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Complex femininities in television series: representations, figures, and literacy models from (post)feminism to anti-heroines*

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This article examines the evolution of female representations in contemporary television seriality, focusing on the increasing complexity of female characters and their relationship with different strands of feminism. Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework that combines media studies, sociology of culture, and gender studies, the study analyses four television series - *Orange Is the New Black*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Fleabag*, and *Bridgerton* - selected through purposive sampling for their cultural relevance and their capacity to illustrate diverse narrative configurations of femininity. The analysis highlights how contemporary serial narratives move beyond traditional representations of women, introducing protagonists characterised by ambivalence, vulnerability, and moral complexity. Particular attention is devoted to the figure of the anti-heroine, understood not simply as a female counterpart to the male anti-hero, but as a distinct narrative configuration that destabilises normative expectations of femininity. The findings show that female representations do not follow a linear trajectory of emancipation, but rather unfold within complex and contradictory continua, where feminist concerns, postfeminist sensibilities, and intersectional perspectives converge and are continuously renegotiated. The article also argues that television series function as significant sites of cultural production and social learning. Through their narrative structures, aesthetic strategies, and transmedia circulation, they contribute to shaping gender imaginaries and to disseminating models of identity, agency, and relationality. In this sense, seriality operates as an informal pedagogical device, fostering processes of gender socialisation and requiring the development of critical gender media literacy. Ultimately, the study contributes to expanding the concept of narrative complexity by foregrounding the role of female characters in redefining both television storytelling and contemporary cultural understandings of femininity.

Keywords: TV series, feminisms, anti-heroines, postfeminism, gender education.

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Introduction. Genres, narrative models, and female anti-heroism in television seriality

Over the past few decades, television seriality has undergone a profound redefinition of its status, acquiring increasing centrality within the global audiovisual landscape. This transformation has contributed to the progressive legitimisation of TV series as culturally significant products, shaping processes of social imagination. From predominantly low-budget productions with a limited number of episodes, TV series have evolved into flagship products of media consumption: characterised by high production values (*quality drama*, Cardwell, 2013), and now competing with cinema in terms of direction, casting, scenography, themes, and storytelling, adopting innovative criteria at both aesthetic and narrative levels. However, despite the evolution of contemporary television seriality and the emergence of increasingly complex narrative forms, many titles that have achieved cult status in recent years continue to rely on predominantly male-oriented narrative models. In these productions, female characters often occupy secondary or functional roles within the development of the main narrative arc, aligning with what critics have defined as *masculine templates*, that is, narrative structures centred on male heroes and anti-heroes as normative figures of complexity (Buonanno, 2017; Levy, 2022).

In light of these considerations, this contribution focuses on three key analytical axes for understanding the evolution of female characters in television seriality: the configuration and transformation of models of femininity; their relationship with different strands of feminism (from traditional or 'political' feminism to postfeminism and popular feminism, among others); and the emergence of the anti-heroine as a privileged narrative figure (Levy, 2022). These dynamics are examined within the framework of *women's genres* and their progressive hybridisation with other media genres, a process that has contributed to the increasing complexity of female subjectivities on screen.

Within this framework, the contribution of so-called *women's genres* - cultural genres primarily addressed to female audiences, centred on women's experiences and often symbolically located within the private and affective sphere - appears particularly significant. From television melodrama to chick lit and its serial adaptations, products for 'women' have often been dismissed as 'minor' or excessively *soapy*, despite their substantial role in the evolution of television seriality. As Kuhn observes, such genres are grounded in the "construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by a female point-of-view" (Kuhn, 1984, p. 18). Far from being merely conservative narrative forms, they have constituted crucial spaces for the representation of women's emotional, relational, and identity complexity, anticipating the later emergence of more ambiguous and contradictory female figures.

The hybridisation between traditionally feminine genres and the structures of complex seriality has thus contributed to the emergence of more layered female characters, oscillating between heroism and anti-heroism, desire and guilt, autonomy and vulnerability. It is precisely within this space of tension that contemporary television seriality makes visible forms of female resistance that do not necessarily operate through classical heroism, but rather through everyday practices of negotiation, failure, and self-redefinition.

The growing centrality of the anti-hero in contemporary seriality also represents one of the main drivers of renewal in television fiction (Martin, 2013). However, for female characters, this process appears slower, more contradictory, and more heavily regulated. At the same time, it has led to an increase in titles featuring female protagonists. As will be

discussed in the following sections, when serial narratives began to foreground heroines and anti-heroines, they did so through specific trajectories that directly interrogate gendered social expectations, often producing representations that diverge from audience expectations and open up innovative perspectives on what are traditionally considered 'feminine' qualities. As Buonanno notes, "regarding women as antiheroines might disrupt the social order because women are expected to maintain order" (Buonanno, 2017, p. 11). Female anti-heroism does not simply consist of the feminisation of male models, but takes on distinct forms, often linked to the transgression of prescribed social roles and the destabilisation of norms of respectability, care, and responsibility historically associated with female characters. In this sense, female anti-heroism is frequently associated with failure - real or perceived - in fulfilling socially assigned roles, rather than with openly celebrated rebellion, as is often the case for male characters. This dynamic reflects a social order still deeply shaped by patriarchal structures, in which female deviance is more harshly problematised than male deviance. The anti-heroine is therefore not merely 'morally ambiguous' but becomes a disturbing figure that makes visible the structural tensions between female subjectivity and the social order. On screen, anti-heroines embody and transform into narrative identities those forms of resistance to hegemonic ideologies that are central to feminist thought: they are stories of marginalised women, often positioned in opposition to dominant models of their time, capable of going against the grain (Levy, 2022).

Building on these premises, this contribution examines four television series selected according to specific qualitative criteria: *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-2025), *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016-2019), and *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020-).

The analysis is structured around the following research questions:
RQ1 - To what extent is it possible to identify traces of the evolution of female characters in the selected serial products, in relation to the development of feminisms?
RQ2 - To what extent does the rise of anti-heroines contribute to the reworking of feminist, postfeminist, and intersectional sensibilities, fostering a redefinition of female roles and influencing processes of gender socialisation?

This contribution traces some of the key turning points in these transformations, with the aim of highlighting not only the increasing centrality of female protagonists, but above all the ways in which television seriality contributes to renegotiating the symbolic boundaries of contemporary femininity.

Theoretical Framework

1.1 The complexity of television series

As previously noted, television series have established themselves as culturally significant products, characterised by increasingly high production values. To the features outlined above, one must add complexity, understood as a spectrum of elements interacting in non-linear ways (Mittell, 2015). Complexity distinguishes television seriality in terms of the editorial project, the script, the modes of production, the poetics that define and characterise each individual title, and the functional aesthetic, which directs the audience's gaze towards the narrative mechanisms underlying the story. As Mittell writes, this represents a new model of storytelling that "redefines episodic forms in accordance with serial narration" (2015, p.

47), in which the development of individual characters is intertwined with multiple subplots as well as the overarching narrative framework. Complex television series thus transcend the boundaries of traditional genres, offering more articulated narrative spaces within which layered or evolving subjectivities can emerge, capable of reflecting the cultural, social, and political tensions of the present.

Contemporary seriality is also characterised by a marked tendency towards realism. As Innocenti and Pescatore (2008) underline, contemporary television realism does not coincide with a documentary aesthetic, but rather with a form of "functional realism", in which choices of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing contribute to creating an effect of authenticity and emotional proximity. This effect is further reinforced by the serial form itself: extended duration allows viewers to develop a sense of familiarity with characters, fostering identification and emotional engagement (Lotz, 2006).

Within this context, television series assume a central role in redefining gender imaginaries. These products, often oriented towards addressing contemporary social and cultural issues, prove particularly effective in representing complex and non-linear female trajectories, generating engagement, identification, and public discussion (Grasso & Penati, 2016; Lotz, 2006).

Since the 1970s, serial fiction has brought to the screen characters embodying evolving models of femininity, reflecting transformations occurring within the broader social context. Women are no longer represented solely as housewives, but increasingly as subjects with occupations and economic autonomy, enabling them to make independent choices, such as rejecting marriage as a necessity for economic or moral survival.

Addressing a broad and heterogeneous audience, television seriality has therefore assumed an increasingly prominent role in the circulation of new models of femininity, positioning itself as a privileged site of cultural production. Through symbolic and narrative structures, these productions have contributed to redefining gender norms, social roles, and the horizons of possibility currently available to women in contemporary society.

A particularly significant example, now widely regarded as a television cult, is *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). The series profoundly transformed the ways in which female subjectivity is represented on screen, establishing itself as a key reference point in both popular culture and feminist debate (Akass & McCabe, 2004). By staging experiences centred on sexuality, work, friendship, and economic and emotional autonomy, *Sex and the City* contributed to the redefinition of contemporary forms of women's emancipation, proposing identity models that are complex, ambivalent, and openly negotiated. As Henry observes, "If TV follows the changes in feminist thinking, then *Sex and the City* embodies what is now referred to as 'third wave feminism'" (Henry, 2004, p. 70), highlighting the relationship between the evolution of feminist thought and the transformation of television narratives.

1.2 *From first-wave feminism to plural feminisms*

Representations of women in television seriality have evolved alongside broader transformations in feminist thought. Rather than reflecting a single feminist perspective, contemporary television series engage with a plurality of feminist traditions and postfeminist sensibilities that coexist, overlap, and sometimes contradict one another. For this reason, the aim of this section is not to provide a comprehensive history of feminism, but to identify the conceptual approaches that are most relevant for analysing contemporary serial narratives.

From the first wave, centred on political rights such as women's suffrage, feminist thought progressively expanded towards the second wave, which foregrounded gender equality, the critique of domestic roles, and women's control over their own bodies (Friedan, 1963). More recently, third- and fourth-wave feminisms have increasingly emphasised media cultures, digital activism, and intersectionality, highlighting how gender inequalities intersect with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other social dimensions (Crenshaw, 1989; Harvey, 2023).

