). Kitty, another patient at St. Cecilia, depicts Martha as “scornful of religion” (286), while Brenda, the fourth patient in Gretchen’s and Martha’s ward, characterizes Martha as “a bully and very possessive” (208), especially toward Gretchen when the latter tried to make friends with other girls.

Jane’s meeting with Martha invites a crucial moment in the novel’s plot. Martha is a “tall, striking woman with scarlet lipstick” (Chambers, *Small* 99), dressed in strange bohemian clothes. She confesses of breaking all ties with her sickly and elderly parents since she “got tired of their disapproval,” and with whom she “disagree[s] about everything,” as “they’re Edwardians essentially, absolutely at sea in the modern world” (99–100). She is an invalid, walking with a stick and wearing “curious leather splints” (99) that are bound around her hands and wrists, probably due to arthritis. Martha is a painter and an art teacher who

barely makes ends meet. Though she lives in a filthy and freezing loft, mainly crawling with easels and paints, Martha is a proud person who does not complain about her lot. Upon hearing from Jean the story of Gretchen's alleged parthenogenesis, and mainly the doctors' conviction regarding the latter's probable feasibility, Martha sends Gretchen a gift, signaling that after more than ten years of separation, Gretchen is welcome to renew their former relations.

Gretchen, an ultimate "Other," an outsider, raised by overtly strict and inhibitive parents, believes, while at St. Cecilia, that Martha is the only person who really cares about her and treats her as an equal. Kitty's description of Martha's and Gretchen's relationships corroborates their attachment, leaving Jean perplexed regarding "this unexpected picture of Martha's vulnerability" (Chambers, *Small* 283). "Martha was her [Gretchen's] special friend," Kitty remarks, "the beds were too wide apart for them to hold hands, so they used to hold the ends of a rolled-up towel between them. Isn't that sweet?" (283) Gretchen did not realize that Martha's special attention and seeming care conceal strong possessive and jealous behaviors and a lesbian attachment. Martha does not allow Gretchen to socialize with other girls. Moreover, she convinces Gretchen to hoard painkillers and sleeping pills and then take overdoses of these substances, apparently "to guarantee a deep and painless sleep" (121), but essentially aiming at achieving full control of Gretchen's mind and body. The Matron, in her diary, comments that Martha "is a devil to take a risk like this," adding that "Gretchen is filly led along by Martha" (121), even if such practices may cause to fatal consequences. Eventually, as the novel proceeds, the narrator reveals the tragic consequences of pills' hoarding. After taking an overdose of sleeping pills, Gretchen was surreptitiously raped by the Matron's deranged nephew, which, in turn, brought about her pregnancy and alleged "virgin birth."

It seems that Gretchen's worship of Martha is mostly based on an imagined spiritual attachment and on admiration of Martha's boldness and determination and less on physical attraction. She is totally blind to Martha's narcissism, selfishness, and despotism. Gretchen's unconditional love makes her totally oblivious to Martha's agonizing rejection. When the shocked Gretchen finds out that she is pregnant, and comes to Martha's house believing that the latter "was the one person who would understand," (Chambers, *Small* 225) as Gretchen innocently conjectured that the baby who "had come to me [Gretchen] while we were in St. Cecilia's together" (225) belongs to both, the enraged Martha accuses Gretchen of betrayal and shuts the door on her. Since

then, Gretchen’s sole aim in life is to prove her innocence and bring Martha back to her life. Even the baby girl’s name, Margaret, is a combination of Martha’s and Gretchen’s names, as Gretchen believes she is product of their unison.

When Jean confronts Martha regarding the sacrifices Gretchen has made after the latter leaves Howard and her home and moves with Martha, Martha aggressively reacts saying “she [Gretchen] was mine before she was his” (Chambers, *Small* 222). Martha’s seeming acknowledgement and acceptance of Gretchen’s story of “virgin birth” brings about Gretchen’s imagined catharsis. Freud and Breuer defined catharsis as “the process of reducing or eliminating a complex by recalling it to conscious awareness and allowing it to be expressed” (Breuer and Freud 8).⁵ The American Psychological Association defines it as “the discharge of affects connected to traumatic events that had previously been repressed by bringing these events back into consciousness and re-experiencing them” (VandenBos). Although in some cases, according to Freud and Breuer, catharsis or emotional release may become an important therapeutic tool for coping with fear, depression, and anxiety, in this case Gretchen’s ostensible abreaction is temporary, since Martha’s domineering nature cannot bear any traces of free will or independence that Gretchen shyly attempts to exercise, such as accommodating Margaret in their loft, allowing Gretchen to invite visitors, or contributing to the household’s meager budget by taking sewing orders. Gretchen is literally confined to the freezing loft, suffering from cold, arthritis and neglect. “Her once lustrous hair was greasy and there were dark semicircles under her eyes.” (Chambers, *Small* 293)

Pseudo-homosexual discourse

Interestingly, and most likely subversively, Chambers here adopts a pseudo-homosexual discourse, quite popular in the fifties, regarding power-relations within lesbian couples. The discourse was first introduced in 1929 by the well-known German sexologist, Iwan Bloch, and later popularized by other sexologists and psychologists. Bloch and his fellow researcher, Magnus Hirschfeld, asserted that genuine homosexuals were biologically disposed to members of the same sex, while pseudo-homosexuals—mainly women—were the formation of external

⁵ It should be noted in this context that numerous historians hold Freud responsible for pathologizing homosexuality, as, paradoxically, Freud socially constructs the very diagnosis that he seeks to treat via the practice of catharsis.

circumstances, such as the lack of male sexual partners in prisons, hospitals, or schools (Bloch 281). According to Bloch, since many heterosexual women are naturally predisposed towards “tenderness and caresses,” it is easier for them to adopt “pseudo-homosexual tendencies” (72). Jennings explains that “Freudian accounts of sexuality,” popular in Britain in the fifties and sixties, refers to lesbianism as to an “‘arrested development’: a girl becoming fixed at an earlier stage of sexual development and failing to reach adult heterosexuality” (886). Some other psychiatrists believed that lesbianism may be “cured” by “extreme forms of behavioral therapy or surgical intervention” or some less invasive “form of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy” (895). Gretchen is depicted as an asexual woman, or a woman that suffers from “arrested development.” Lacking tenderness and maternal love, and defying heterosexual relations with her husband, she resorts to pseudo-homosexual relations with Martha, hoping to attain warmth and attention. Martha resorts to all sorts of violence: verbal emotional and financial, which is perfectly in line with several recent studies that examined violence among lesbians.⁶ Furthermore, if for Gretchen, Margaret is the token of Martha’s and Gretchen’s love, for Martha, Margaret is a nuisance that disturbs full domination of her lover.

Gender-specific identities

In their discussion of homosexual family, Frost and Eliason refer to “fusion,” a concept which is extensively referred to in psychotherapeutic and lesbian popular culture literatures. “Fusion” delineates the overly close bonds between lovers, often lacking boundaries in female same-sex couples (Frost and Eliason 65). Sometimes, such merging may be beneficial, as it protects the lesbian couple from the criticism and threats of the outside world, but often, like in Martha’s and Gretchen’s case, Martha’s treatment of Gretchen becomes obsessive and “the intense anxiety over any desire for separateness or autonomy within the

⁶ According to a 1997 study by Lisa K. Waldner-Haugrud et al., “lesbians were more likely to be classified as victims and perpetrators of violence than gay men [...] lesbians reported experiencing a greater number of different victimization and perpetration tactics than gay men” (173). Studies by Robert J. Milletich et al., Lewis et al., and Walters et al. have shown that partner violence perpetration among same-sex couples occurs at rates that are equal to or higher than perpetration among opposite-sex couples. West found that approximately 30–40% of lesbian women have been involved in at least one, if not more, physically abusive relationships.

relationship” (Krestan and Bepko 277) causes Gretchen to lose her sense of individuality. If at the beginning of the relationship, Gretchen feels that her ten-year struggle to regain Martha’s love and approval bring about a sense of euphoria and victory, Martha’s hostility toward Margaret and her restrictive and domineering behavior cause Gretchen to experience a loss of her former sense of self. Moreover, given the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of lesbianism in the fifties,⁷ and the fear of losing custody of her child, Gretchen naively believes that she can go back to her life with Howard. Howard continues to support Gretchen financially and takes care of Margaret but is unready to take the former back.