Alongside these developments, postfeminism has emerged less as a coherent feminist movement than as a cultural sensibility shaping contemporary media representations (Gill, 2007). As McRobbie (2009) argues, postfeminism is characterised by a "double entanglement": it celebrates women's individual choice, agency, and empowerment while simultaneously rearticulating traditional gender norms through consumption, self-surveillance, and neoliberal ideals of self-realisation. Rather than replacing feminism, postfeminism frequently coexists with it, producing hybrid and often contradictory representations of femininity.

Recent scholarship has also identified the emergence of popular feminism, which reintroduces feminist language into mainstream media and digital cultures, making issues such as sexism and gender violence more publicly visible (Banet-Weiser, 2018). At the same time, this visibility is frequently mediated by commercial and platform logics that privilege individual empowerment over structural critique. Similarly, digital feminism has transformed online platforms into spaces of mobilisation and collective action, as demonstrated by movements such as #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos (Harvey, 2023).

These different feminist traditions should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Contemporary television series often combine elements of political feminism, postfeminism, popular feminism, and intersectional approaches within the same narrative. This plurality provides the conceptual framework adopted in the following analysis, allowing the selected series to be interpreted not as straightforwardly feminist or postfeminist texts, but as cultural sites in which different understandings of femininity are continuously negotiated.

Thus, the relationship between feminist thought and television series can be examined through the ways in which serial narratives have progressively incorporated, negotiated, and at times neutralised feminist discourses. In particular, several well-known productions have been read as expressions of postfeminist sensibilities: a cultural framework that, as noted earlier, has informed media products such as books, films, television programmes, and advertising since the 1990s.

This postfeminist sensibility is closely connected to the broader cultural terrain of chick lit, a literary and media genre that emerged in the 1990s and is primarily addressed to a female audience. Chick lit typically centres on female protagonists and explores their everyday, emotional, professional, and relational experiences (Lu, 2014). Although it has often been associated with light, popular, or commercial narratives, chick lit constitutes a significant discursive space for analysing female subjectivities, the reconfiguration of gender roles, and the tensions between empowerment, consumption, intimacy, and self-realisation in contemporary culture.

Within television seriality, this narrative sensibility appears as a transversal mode, intersecting with texts characterised by a strong hybridisation of genres. The "chick" element becomes recognisable when the narrative privileges a female point of view and focuses on affective, familial, and interpersonal relationships, even within series not explicitly targeted at a female audience.

Chick lit is also populated by ambivalent representations of femininity, characterised by an apparent individual autonomy, the centrality of personal choice, and an emphasis on desire, consumption, and empowerment, alongside a substantial depoliticisation and near "denial" of structural gender inequalities. This tendency can be observed, for instance, in productions such as the aforementioned *Sex and the City*, which appear to align with neoliberal and patriarchal orders. However, as will be discussed in the following sections, such an interpretation risks obscuring the critical potential of these texts, particularly when they focus on anti-heroic female protagonists and non-linear narrative forms (Levy, 2022).

Another emblematic example is *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), in which the "chick" dimension is articulated through the character of the mother, Ruth Fisher, whose narrative trajectory foregrounds tensions between desire, motherhood, autonomy, and vulnerability, contributing to the increasing complexity of female representations within an ensemble drama.

Naturally, these sensibilities do not appear in a uniform or isolated manner within the series analysed, but rather tend to overlap and intersect within cultural products, shaping their content in multiple and differentiated ways.

1.2.1 Towards a (simplified) mapping of the relationship between feminisms and television series

Without seeking to provide a comprehensive account of how feminism and postfeminism relate to television fiction and, more specifically, to television series - while at the same time marking an evolution in female characters - this article aims to identify key moments within this relationship, with the objective of offering a general framework and analytical orientation.

In a simplified and schematic way, it is possible to distinguish three types of relationship:

1. Fiction and television series in which there is a substantial absence of feminist concerns or an implicit (or explicit) critique of feminism;
2. Fiction and television series in which feminist themes are present in different forms and degrees. In this case, the issue becomes more complex, as feminism in serial narratives emerges in multiple ways, revealing a variety of perspectives and translating into different narrative forms;
3. Fiction and television series in which the influence of postfeminism can be identified.

With regard to productions that fall into the first type of relationship (a conflictual or absent relationship with feminism), *Happy Days* (ABC, Channel 4, 1974), to cite just one example, is a series which, while not explicitly anti-feminist, neutralises gender tensions by presenting (particularly through the character of Marion) a traditional and nurturing mother figure, while male centrality (embodied by Richie and Fonzie) remains dominant. As a result, the series - set in the 1950s and early 1960s - can be seen as standing in contrast to second-wave feminism, which was characterised by women's entry into the labour market and the questioning of the traditional family, by reintroducing a model of femininity that is domestic, affective, and non-conflictual.

Similarly, in a production such as *Desperate Housewives* (Cherry Productions, Touchstone Television, ABC Studios, Buena Vista International Inc., Buena Vista International Television, 2004-2012), the centrality of female protagonists does not necessarily translate into a critique of gender norms. Dynamics of power, domesticity, and female competition are often represented through irony or melodrama, ultimately naturalising the existing symbolic order and neutralising gender inequalities as a structural issue. However, in Levy's (2022) analysis, this series is presented as a hybrid example

situated between negotiated feminism and postfeminism, functioning as a kind of laboratory of domestic anti-heroines. Levy highlights the paradox at the heart of the series: although the protagonists are housewives, they do not embody the "good wife" model; instead, they engage with themes such as infidelity, ambition, frustration, and transgression. In this way, domesticity is no longer a space of social stability but becomes a site of tension.

In *Desperate Housewives*, Levy also identifies three female models: the romantic heroine (Susan Mayer), the hypersexualised villainess (Edie Britt), and the "true" anti-heroine (Gabrielle Solis), who betrays her husband and acts out of self-interest. These figures can thus be understood as anti-heroines not because they reject domesticity, but because they reinterpret it in transgressive ways, destabilising the model of the "perfect housewife".

Regarding the impact of feminism, we refer to some of the productions examined in detail in this study. The series *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-2025) offers an explicit feminist standpoint, placing the female body at the centre of political struggle and directly addressing issues such as reproductive control, patriarchy, and gender-based violence.

Another example that falls within the second category identified in this mapping is represented by series in which feminism emerges as an everyday and intersectional practice, such as *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019), where we encounter a multiplicity of female subjectivities operating collectively, highlighting the complex intersections between class, race, sexuality, the body, and mental health.

Within this fluid and revisable tripartition, the strand concerning the relationship between television series and postfeminism is particularly rich and complex, as at least two of the series analysed here (*Fleabag* and *Bridgerton*) maintain an ambivalent and contested relationship with this phenomenon, engaging with its various dimensions.

Although necessarily simplified, the proposed mapping demonstrates that contemporary television series cannot be interpreted either as straightforward vehicles of emancipation or as mere instruments for reproducing inequalities. Rather, the three categories should be understood as analytical areas forming part of a continuum, within which series may be positioned in hybrid, fluid, or contradictory ways.

Television series thus emerge as complex and stratified cultural spaces, in which traditional models, feminist concerns, and postfeminist sensibilities intersect, offering a privileged terrain for analysing the transformation of gender models and contemporary femininities.

1.2.2 Creation, authorship, and production: from chick lit to Shondaland

The increasing centrality of female protagonists in television series, whose roles intertwine individual experience, social conflict, and claims for autonomy, has been accompanied by a significant rise in women's participation in their creation, writing, and production. In some cases, these are television adaptations of novels; in others, original screenplays. This transformation in production has not simply introduced "strong female protagonists" into narratives; rather, it has brought to the screen diverse trajectories of emancipation, identity ambivalences, and tensions that also concern what happens behind the scenes, alongside the social and professional roles progressively acquired by women.

Streaming platform catalogues now feature numerous series and miniseries written by women, which narrate stories of women engaged in struggles for economic, social, or symbolic independence, often inspired by real-life experiences. Examples include *Maid* (Netflix, 2021), based on Stephanie Land's memoir, which foregrounds precarity, domestic violence, and the struggle for material survival, constructing a form of

intimate and social realism that challenges the myth of meritocracy. Similarly, *Unorthodox* (Netflix, 2020), inspired by Deborah Feldman's autobiography, recounts the escape from an ultra-Orthodox religious community, intertwining personal emancipation with cultural conflict. In both cases, female subjectivity is shaped through a process of detachment from oppressive structures, while avoiding simplified representations of empowerment.

A turning point in the representation of female generational experience can be identified in works such as *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017), created, written, and performed by Lena Dunham. Unlike earlier models such as *Sex and the City*, which presented a glamorous, consumer-oriented image of urban female independence, *Girls* portrays young, recently graduated women living in conditions of economic instability, often narcissistic and contradictory. Far removed from the polished aesthetic typical of many productions, the series constructs an awkward, sometimes uncomfortable realism in which failure and precarity become central elements of contemporary female experience. Whereas the form of emancipation proposed by *Sex and the City* was largely linked to sexual freedom and professional success, *Girls problematises* that promise, offering a more uncertain and disillusioned conception of autonomy.

The issue of female ageing, traditionally marginalised or stereotyped, has also entered serial narratives. Series such as *Feud* (FX, 2017-), whose first season focuses on the conflict between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, reflect on dynamics of power, competition, and the exclusion of older women from the entertainment industry, transforming age into a critical lens for interrogating the media system itself (Mascio, 2023b)[1].

Female presence has also increased in genres such as crime and medical drama, where female doctors, surgeons, investigators, and magistrates occupy positions of leadership and narrative centrality. However, this greater visibility does not eliminate the tensions between stereotype and innovation: female protagonists often oscillate between models of empowerment and reinscription within traditional codes (care, emotionality, work-life balance).