Gretchen’s anxiety shows how gender-specific identities are still relevant in society and how the latter oppresses those who try to go against social norms. Gretchen is striving for autonomous self-definition beyond her domestic duties. In this way she demonstrates a lasting persistence of reductionist patriarchal view of women’s roles and shows how deeply women have internalized them. She tries to have power over her own wishes while not letting herself be limited by patriarchal impositions. In this way, she challenges the self-sacrificial belief that women should put the needs of others over their own and focus on caring and supporting roles, not only in relation to their partners and children. Unlike Jean, whose whole life revolves around caring for her mother, Gretchen challenges the accepted social roles by refusing to sacrifice her own dreams. Ironically, resisting patriarchy does not bring about freedom. Quite contrary, Gretchen autonomy is jeopardized not by a male partner, but by her female lover.

Unexpectedly, Martha who professes seemingly advanced ideas regarding female advancement and independence, in practice acts according to notions often associated with patriarchal culture and “male” values, such as violence, aggression, and repression. Her treatment of Margaret

⁷ Male homosexuality was classified by APA’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a mental illness until 1973 when it was replaced with the diagnosis of “sexual orientation disturbance.” Although female homosexuality was not criminalized in England, it was still, like male homosexuality, officially regarded as a mental disorder or a “sexual deviation.” Many lesbian women were subjected to conversion treatments. According to Carr and Spandler, “various mental health-related disciplines in England were involved in the treatment of same-sex attracted women, whether to change, or accept and adjust to, their sexual orientation” (289). Moreover, several novels depicting sexual relations between lesbians were banned; for example, when Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe Hall’s novel *Well of Loneliness* (1928) was republished in 1949, it was prosecuted under the *Obscene Publications Act* for lesbian content.

also goes against the utopian vision⁸ of many lesbians, especially those belonging to the separatist current. According to Greta Rensenbrink, “the promise of parthenogenesis that it could affirm and make possible women’s culture and women’s community was in some sense fulfilled” (Rensenbrink 316). Lesbian feminists, cultural feminists, and lesbian separatists were highly excited about the possibility of parthenogenesis which could allow woman-only conception, hence leading to establishing separatist women’s communities. Sue Rosser asserts that “lesbian separatism, often seen as an offshoot of radical feminism, would suggest that separation from men is necessary in a patriarchal society for females to understand their experiences and explore the potentials of science and the impacts of reproductive technologies” (Rosser 10). Interestingly, Martha neither sees Margaret as a token of her and Gretchen’s love-affair, nor she envisions a happy feminist household, where two lesbian lovers raise a child. Chambers, building on a factual story of a woman’s attempt to validate parthenogenesis in the nineteen-fifties, constructs her protagonist, Gretchen, through a modern outlook, that of a third or fourth-wave feminist. Gretchen does not hesitate to use, or one might say exploit, science (parthenogenesis) to prove her case.