Although the proliferation of series featuring female protagonists signals a significant transformation in the contemporary television imaginary, what emerges are not heroines capable of embodying both strength and positive models simultaneously, but rather representations increasingly aligned with anti-heroines. Seriality thus presents itself as a space of cultural negotiation in which gender roles, models of success, and representations of the body, age, and work are redefined, foregrounding the complex and critical dimensions of these characters. In this sense, television series do not merely reflect social change, but actively contribute to constructing new horizons of visibility and recognition for female subjectivities, staging forms and models of femininity that move beyond traditional stereotypes.

A separate discussion is required for television series associated with "Shondaland", the production universe created by Shonda Rhimes, the American producer behind globally successful shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-) and *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020-). On the one hand, Shondaland has played a crucial role in making visible women who are Black, queer, and non-normative in central roles, in line with the principles of intersectional feminism. On the other hand, its narrative strategy of colourblindness tends to neutralise the conflictual dimension of race. In many narratives, Black female protagonists are progressively "normalised" through heterosexual relationships with white men, adherence to respectability codes, and symbolic proximity to whiteness, which contributes to making these subjectivities more compatible with dominant normative frameworks.

In this sense, the symbolic universe of Shondaland can be linked to postfeminism, insofar as the women represented exercise conscious choices (in relation to relationships, careers, motherhood, abortion), and success is framed as the result of merit, talent, and individual effort. This thematic framework is also compatible with neoliberal feminism, in which the visibility of female subjects and symbolic inclusion do not necessarily entail a transformation of structural power relations. Within this context, feminism becomes depoliticised and reframed as a lifestyle, aligning with broader transformations in the contemporary television landscape.

The dynamics that underpin the growing presence of complex female characters in seriality can be summarised in three main tendencies. First, such representations now appear across a wide range of audiovisual platforms, from broadcast television to video-on-demand services. This not only demonstrates their increasing popularity, but also their progressive normalisation: complex female characters are no longer a niche phenomenon, but have become a central feature of contemporary serial production.

Second, as noted above, many of these figures are created, produced, and developed by women working behind the scenes in the television industry. The increased presence of women in writers' rooms and creative roles has expanded the variety of representations and roles available to female characters on screen, fostering the emergence of more articulated narrative subjectivities.

Finally, television executives and showrunners have increasingly recognised the economic and symbolic capital associated with the centrality of complex female protagonists, thus fostering their proliferation within contemporary seriality (Hohenstein & Thalmann, 2019). In this context, production universes such as Shondaland represent a particularly significant case, as they combine the broad visibility of diverse female characters with specific narrative and production strategies.

1.2.3 Female protagonists on screen: anti-heroines, never heroines

One element that emerges from the study of female figures in television seriality, and which is also reflected in our analysis, concerns the type of role attributed to female characters. While it is true that, from the 1970s onwards, fiction - particularly in the United States - began to include female characters, it is equally true that these figures departed from the traditional domestic models that had previously dominated television, bringing to the screen working women, single women, African American women, women from the working class, and women belonging to age groups that had previously been marginalised in media representation. Series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) and *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975–1985), for example, represent key moments in a process that contributed to disseminating, within mainstream audiences, representations of female figures that were more autonomous in both professional and identity terms, although still embedded within narrative frameworks that tended to rework social tensions through the register of irony.

In order to take shape, these subjectivities often had to break away from dominant narrative stereotypes, challenging the structures of storytelling familiar to audiences through subversive modes or by adopting traits of eccentricity, deviance, or "excess", sometimes at the margins of moral acceptability (Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017).

At this stage, it is possible to identify figures that may be read as proto-anti-heroines: characters who, while not radically subverting the patriarchal order, introduce elements of tension with respect to normative models of femininity, thereby contributing to the expansion

of the boundaries of television representation. Their ambivalence - suspended between emancipation and reinscription within traditional roles - anticipates the forms of female anti-heroism that would emerge more fully in subsequent decades, paving the way for more complex, contradictory, and conflictual characters.

From a chronological perspective, the 1980s represent a crucial transitional phase in the representation of female characters. On the one hand, strong elements of continuity with the normative models of the previous decade persist; on the other, more complex figures begin to develop, embedded within narratives that reflect the transformations - and ambivalences - of the socio-cultural climate of the time, marked by a partial postfeminist backlash and a reassertion of neoliberal and conservative values. During this period, women gain greater visibility in the public and professional spheres, as well as within serial narratives; however, this visibility is often accompanied by mechanisms of symbolic compensation that limit its emancipatory potential. Female protagonists are frequently portrayed as working women - competent and autonomous in professional terms - yet simultaneously required to negotiate their roles in relation to family, motherhood, and the affective sphere. Series such as *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS, 1981-1988) constitute a paradigmatic example of this tension: the two protagonists embody models of female professionalism within a traditionally male domain such as policing. However, this representation is accompanied by a narrative that emphasises the personal, emotional, and relational costs of such professional choices.

Alongside these figures, female characters also begin to occupy central roles in genres traditionally dominated by male protagonists, such as family drama and serial melodrama. In *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989), for instance, the character of Alexis Carrington introduces a form of female power that is openly antagonistic, grounded in ambition, manipulation, and conflict. Although situated within an excessive and highly spectacularised imaginary, Alexis can be read as an early form of anti-heroine, capable of destabilising the moral order of the narrative and embodying an aggressive and non-conciliatory form of femininity.

However, female anti-heroism in the 1980s often remains confined to melodramatic or *soapy* registers, in which transgression is spectacularised but rarely politicised. Female deviance continues to be represented as an exception and is frequently associated with excess, failure, or symbolic punishment (Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017). In this sense, the protagonists of the 1980s occupy an intermediate position between the proto-anti-heroines of the 1970s and the more complex anti-heroines of contemporary seriality. The possibility of explicitly addressing issues such as abortion, gender-based violence, structural inequalities, or equal opportunities remains limited. It is only in the 1990s that such themes begin to enter serial narratives more systematically. Social transformations, together with developments in the television industry - including the multiplication of channels and the global circulation of productions, particularly from the United States - are accompanied by increasing narrative complexity, progressively oriented towards realism (Levy, 2022).

Indeed, it is only from the 1990s onwards, with the transformation of the television industry and the emergence of new narrative, production, and distribution strategies, that seriality begins to portray female characters capable of articulating more ambiguous, contradictory, and structurally conflictual forms of agency, thereby paving the way for a profound renegotiation of models of heroism and anti-heroism in relation to gender.

Nevertheless, the question remains why female protagonists, to emerge in contemporary television, tend to be configured as anti-heroines rather than heroines in the traditional sense. Their representation is constructed through traits of complexity, ambivalence, and imperfection, placing them at the margins of normative models of femininity and rendering them “difficult” figures, characterised by opacity and contradiction (as exemplified by Saga

Norén in *The Bridge* (SVT1-DR1, 2014-2019) or Villanelle in *Killing Eve* (BBC America, 2018–2022).

For these reasons, this narrative configuration of female protagonists raises a crucial question, which this study seeks to explore through the selected case studies: does it represent a genuine expansion of spaces of freedom and female agency, or does it risk becoming inscribed within new forms of symbolic discredit and delegitimation?

2. Methodology

The analysis of television series, particularly with regard to female representations, required an integrated methodological approach capable of combining different research techniques and levels of observation. As discussed above, contemporary seriality must be understood as a complex cultural device situated at the intersection of production, text, and reception (Hall, 1980; Mittell, 2015). The study of the selected series - *Orange Is the New Black*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Fleabag*, and *Bridgerton* - also takes into account their transmedia dimension, as components of broader narrative ecosystems. All four series derive from pre-existing works written by women - respectively, the memoir by Piper Kerman, the novel by Margaret Atwood, the theatrical monologue by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, and the romance saga by Julia Quinn - and have subsequently been adapted, expanded, and reinterpreted through audiovisual seriality. This transition from one medium to another, entails processes of adaptation, rewriting, and reconfiguration of both characters and gender-related concerns, thus requiring an approach that considers the circulation of content across different expressive forms (Jenkins, 2006; Gambarato, Alzamora, & Tàrcia, 2020).

2.1 Sample selection

The selection of the TV series analysed in this study is based on theoretical and methodological criteria consistent with the research aim, namely to investigate the complexity of female representations in contemporary seriality. To this end, a purposive sampling strategy was employed (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). The sample thus consists of cases that, although not statistically representative, are capable of effectively illustrating how seriality has incorporated, negotiated, or thematised feminisms in relation to the evolution of female characters.

The selection of the corpus was guided by five criteria:

1. *Recent development of serial productions featuring female protagonists.*

The selected series span the period from 2013 to the late 2020s. Although produced within a relatively limited timeframe, they span different phases of media culture: from post/third-wave feminism and postfeminism to the era of intersectionality, the #MeToo movement, and digital feminisms.

2. *Variety of genres and narrative registers.*

The series belong to different genres (romcom/luxury soap, political dystopia, auteur comedy, period drama) and adopt diverse registers (mainstream vs. auteur; satire/irony vs. social critique). This controlled variation helps ensure that the findings are not merely genre-specific but instead relate to the broader theme of feminism.

3. *Different degrees of explicit engagement with feminism, also in relation to the typology outlined above.*

The sample includes productions in which feminism is:

- explicitly thematised (e.g. dystopian control over bodies);
- translated into popular and negotiated forms (empowerment, consumption, sexuality);
- incorporated as a critique of normative femininity (imperfection, ambivalence, transgression).
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4. *Cultural relevance and distribution.*

The selected series have been distributed through streaming platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime, Sky), reaching global audiences. They have had a strong impact on public debate and on fandom practices and forms of reuse on social media.

5. *Analytical comparability.*

Despite differences in narrative content, historical settings, and cultural contexts, the selected series allow for meaningful comparison across the thematic dimensions under investigation.

Furthermore, the fact that these series originate from works written by women strengthens the coherence of the corpus, making it possible to examine not only their televisual representation but also the cultural genealogy from which they derive.

The series were also selected because they developed particularly rich transmedia ecosystems, extending beyond the television text through literary adaptations, social media circulation, fandom practices, merchandising and promotional campaigns, interviews with authors and public forms of symbolic appropriation (such as the use of the Handmaids' costume in public protests). This dimension further reinforces their relevance as cultural sites where gender representations circulate, are negotiated. Within this framework, the series are not analysed as closed texts, but as nodes within a broader cultural network in which female representations are continuously reinterpreted, negotiated, and politicised.

Accordingly, an approach to analysing television series must necessarily integrate qualitative content analysis (including thematic analysis), aimed at identifying recurring patterns, gender models, character trajectories, and narrative structures (Krippendorff, 2004), with attention - at least in part - to the visual and formal dimensions of audiovisual language, such as framing, use of colour, editing, gaze, and spatial construction (Mulvey, 1975). Furthermore, the specificity of a sociological approach (focused on cultural and communicative processes) allows these representations to be situated within broader frameworks that interrogate the relationship between media, power, and the construction of identities (Van Zoonen, 1994).

For these reasons, it is grounded in a plural methodological approach that integrates textual, visual, and sociological analysis.

2.2 Sociological analysis of the text

Once the corpus had been defined, a set of analytical criteria was established in order to enable comparison across the selected cases. The analysis focuses primarily on the pilot episode of each series, as this episode performs a crucial function in constructing the narrative universe: it introduces the characters, establishes the symbolic and value-based

coordinates of the story, defines relational hierarchies, and foregrounds key conflicts. In short, it encapsulates the series' narrative complexity (Mittell, 2015). From a production perspective, the pilot is also a text designed to condense the series's identity and render its cultural and commercial positioning immediately recognisable. Analysing the pilot, therefore, allows us to observe the "initial staging" of female representations, examining how they are presented, coded, and made intelligible to the viewer. However, while the analysis begins with the pilot episodes, it also takes into account subsequent narrative developments in order to identify potential transformations in the characters and to assess whether initial configurations are confirmed, problematised, or subverted over the course of episodes or seasons.

2.3 Description of the analytical framework

The analytical framework was developed in line with the integrated approach outlined above, which combines media studies, sociology of culture, and gender studies. Accordingly, the analysis is grounded in a theoretical model that identifies different possible relationships between television series and feminism: the absence or implicit critique of feminism, in which feminist concerns are marginalised or neutralised; the presence of feminist themes in varying forms and degrees, through narratives that address gender inequalities and structural conflicts; and the influence of a postfeminist sensibility, characterised by an emphasis on individual choice, empowerment, and self-realisation within neoliberal frameworks.

The first category identified (absence or implicit critique of feminism) was excluded from the empirical analysis, following a deliberate theoretical and strategic choice. The aim of the research is not to map the entire spectrum of contemporary seriality, but rather to focus on those productions that occupy a more complex and discursively ambivalent space, in which feminist concerns are explicitly addressed, reworked, or transformed. Concentrating on the second and third categories, therefore, allows for a more productive investigation of the dynamics of negotiation, co-optation, and transformation of gender-related concerns within contemporary popular culture.

The framework also includes a section dedicated to the analysis of the main characters - all female within the selected sample - focusing on their professional, affective, and relational roles. Their ways of being and expressing femininity, the tensions that may emerge in relation to other genders (male, transgender, etc.), their specific characteristics, and, above all, their narrative agency contribute to forms of innovation that are visible both within traditional television and in streaming contexts. In essence, the categories included in the analytical framework enabled the identification of multiple elements of originality in the selected series, extending beyond traditional characterisations of female figures.

Feminisms

The first dimension of the framework concerns the identification of the type or types of feminism that emerge within each series. Without seeking to impose normative labels, the series are analysed as sites of cultural negotiation in which different feminisms may coexist in contradictory forms, oscillating between structural critique and the individualisation of conflict (McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020).

Main Characters
The second macro-area focuses on central female characters, based on the assumption that gender representations emerge and are articulated through narrative and relational trajectories (Van Zoonen, 1994). Characters are analysed as evolving configurations across four dimensions: the evolution of their relationship with work, the evolution of their relationship with the affective sphere, the evolution of their relationship with themselves, and the evolution of their relationships with other women.

Evolution of the Relationship with Work
Work is considered a key site of agency and symbolic recognition. The analysis examines:
- economic autonomy;
- the tension between ambition and gender constraints;
- the possible articulation of meritocratic logics typical of neoliberal feminism.

Evolution of the Relationship with the Affective Sphere
The affective sphere is analysed as a site of negotiation between power and desire. The analysis focuses on:
- the centrality (or otherwise) of marriage;
- dynamics of domination or reciprocity;
- the possible transformation of love into a narrative device of resolution.

Evolution of the Relationship with the Self
This dimension addresses the construction of female subjectivity, focusing on:
- the relationship with the body;
- forms of self-awareness and identity construction;
- vulnerability and resilience.

Evolution of the Relationship with Other Women
Finally, the analysis examines dynamics of solidarity and competition among women, assessing whether the series promotes collective models of emancipation or reproduces individualistic logics, in line with the tensions between political feminism and postfeminism.

3.Results. The analysis of television series

3.1 Orange Is the New Black

Orange Is the New Black[2] is an American television series created by Jenji Kohan and based on Piper Kerman's memoir of the same name, in which the author recounts her experience of one year of imprisonment in a federal correctional facility near New York. The series adopts the protagonist's perspective to explore the dynamics of power, identity, and belonging, offering a collective representation of female subjectivities and the biographical trajectories of incarcerated women. In relation to the analytical framework adopted, OITNB emerges from the outset as a particularly significant text, as it allows one to observe the protagonists' relationship with work, the affective sphere, their own bodies, and other women

simultaneously. The series does not propose a single model of femininity or feminism, but rather stages plural and often contradictory female subjectivities, traversed by differences of class, race, age, sexual orientation, and social position.

The prison setting thus constitutes the symbolic space of the narrative, in which the orange colour of the uniform visually identifies the women and becomes one of the iconic elements of the series' imaginary. The reference to colour and uniform, as key codes within the language of clothing, is significant for several reasons: it refers to a specific institutional context and denies those within it the possibility of expressing themselves through a differentiated wardrobe. From an analytical point of view, the uniform operates within the protagonist's relationship with herself, insofar as it reflects her awareness of having entered a new context and routine that initially renders her vulnerable. It also functions as a de-individualising marker, connoting any woman in that space as a "prisoner" and reducing the meaning of clothing to a binary: belonging or not belonging to that world.

The uniform thus establishes a principle of homogenisation and levelling, while simultaneously providing a strong recognisability of the values it embodies, both for those who wear it and for those who observe it (cf. Mascio, 2023a). It effectively creates a visual grammar based on conformity, in which individual identity is subordinated to collective order. To stand out, individual identities must therefore rely on alternative forms of expression that differ significantly from conventional ones. In OITNB, the uniform thus constitutes an initial rupture with traditional stereotypes used to represent female figures on screen. Precisely because it deprives the inmates of the possibility of representing themselves through clothing, the uniform makes other codes of subjectivation more visible: language, gestures, postures, alliances, conflicts, and individual memories. In this sense, the uniform does not entirely erase identities, but forces the protagonists to negotiate them through alternative expressive forms.

Crossing the threshold of the prison marks a substantial transformation in Piper's lifestyle, as well as that of the other women, affecting both their relationship with themselves and those with other women. The supposed principle of order and equality, as a normative effect of the institution, combined with the lack of freedom - even in the expression of the self through clothing - results in a form of personal and social mortification for all the inmates. The prison therefore operates as a device for disciplining both body and identity: it deprives women of spaces of privacy, autonomy, and self-determination, while at the same time making visible the strategies through which they reconstruct partial forms of agency within a highly constraining system.

To convey the prisoners' complex identities on screen and show their lives prior to incarceration, the series employs a narrative device typical of complex television (Mittell, 2015): flashbacks. Through the juxtaposition of past and present moments, OITNB invites viewers to follow a story structured through a multiperspectival dimension from the very first moments of the pilot episode. Piper is introduced to the audience through a series of frames that depict her in different contexts, revealing her plural identity: the main narrative line presents a recent past in which she is happily in a relationship with a man, living in a comfortable home and surrounded by close friends. Additional flashbacks introduce a more distant past, in which she is involved in a lesbian relationship and exposed to dangerous situations linked to drug trafficking. From the outset, the character appears ambivalent: initially, viewers are led to assume a narrative centred on a miscarriage of justice, as Piper is presented as a white, attractive, young, and educated woman, surrounded by characters who appear narratively "respectable".

Piper's affective sphere plays a decisive role in constructing this ambivalence. Her heterosexual relationship with Larry initially places her within a normative and reassuring

imaginary, based on domesticity, stability, and bourgeois respectability. Her relationship with Alex, by contrast, reactivates a transgressive past and a queer dimension that destabilises this image. Affectivity therefore does not function as a simple device of narrative resolution, but rather as a space of identity conflict, in which desire, guilt, dependency, and self-determination intersect.

As the series unfolds, however, Piper does not conform to the model of the idealised young woman frequently portrayed in television series, that is, a reassuring WASP heroine. The flashbacks enable viewers to reconstruct her identity and reveal elements that characterise her as a complex and contradictory figure: she is a woman capable of breaking rules and navigating extreme situations, ultimately paying the price for her actions through imprisonment. She thus emerges as a controversial figure, resisting stereotypical and sexist representations of female characters typically found in television narratives. Her trajectory can also be read as an expression of a postfeminist sensibility, insofar as the narrative initially insists on individual choice, autonomy, and personal responsibility. However, Piper's white and bourgeois privilege is progressively called into question through her encounter with the other inmates, whose biographies show how the possibility of choice is always conditioned by material, social, and institutional factors.