Moreover, Gretchen’s attempt at creating a promising relationship, based on trustworthiness, dependability and faith within a lesbian context is a postmodernist notion which is strange to the governing social mood in the fifties. Unfortunately, Gretchen’s struggle to attain happiness and appreciation is doomed to fail since the roots of Gretchen’s and Martha’s relationships are still deeply grounded in patriarchal system both are products of. Gretchen is unready to lead a self-sufficient and independent life and needs either Howard or Martha to support her both emotionally and financially. Tragically, Martha’s resistance of patriarchy and authoritarian parental attitudes leads her to embrace the same stance that she rebels against—power, verbal and economic oppression and alienation of Gretchen from her daughter and friends. C. Maria in her essay “Separatism is Not a Luxury” claims that:

⁸ In many fertility utopias like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) or Mary E. Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (1890), parthenogenesis is used as a means of exploring the politics of body autonomy. For Gilman, parthenogenesis allows women to exercise their independence and capabilities as women, and serves as a metaphor for birth control that permits the author to advocate a woman’s right to family limitation. For Bradley Lane, parthenogenesis serves as a method of in-vitro fertilization that allows the author to explore the exciting potential of reproducing without a man. Neither author takes parthenogenesis at face value or as a scientific reality; rather, they employ it as a plot device to make their arguments for body autonomy and eugenics.

The Lesbian Separatist has chosen to defy men, to hate men, in order to be for women and for our freedom to be our Selves. The price to maintain our integrity is often poverty, violence, degradation, and the denial of basic necessities. Despite the poverty suffered and the obstacles placed in front of us, we know we are right. And because of the joy and freedom we radiate, our enemies know we are right. (Maria, 16–17)

Such an approach may permit female patriarchy against other women. Martha’s hostility toward men and her defiance of society results in poverty, violence, and victimization of her lover. The gloomy and repressive nineteen-fifty setting plays an important role in the novel. London is described as being often noisy, grim, and filthy with its “shuddering bulk of buses and taxis panting out clouds of diesel” (Chambers, *Small* 338–339). The shabby Luna Street in Chelsea, where Martha and Gretchen live, is plagued by rats, and filled with garbage. The description of Martha’s violent neighbor who terrorizes his wife and threatens the whole neighborhood adds to the dismal depiction of her filthy apartment and her own aggressive behavior. The oppressive environment serves as a reflective image of the restrictive social climate that is unable to accept nonstandard behaviors, such as having children outside of wedlock (in Jane’s case) or lesbianism (in Martha’s and Gretchen’s) case. Society’s and media’s interest in Gretchen’s alleged parthenogenesis is not driven by empathy; it is the sensation or “deviation” from the norm that entices curiosity. Such a disconcerting setting cannot allow the fulfillment of one’s dreams or the flourishing of loving rapports.

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Partogeneza (»Deviško rojstvo«): Ženska, ki zaman išče priznanje

Ključne besede: angleška književnost / Chambers, Clare / spolne študije / partenogeneza / lezbištvo / konservativizem / senzacionalistično novinarstvo

Prispevek pokaže, kako sodobna britanska pisateljica Clare Chambers v svojem romanu *Small Pleasures* (2020) za prikaz zgodovinskih dogodkov v letih 1955–1956 uporablja pojme feminizma četrtega vala, namreč resnični poskus dokazovanja partenogeneze (»deviškega rojstva«) z znanstvenimi metodami. Takšna analiza odraža pomembne družbene in kulturne spremembe zadnjih šestdesetih let na področju reproduktivnih pravic in avtonomije žensk, telesne podobe in lezbičnosti. Prispevek razkriva, da so se v nasprotju s konservativno povojno britansko družbo, ki je bila represivna do lezbištva in nenaklonjena zamisli o spočetju s partenogenezo – ta je bila razumljena kot odstopanje od ustaljenih norm –, sodobni prikazi teh tem temeljito spremenili. V prispevku še pokažemo, kako Chambers nakazuje mnogo sodobnejši, za lezbično skupnosti značilen pogled na partenogenezo, zlasti med pripadnicami lezbičnega separatizma. To stališče zaznamujejo tako utopične kot distopične ideje. Za zaključek opišemo vlogo senzacionalističnega/tabloidnega novinarstva pri vplivanju na javno mnenje in posledično pri oblikovanju družbenih in kulturnih konstruktov.

1. 01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 821.111.09Chambers C.

176.1:591.162

305-055.2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v46.i2.10>