Piper's multifaceted identity is constructed in the pilot through the spatial setting of the bathroom, which functions as a "switch-context", evoking different environments: from a comfortable bathtub, to a luxurious shower, to the bleak and shared prison showers. The choice of the bathroom is not incidental. In correctional facilities, this space loses its private and intimate character, becoming a fully public environment in which even time - understood as duration - takes on a different meaning: the personal moment of relaxation associated with showering gives way to a regimented, almost militarised rhythm. The bathroom is also the domestic space where the body is typically undressed and immersed in moments of relaxation and pleasure. These moments are depicted in the pilot, initially showing Piper relaxed in a candlelit bath, then scenes in which she appears tense and exposed in a dirty, shared prison shower. The relationship with the self, therefore, passes first and foremost through the body, which in prison is removed from the private sphere and inserted into a regime of forced visibility. The shower scene clearly shows this transformation: Piper's body, initially associated with intimacy, care, and pleasure, is then exposed in a collective space that is degraded and regulated by the institution.

As Hohenstein and Thalmann (2019, p. 121) note, the depiction of a woman's body in a bathroom aligns with "a genre convention or stock scene, namely one which Jason Demers describes as 'women in showers being watched'" (Demers 2017, p. 405). This corresponds to the use of a male gaze that marks the transition from the sensual display of the body to the discomfort generated by the absence of choice in exposing oneself. In the prison showers of OITNB, however, the gaze is embodied primarily by other women - fellow inmates - thus subverting conventional rules of female representation. The comments directed at Piper by some prisoners are inappropriate and unsettling, experienced as forms of violence typically associated with male behavior. Yet, as Schwan argues in analysing the shower scene:

> Although the visual emphasis on lesbianism could be seen as problematic in that it reaffirms the traditional, stereotypical conflation of women's social and sexual deviance, such strategies of representation operate in more complex ways in a postfeminist media climate where the show also has the potential to positively affirm lesbian - and in Piper's case, bisexual - visibility and agency (Schwan, 2016, p. 478).

The representation of female and queer sexuality, therefore, remains ambivalent: on the one hand, it may reproduce problematic spectatorial codes linked to the visibility of the female

body and the sexualisation of lesbianism; on the other hand, it contributes to making visible lesbian and bisexual subjectivities that are rarely placed at the centre of mainstream serial narratives. OITNB thus occupies an unstable but productive position between the risk of stereotyping and the possibility of recognition.

The (fictional) Litchfield penitentiary is inhabited almost exclusively by women (with a small number of male guards). The narrative's collective dimension thus encompasses multiple female voices, generating both forms of solidarity and moments of conflict. Within this quasi-gynaeceum, women are subject to two sets of rules: those imposed by the institution and those established within the inmate community itself. Roles and relationships are therefore governed by different regimes. For instance, Galina "Red" Reznikov not only serves a sentence for her involvement with the Russian mafia, but also manages the prison kitchen, exercising significant power by using food as a means of control and punishment. The relationship with work takes on a specific form here: it does not coincide with professional fulfillment or full economic autonomy, but with a system of tasks, hierarchies, and micro-powers internal to the penitentiary institution. For Red, the kitchen becomes a space of limited agency, in which work enables her to obtain recognition and control, but always within the boundaries imposed by the prison.

Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren, an African American woman from a marginal socio-economic background, develops an obsessive attachment to Piper. Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson represents a group of Black women who challenge the protagonist's privilege. Carrie "Big Boo" Black embodies a butch lesbian subjectivity that deviates from traditional gender norms. These figures broaden the representation of femininity beyond Piper's centrality, allowing the series to adopt a more intersectional perspective. Gender, race, class, sexuality, mental health, and social marginality are not treated as separate elements, but as axes that combine to shape the inmates' living conditions and their possibilities for action.

Through this plurality of characters - differing in age, social background, religion, and ethnicity - OITNB constructs a complex representation of femininity, offering a critical perspective on serial stereotypes and foregrounding the centrality of anti-heroines. Over the course of the series, Piper's voice gradually gives way to those of other inmates, who anchor the narrative in themes closely connected to feminism and femininity. The progressive decentring of Piper is one of the most significant aspects of the series: the white, bourgeois, and relatively privileged protagonist initially serves as an entry point for the viewer, but the narrative gradually opens up to less-represented subjectivities, showing that female experience cannot be reduced to a single model.

> OITNB is caught precisely in a tension between performing its own mode of (post)feminist critique while exposing itself to critical analyses of the limitations of its postfeminist sensibility. Through the figure of Piper, and the show's distinctive use of women in prison tropes, Orange is the new Black both problematises and remains constrained by the double bind of postfeminism's ambivalent politics (Schwan, 2016, p. 476).

In this framework, relationships between women are not represented in an idealised way. The series alternates between solidarity, rivalry, domination, care, blackmail, and alliance. Prison does not automatically produce sisterhood, but forces inmates to construct unstable forms of community. Female solidarity often emerges as a situated, fragile, and contingent practice, rather than as an abstract value. At the same time, competition between women frequently appears to be produced by the material conditions of the institution: scarcity of resources, internal hierarchies, racialised spaces, and the need for survival.

The series thus foregrounds structural factors - such as poverty, family neglect, racism, homophobia, and lack of education - that help explain why many of the women at Litchfield

have committed crimes, adopting a critical stance towards the social inequalities that produce and reproduce criminality, for both men and women. Within this framework, the protagonists of OITNB fully embody the role of anti-heroines, or "difficult women" (Hohenstein & Thalmann, 2019), not because they deviate from moral norms, but because they resist simplistic categorisation, emerging as contradictory and ambivalent subjectivities deeply rooted in structural conditions of inequality. While partially aligned with a postfeminist sensibility - particularly in their emphasis on agency and individual choice - these figures simultaneously challenge its assumptions, demonstrating how such choices are always constrained by material and institutional limits. In light of the analytical framework, OITNB can therefore be read as a series traversed by a plurality of feminisms: postfeminist in the centrality attributed to individual agency, intersectional in its representation of differences among inmates, queer in the visibility it grants to non-normative sexualities and identities, and structural in its critique of the prison institution and social inequalities. Its strength lies precisely in this tension: the series does not offer a pacified image of female emancipation, but shows vulnerable, conflictual, and resistant subjectivities whose agency is always constructed within relations of power.

3.2 The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale, a political dystopian drama adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, was produced in the United States and premiered on Hulu in 2017. The series is aimed at an adult audience, given the complexity of the issues it addresses.

From the opening sequence onwards, an imaginary of control and oppression is established through the use of red and black, sombre music, close-up shots of faces, and claustrophobic spaces (Harrison, 2020). The pilot episode, entitled "Offred" (after the name acquired by the protagonist in the new dystopian setting), introduces the political order of Gilead, an imagined theocratic and totalitarian society which, following a severe global fertility crisis, rigidly organises its system according to a hierarchy of gender and class, assigning women specific roles and drastically limiting their rights. In the pilot, we also witness the protagonist's progressive transformation in terms of identity, from free woman to Handmaid. In the Republic of Gilead, fertile women are turned into Handmaids, forced to reproduce on behalf of the families of the ruling elite, the Wives. The protagonist, June Osborne, who is renamed Offred ("of Fred"), is assigned to the household of Commander Waterford and his wife, Serena Joy. Within this system, June is deprived of her identity, personal freedom, and control over her own body, which is subjected to compulsory and institutionalised fertilisation rituals. Through a narrative structure that alternates between the present and flashbacks, the series recounts both June's everyday life in Gilead and her life before the coup, when she lived with her husband, Luke, and their daughter, Hannah. Her forced separation from her family constitutes one of the story's main emotional cores and motivates her gradual path towards resistance.

On the basis of these initial cinematic and interpretative elements, the series might appear to be situated within a framework of political and structural feminism, although on closer examination, this positioning is neither entirely straightforward nor linear. Weiss's (2009) reading questions the idea that Offred is a resistant heroine, arguing instead that she is complicit with the system, both before and after the establishment of Gilead. Weiss reconstructs three main interpretations of the character: he reads her as a rebel, insofar as she resists through language, memory, and narration, yet this resistance is presented as weak and ineffective. His central argument is that the protagonist is complicit because she

contributed to the emergence of the system and continues to participate in it passively. In this sense, Gilead would also be the product of collective passivity, as people accept the system simply to preserve a sense of security, stability, and comfort. Boyle (2023) likewise argues that the series advances a conservative or domestic feminism, as it emphasises and idealises themes such as motherhood, family, and women's caring roles, rather than critically interrogating them:

> Rather than critiquing the traditional family unit and women's roles as wives and mothers, the first episode of the series teaches viewers to value these gendered institutions and identities (Boyle, 2023, p. 136).

At the same time, the serial narrative does not address themes such as abortion, alternatives to motherhood, or maternal ambivalence, perhaps also in keeping with the feminist framework of the period in which the source novel was originally produced.

The notion of the "resilient heroine" is also useful for grasping the ambivalence of a figure such as June, who can resist and adapt to oppressive contexts without necessarily subverting them. As Gorton (2021) argues, resilience entails a capacity to "bounce back" that is based not on the elimination of vulnerability, but on its integration, giving rise to forms of "resistant vulnerability" in which fragility and resistance coexist. However, this configuration is not without tension: while resilience offers audiences identificatory and pedagogical models, it also risks being inscribed within a neoliberal logic that individualises the problem of inequality, assigning subjects the responsibility to adapt rather than to transform social structures.

What can certainly be said is that this is not a postfeminist narrative, but rather a dystopia that explicitly denounces the regression of women's rights and the entanglement of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and state power. The series also stages an intersectional structure of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), in which gender intersects with religion, class, and institutional control. Where feminism does emerge, it does so primarily through the representation of the loss of fundamental rights: economic autonomy, access to work, and control over motherhood.

In the analysis of female characters, the affective dimension is marked by trauma: June is separated from her husband, Luke, and her daughter. Motherhood, in turn, is transformed from a private experience into a political dispositif, functional to maintaining a rigid patriarchal order in which Handmaids are compelled to reproduce only to surrender their children to other women who occupy a hierarchically superior position. Love survives as memory and inner resistance, configuring itself as a residual space of subjectivity within a totalising system. In this sense, the series problematises the traditional centrality of love within women's genres, transforming it from a narrative endpoint into a form of survival. At the same time, June's relationship with Nick may be interpreted ambiguously: what might be read as rebellion is in fact a private escape (Weiss, 2009), one that weakens the impetus towards resistance. In this sense, love becomes compensation rather than revolution. Nick is, in fact, an ambiguous and liminal figure: initially presented as Commander Waterford's driver, he is connected to the Eyes (the regime's secret police) while also maintaining ties with the resistance. For Offred, he is an ambiguous ally within the system: on the one hand, he is involved in an intimate relationship with her, initially imposed by Serena Joy; on the other, he represents a possible emotional and affective route of escape for the protagonist.

As regards June's relationship with herself and with her body, the series constructs her subjectivity through a split self (Harrison, 2020), achieved through voice-over, visual choices, and film language. Whereas in the novel the narration unfolds entirely in the first

person, in the series it is multiperspectival, though June retains a privileged interior monologue. Her identity is split across several levels: the pre-Gilead June, Offred (the imposed identity), and the inner narrating voice. The voice-over expresses what she cannot say aloud and creates a distance between her inner self and her social self.

The female body is disciplined, ritualised, and controlled. The red cloak and white bonnet, which constitute the Handmaids' "uniform", homogenise and erase individuality. The Ceremony makes explicit the reduction of woman to a state instrument. This narrative construction aligns with Foucault's reflections on biopower, namely the political control of bodies and reproduction (Foucault, 1975), in which the fertile body is transformed into state property and incorporated into a biopolitical logic. Female freedom thus appears fragile and revocable, never definitively secured.

Regarding relationships with other women, the series presents female relationships as ambivalent and stratified. Moira (a Handmaid) embodies a form of resistance; Serena Joy (a Wife) represents the contradictory complicity of someone who, although oppressed, benefits from the system; while Aunt Lydia embodies the internalisation of patriarchy, as she trains the Handmaids, exercises control and punishment, imposes an ideological worldview, and promotes surveillance among women. In this sense, what emerges is not a relationship of sisterhood or solidarity, but rather elements of conflict and competition.

The relationship with work and social role is represented in terms of the erasure of women's economic autonomy: women lose their jobs, access to money, and citizenship. Roles are rigidly assigned - Handmaids, Wives, Marthas - and defined exclusively in relation to the needs of the system. What we witness is a radical transformation: the woman is no longer a social subject, but a biological function.

On the level of visual style and language, the series privileges insistent close-ups of June, looks into the camera that establish a direct dialogue with the viewer, and a symbolic use of colour (red for fertility and blood, green for the Wives, blue for power). The use of silence and a minimalist soundtrack intensifies the claustrophobic atmosphere. Verbal language is likewise a tool of control: biblical vocabulary legitimises the system, while renaming ("Offred", "of Fred") erases individual identity, transforming the name into a sign of proprietary belonging.

Set in a dystopian near future, in terms of both temporality and socio-cultural context, the series engages with contemporary tensions over reproductive rights, religious fundamentalism, and authoritarian drift.

Gender roles are extremely rigid: men hold power, while women are defined by function. There is neither fluidity nor hybridity. Gender appears as a coercive and institutionalised construction.

As for intersectional aspects, the pilot episode foregrounds the intersection of gender, fertility, religion, and class (Crenshaw, 1989).

The transmedia dimension of *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes particularly evident when one considers the circulation of the text across different media, languages, and social practices. As Mascio (2020) shows, the series does not end with its televisual form, but is embedded within a broader narrative and cultural genealogy that includes, first and foremost, Atwood's 1985 novel and the subsequent 1990 film adaptation, thus configuring itself as a text that traverses different semiotic systems through ongoing processes of translation and resemanticisation. Added to this layering are the participatory practices of audiences, which further expand the universe of the series: *author* recalls, for instance, the rapid online circulation of memes inspired by the series' imagery, often centred on Donald Trump and the visual symbols of Gilead, as well as the political use of the hashtag #NoliteTeBastardesCarborundorum, taken from the narrative and reused as a code of

female resistance on social media. Also significant is the transformation of the Handmaid's red uniform into a global cultural icon: worn during public demonstrations in the United States, Europe, and Latin America against anti-abortion policies and gender discrimination, it shows how an element originating in fiction can be reappropriated within public space and invested with new political meanings.

3.3 Fleabag

In 2016, *Fleabag*[3], a series written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, premiered on the BBC. It is based on the experiences of a young London woman whose name is never revealed, (though she is, of course, identifiable as "Fleabag").

The protagonist's personality is clearly established in the pilot episode, where Fleabag is portrayed as struggling to manage a failing café, the complications of an unstable romantic life, and relationships with a dysfunctional family that rarely offers her understanding or empathy. Her vulnerability, however, does not coincide with a condition of structural marginality. Embedded within a well-off family context, she can rely on substantial economic and social capital, which functions as a safety net. In other words, the character does not represent a minoritised subjectivity: she is a white, British, middle-class woman and, as such, occupies a position of privilege that mitigates the risk of social exclusion. Her crisis thus appears more existential than systemic, inscribed within coordinates of class and race that nevertheless guarantee her access to resources and recognition. From the outset, *Fleabag* is therefore configured as a series centred less on the denunciation of explicit structural oppression than on the questioning of normative models of contemporary femininity. The protagonist does occupy a position of relative privilege, yet this privilege does not protect her from failure, from a sense of inadequacy, or from the difficulty of constructing a coherent and socially recognisable subjectivity.

Each episode of the series is permeated by an atmosphere of mourning and, at the same time, of catharsis: the flashbacks devoted to Boo, Fleabag's friend and business partner, and the memories of her mother, both of whom died before the beginning of the story, partially justify in the viewer's eyes some of Fleabag's attitudes, especially her emotional fragility and her choices, which are not always rational or carefully considered. These aspects, however, are sustained by a sarcastic tone that pervades both seasons: Fleabag is ironic and self-ironic, and although she finds herself in difficult, at times dramatic situations, she never indulges in self-pity.

One particularly original element lies in the narrative construction, based on the breaking of the fourth wall: at different moments, the protagonist withdraws from the scene to address the audience directly, winking, anticipating other characters' lines, and providing explanations for events. Although this strategy is not entirely new in television seriality (as exemplified by Carrie Bradshaw in the first season of *Sex and the City*, or Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*), here it produces a dissonance with the linearity of spectatorship: it simulates a kind of direct interaction with the viewer - or, more accurately, the female viewer - creating an effect of both complicity and intimacy. Consequently, a pact of trust is established between the audience and the protagonist, who at times appears to choose the audience as her privileged interlocutor, preferring it to the characters on screen.

The breaking of the fourth wall also activates a metareferential device that destabilises the boundary between diegetic and extradiegetic levels. While remaining within the narrative, Fleabag constantly exceeds its limits, addressing the viewer directly and, at times, assuming an almost lateral position in relation to events, as though observing them while

seated beside the audience. This double status - simultaneously character and enunciative instance - produces a self-reflexive movement that shapes Fleabag's relationship with herself and her perspective on social relationships beyond the formal conventions she adopts in everyday interactions. Fleabag thus functions as a mediating device, capable of guiding the viewer in and out of the text, oscillating between immersion and distance. The character allows us into her world, reveals what she thinks and what happens to her, although she occasionally omits significant parts of her story. In essence, she presents herself as a confiding but unreliable narrator, withholding aspects of her experience that are later disclosed to the audience over the course of the episodes. From this perspective, the breaking of the fourth wall can be interpreted as a strategy through which Fleabag controls both her image and her own narrative. She constantly shows herself to the viewer, but she also decides what to conceal, when to divert attention, and which aspects of her vulnerability to make accessible. The metanarrative device thus becomes a form of self-defense: it allows the protagonist to evade the judgment of the other characters, though not always her own self-judgment.

This multiperspectival view of narrated events, as well as of herself, also informs Fleabag's relationship with feminism. In the pilot, the young woman turns up at her father's house in the middle of the night, declaring: "I have a horrible feeling that I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist." Her father responds: "That sounds like your mother." This scene sets the tone for the entire series: on the one hand, it explores Fleabag's femininity and the moral and social contexts that lead her to perceive herself as a "failed" feminist; on the other, it shows how the protagonist challenges her own narrative, resisting her own story through genuine forms of opposition. As Dove-Viebahn argues:

> Articulating the power of feminist failure and femme resistance [...] *Fleabag* signifies myriad ways women and other feminized subjects in contemporary popular culture struggle to wrest their agency from normative constructions of femininity and offers resolution through the lenses of reclamation and refusal (Dove-Viebahn, 2024, p. 1402).

Fleabag can therefore be read as a series traversed by a tension between postfeminism and a critique of neoliberal feminism. On the one hand, the protagonist seems to be situated within a postfeminist imaginary based on individual autonomy, sexual freedom, irony, and personal responsibility. On the other hand, the series reveals the emotional cost of such freedom, showing how the contemporary imperative to be independent, desirable, brilliant, and high-performing may itself become a new form of discipline. The feminism of *Fleabag* therefore does not coincide with a positive and pacified model of emancipation, but rather with an unstable practice of resistance, refusal, and survival.

Although the other characters seize every opportunity to highlight her frailties, Fleabag embodies strength and a marked capacity for resistance, both in relation to the precepts of feminism - as transmitted to her above all by her late mother -and in relation to life's difficulties.

From the perspective of liberal feminism (Darling, 2022), Fleabag represents both a failed figure and a model of a woman capable of managing, albeit chaotically, situations of considerable complexity. The character's development - and her contrast with other female characters in television series - unfolds precisely through failure and loss: in her tragic dimension, this young woman constantly conveys a positive form of hope. As Halberstam, quoted by Dove-Viebahn, states:

> ‘failure’ constitutes a rejection rather than a mistake, which wrests control back from the institution or the systems of social expectation and reaffirms the agency of the subject; failure pushes back against ‘punishing norms’ and reifies the ‘wondrous anarchy of childhood’ (Dove-Viebahn, 2024, pp. 1405–1406).

Failure thus becomes an identity marker for Fleabag, one that operates both in her relationship with herself and, in comparison with other women: a label imposed on her from outside, which she ultimately incorporates and resignifies, transforming it into a narrative resource and a space of freedom. The conscious adoption of this position allows her to practise forms of everyday anarchy, freeing herself - at least temporarily - from normative expectations. In this sense, she appears as an anti-heroine capable of opening up new possibilities in the representation of female and feminist life trajectories, from a popular and fluid perspective.

Her relationship with the affective sphere, particularly with men, is ambivalent and controversial. Fleabag acts according to desire, contingency, and desperation: she abandons the prospect of a stable relationship in favour of casual encounters, often with men far removed from dominant aesthetic standards (the case of the “buck-toothed” man she meets on the bus is emblematic). Her trajectory is not based on the pursuit of coherence or respectability, but on a constant impulse towards experimentation. In rejecting relationships emptied of meaning, however formally reassuring, she stages a deliberate departure from her comfort zone, displaying a degree of risk and courage that redefines, in ambivalent terms, the possibilities of female self-determination.

Her relationship with the family, although structured by recurring rituals of encounter, also proves profoundly fragile, grounded more in convention and formality than in genuine affective closeness. It is precisely within the family sphere that the most marked confrontation with other female figures is articulated: from the mother, who remains a constant presence in speech and memory, to the stepmother, with whom a measured yet persistent dynamic of opposition develops, marked by formalities and subtle barbs. Relationships with other women do not take the form of a pacified sisterhood in the series. On the contrary, they are marked by loss, competition, emotional distance, and a desire for recognition. Boo represents the most authentic and generative female bond, yet she is an absent presence, reconstructed through memory and guilt. Fleabag’s mother, also deceased, continues to operate as an affective and moral model, especially regarding the idea of feminism that Fleabag feels unable to embody. The stepmother, by contrast, occupies the space of rivalry and symbolic replacement, while Claire represents an ambivalent form of closeness: she is at once antagonist, mirror, and Fleabag’s main possibility of alliance.

The most complex bond, however, is with her sister Claire, who embodies an apparently successful model of femininity: professionally accomplished, married, and situated within a domestic environment that reflects upper-middle-class belonging. Claire represents adherence to an ideal of performative femininity aligned with the logics of neoliberal rationality - efficiency, control, respectability, and success. In this sense, the contrast between the two sisters is not merely temperamental but paradigmatic: it stages two different ways of inhabiting contemporary social expectations. As Orlaith Darling observes, “this neoliberal culture inculcates women with the need to ‘self-manage’” (Darling, 2022, p. 133).

This imperative of self-management is expressed above all through the sphere of work. Claire is a successful woman who is constantly pursuing promotions. Fleabag, by contrast, struggles to run a café: her relationship to work appears consistent with her broader pattern of failures and reinforces a profile that is unambitious and lacking major aspirations. Fleabag’s work, however, cannot be read solely as an indicator of professional failure. The

café is also the material site of her relationship with Boo, and therefore a space marked by mourning, guilt, and memory. Her inability to manage the business effectively does not simply signal a lack of ambition, but rather reveals the difficulty of transforming a lost affective bond into an economically sustainable project. In this sense, work does not coincide with neoliberal self-realisation, but becomes the site in which loss, the desire for reparation, and the impossibility of moving forward are condensed. Although Claire embodies a socially recognised positive model - in apparent contrast to her sister's "failure" - she does not, however, represent a fulfilled femininity. The social and familial expectations that structure her daily life become an all-pervasive normative device, a kind of cage that directs and disciplines every choice. The comparison between the two sisters is thus not resolved in Claire's favour: her position as a successful woman is marked by constant tension, which makes her, paradoxically, less free and less satisfied than Fleabag. From this perspective, the latter's "failure" acquires a different meaning: it is configured as an act of withdrawal and a form of self-defence, a deviation from a rigid and pre-established model of accomplished femininity. It becomes a form of redemption and a new model of personal freedom. The comparison, therefore, challenges the idea that female emancipation coincides with professional success, emotional control, and social respectability. Claire seems to embody the perfectly functioning neoliberal woman, whereas Fleabag represents her disordered and failed reverse image. Yet the series shows how both women are trapped within different normative models: Claire within the obligation of efficiency and self-control, Fleabag within the impossibility of adhering to a stable and recognisable image of herself.

Failure thus becomes a dispositif for breaking rules, a practice of disalignment from the neoliberal norms of performance and respectability. *Fleabag* is therefore configured as a series centred on the crisis of normative models of contemporary femininity. Work, sexuality, family, mourning, and relationships between women do not function as spaces of identity stabilisation, but as sites of friction, failure, and redefinition of the self. The protagonist does not offer an exemplary model of female emancipation: on the contrary, she stages a vulnerable, contradictory, and often self-destructive subjectivity that, precisely through failure, manages to evade expectations of coherence, success, and respectability. In this sense, *Fleabag* produces a non-normative form of feminism, grounded less in empowerment as individual success than in the possibility of inhabiting inadequacy as a practice of resistance.

3.4 Bridgerton

Bridgerton (Netflix, 2020-present) is a series in the dramatic/romantic genre, set in England during the Regency period, produced in the United States. It was created by Chris Van Dusen, adapted from Julia Quinn's romance saga, and produced by Shondaland. The series is aimed at a predominantly female and adult audience, as well as young adults, thereby exhibiting a strong cross-generational character.

Its narrative universe is constructed as an artificial, theatrical, and consciously aestheticised space, as is evident in the opening sequence, characterised by pastel colours, soft, diffused lighting, and orchestral arrangements of contemporary pop songs.

The pilot episode is entitled "Diamond of the First Water", a title that introduces and anticipates many of the themes that shape the development of the plot, such as the logic of evaluation and classification that structures the narrative universe of the series. Daphne is designated the "diamond" of the season, thus becoming an object of value within the aristocratic marriage market. The metaphor of the diamond evokes not only aesthetic

perfection and purity, but also the reduction of the female body to a symbolic good, destined to be observed, judged, and socially "exchanged".

With regard to its relationship to feminisms, *Bridgerton* does not propose an explicit feminism that openly challenges the rules of the patriarchal system; rather, it stages a predominantly negotiated feminism, evoking certain elements of popular feminism and intersectional feminism (represented, for example, by an apparently inclusive casting strategy). Intersectionality, however, appears to be more aesthetic than political, since, as Sipe (2023) observes, *Bridgerton transforms* structural racism into a problem that can be resolved through romantic desire, constructing a fictional post-racial and postfeminist historical reality in which romantic love and individual desire are presented as mechanisms capable of overcoming social tensions and hierarchies of power:

> I describe the show as post-racial because, while it does not ignore race entirely, racism as a systemic issue is said to no longer exist. In the fantasy of *Bridgerton*, King George III's love for his biracial wife compelled him to racially integrate the entire aristocracy. This fictional history, recounted by the Queen herself, is meant to illustrate the show's core conviction: love and desire supersede all [...]. Racism was dismantled because a white man loved a Black woman (Sipe, 2023, p. 335).

Racism is thus reduced to an obstacle overcome at the individual level, while women hold symbolic power (the Queen, Lady Danbury), yet their horizon remains essentially centred on love and marriage. The series does not, moreover, genuinely challenge colonialism or the logics of privilege.

Feminist values and themes emerge through signals such as the presence of a female narrative voice (Lady Whistledown), the female agency embodied by certain characters, and the legitimisation of female desire and pleasure. With specific reference to agency, Queen Charlotte is one of the few female figures who exercises public decision-making power: she determines who will be the "diamond" of the season, influences the marriage market, and can alter the social destiny of young women; she effectively rules the court, since she is not subordinated to a man, given that the king is ill and marginal. Although she participates in the production of social value, her agency is nevertheless limited and perfectly inscribed within the system, so that it constitutes a symbolic rather than genuinely transformative possibility for action.

Beyond identifying the feminist sensibilities mobilised by the series, it is equally important to examine the specific configuration of femininity that *Bridgerton* constructs. Rather than presenting femininity as a stable identity, the series frames it as a performative achievement continuously negotiated through visibility, elegance, reputation, and desirability. Femininity is produced through ritual practices - debut presentations, courtship, dress, etiquette, and public display - that simultaneously enable and constrain female agency. This configuration directly reflects one of the analytical dimensions adopted in this study, namely the ways television seriality constructs and negotiates models of femininity. Rather than relocating women outside patriarchal structures, *Bridgerton* depicts femininity as a symbolic resource whose value depends upon public recognition and social legitimacy. In this sense, the series illustrates how contemporary seriality often relocates gender negotiations from explicitly political arenas to symbolic and affective ones, where recognition is pursued through cultural legitimacy rather than through structural transformation.

As regards the affective sphere, the main character, Daphne, is fully inserted into the marriage market, in the sense that marriage is understood as an economic strategy and a social investment. Over the course of the season, however, affectivity develops from a purely economic and romantic objective into the discovery of desire.

From the perspective of the analytical framework, the relationship with work is particularly revealing because it is largely absent from the narrative. Unlike the other series analysed, *Bridgerton* does not construct professional activity as a meaningful source of female agency or self-realisation. Women's social value is instead produced through family lineage, marriageability, reputation, and symbolic capital. Female characters are expected to invest in the successful performance of aristocratic femininity rather than in economic independence or professional achievement. This absence is analytically significant. Within the framework adopted in this study, work functions as one of the principal indicators of agency and autonomy; its marginality in *Bridgerton* therefore reinforces a model of femininity in which women's possibilities for action remain embedded within systems of kinship, inheritance, and social reproduction, despite the limited spaces of individual choice that the narrative allows.

Regarding the evolution of the relationship with the self (and the body), a transformation is also evident. First of all, female subjectivity is mediated by desire and consumption, such that female identity is not constructed through a process of structural autonomy, but through relationships and desire. In the pilot episode, moreover, the body is subjected to public evaluation (the girls' bodies at the ball) and disciplined through dress, posture, and ritual, in a context in which consumption also occupies a central place in the construction of identity, within the framework of what Fisher (2009) calls capitalist realism:

> in this era of austerity, deregulation, and wealth inequality, hyper-individualistic consumption is espoused to be the only legitimate force of a just society (Sipe, 2023, p. 336).

In this sense, since the women are presented as "debutantes" exposed to the social gaze and publicly evaluated, the female body becomes a good to be assessed and "consumed" within the marriage market, according to a clear logic of commodification. Even if, as the narrative unfolds, the body appears to become "liberated", turning into a space of discovery and erotic awareness, all of this occurs within a system that is, in substance, unchangeable.

At the same time, the evolution of the protagonists' relationship with themselves remains incomplete. Although Daphne progressively acquires greater awareness of her own desires and sexuality, this process unfolds almost exclusively within the horizon of heterosexual romance and marriage. Self-discovery is therefore mediated by the couple rather than by autonomous processes of identity formation, suggesting that personal fulfilment continues to be articulated through relational recognition rather than through individual self-definition.

As regards the evolution of relationships with other women, the series thematises several aspects: solidarity among women (Daphne and her sisters), competition (the "debutantes"), and female surveillance (Lady Whistledown). These aspects do not constitute a representation of sisterhood, but rather an ambivalent form of collectivity.

From the perspective of the conceptual framework, relationships among women constitute one of the most ambivalent dimensions of the series. Female solidarity certainly exists, particularly within the Bridgerton family and in the mentoring role performed by Lady Danbury. However, these forms of support coexist with mechanisms of surveillance, competition, and symbolic judgement that regulate women's behaviour. The marriage market transforms young women into competitors for social recognition, while Lady Whistledown's gossip simultaneously creates a female public sphere and reinforces disciplinary forms of visibility. Consequently, the series neither celebrates an idealised sisterhood nor reproduces purely antagonistic relationships; instead, it portrays female interactions as unstable negotiations shaped by patriarchal expectations.

The study by Azeharie, Sari, and Irena (2022) also analyses the series from the perspective of multicultural feminism and Peircean semiotics. The authors highlight the fact that, despite some innovative choices - particularly the multiracial casting that assigns central aristocratic roles to Black characters such as Queen Charlotte and the Duke of Hastings - the narrative remains structurally anchored in a patriarchal system. Within the world represented by the series, women do not possess full decision-making autonomy: marriage constitutes the primary horizon of fulfilment, and the choice of partner is subordinated to the authorisation of the father or elder brother, who acts as a patriarchal figure of control. Female reputation is also closely tied to chastity and the preservation of family honour, confirming the centrality of traditional models of femininity in the representation of Regency society.

Hanus (2023) underlines how colour-blind casting and the centrality of interracial relationships may contribute to minimising the structural dimensions of racism and gender inequality:

> By creating a world in which the storyline minimizes social tensions through the presence of interracial romantic relationships, that world unintentionally reinforces the belief that there is no longer work to be done, while also naturalizing the oppressions depicted in the portrayed utopia (Hanus, 2024, p. 457).

From this perspective, even the figure of Lady Whistledown - often interpreted as an example of female public voice - appears ambivalent: on the one hand, she introduces a form of discursive power exercised by a woman; on the other, she reproduces cultural stereotypes associating women with gossip and peer competition.

Finally, *Bridgerton* deserves special attention for the transmedia universe that surrounds and sustains it. The narrative is not merely transferred from one medium to another, but is reworked, expanded, and reinterpreted across a plurality of forms. In particular, social media and digital platforms have amplified the circulation of its content, encouraging participatory practices such as the production of memes, fanfiction, TikTok videos, and online discussions. To this must be added its aesthetic and performative dimension: costumes, hairstyles, music, and scenography have generated forms of imitation and reappropriation within popular culture, influencing fashion, themed events, and practices of cultural consumption. Particularly emblematic are the *Bridgerton*-themed balls organised in various cities, including during the 2026 Venice Carnival, where participants recreated the aesthetics and social rituals of the series through costumes, dances, and settings inspired by the Regency period. These were accompanied by collaborations with commercial brands, such as partnerships with tea brands (for example, collections inspired by the *Bridgerton* universe), which transform the series into a sensory and consumable experience, extending the narrative into everyday life. These phenomena show how *Bridgerton* functions not only as an audiovisual product, but also as a cultural platform that intertwines narrative, consumption, and experience, thereby contributing to the construction of a shared and participatory imaginary.

4.Discussion of results

The comparative analysis of the selected series makes it possible to address the two research questions by highlighting a cross-cutting element: female representations in contemporary seriality cannot be understood through rigid or oppositional categories, but must instead be interpreted within mobile, stratified, and contradictory continua, in which

feminist concerns, postfeminist sensibilities, intersectional tensions, and different forms of anti-heroism coexist.

With regard to RQ1, the findings show that it is possible to identify significant traces of the evolution of female characters within the analysed serial products; however, this evolution does not proceed in a linear manner, nor does it coincide with a simple process of emancipation. Rather, it emerges as a discontinuous process, characterised by openings, regressions, hybridisations, and negotiations. The protagonists of these series depart from traditional models of femininity not only because they occupy a more central position within the narrative, but because they are constructed as complex, opaque, contradictory, and morally ambiguous subjects, less easily reducible to conventional roles such as wife, mother, or caregiver.

In *Orange Is the New Black*, this evolution takes shape through a collective dimension that disrupts any unitary notion of femininity. The prison setting makes explicit the institutional attempt to homogenise bodies and identities, yet it is precisely within this dispositif that plural subjectivities emerge, challenging stereotypes related to gender, class, race, and sexuality. The series thus marks a decisive shift from models of femininity centred on coherence, respectability, and normativity to "difficult" figures, characterised by structural contradictions. In this sense, *Orange Is The New Black* occupies a space in which postfeminist elements -such as the valorisation of individual agency - coexist with a strong emphasis on the material and institutional conditions that constrain such agency.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, by contrast, the evolution of female characters is structured around the explicit thematisation of the loss of rights and the patriarchal control of bodies. Here too, the relationship with feminism is not univocal. The series can certainly be situated within a framework of political and structural feminism, insofar as it denounces biopower, reproductive subordination, and the erasure of female autonomy. At the same time, however, critical readings highlight how the centrality of motherhood, family, and survival may reinscribe elements of a conservative or "domestic" feminism, thus demonstrating that we are not dealing with a cohesive feminist position.

In *Fleabag*, the transformation of female characters unfolds primarily at the level of subjectivity. The protagonist destabilises from within the models of neoliberal femininity based on self-control, success, emotional stability, and efficient self-management. Her identity is constructed through failure, loss, desire, and irony, elements that allow her to distance herself from social expectations without positioning herself entirely outside them. Here, feminism is neither fully political nor simply postfeminist; rather, it emerges as a site of tension between the rejection of a performatively accomplished femininity and the reappropriation of failure as a practice of freedom.

Finally, *Bridgerton* highlights particularly clearly the hybrid nature of these processes. On the one hand, the series offers visibility to central female subjectivities, legitimises women's desire and pleasure, constructs a female narrative voice, and presents itself as inclusive in terms of casting. On the other hand, this openness unfolds within a framework that does not fundamentally destabilise either patriarchy or the logics of privilege, but rather reworks them in an aestheticised, romantic, and consumable form. Rather than proposing a political feminism, *Bridgerton* stages a negotiated feminism, infused with elements of popular feminism and postfeminism, in which autonomy is expressed primarily through affective choice, desire, and self-construction.

With regard to RQ2, the main finding concerns the need to move beyond polarised readings. The anti-heroines emerging from the analysis do not constitute a homogeneous category, just as the ways in which they rework different feminist sensibilities are not uniform. Rather than representing a clear break with previous models, their emergence

signals a process of increasing complexity in female roles, in which disalignment with gender norms may take a variety of forms: structural, intimate, relational, ironic, political, or adaptive.

In *Orange Is the New Black*, anti-heroism is distributed across a collective dimension and becomes a form of resistance to categorisation. The inmates are neither positive heroines nor merely victims of the system: they act, make mistakes, protect themselves, betray one another, and form alliances, producing a representation in which female deviance ceases to be a scandalous exception and becomes a key to understanding the relationship between subjectivity and society. Here, the anti-heroine is not merely a morally ambiguous figure, but a situated subjectivity that compels the viewer to confront the material conditions shaping individual choices.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, June/Offred occupies an even more unstable position along this continuum. She is neither a heroine nor a classical anti-heroine, since her resistance is often intermittent and contradictory, marked by fear, adaptation, and compromise; yet she is not simply a victim either. Her position oscillates between complicity, survival, trauma, and action. For this reason, the series enables a departure from simplified understandings of the anti-heroine as a figure of pure transgression. Here, anti-heroism takes shape through resistant vulnerability, the fragmentation of the self, and the difficulty of acting within a totalising system.

In *Fleabag*, the anti-heroine assumes yet another form: she does not struggle against an explicit regime or a total institution, but against the pervasive imperative of female success. Her failure is not marginal to the construction of the character; it is its core. The series thus offers a significant reworking of contemporary feminist sensibilities, showing how the rejection of norms may also take place through chaos, inadequacy, sadness, compulsive sexuality, irony, and confession. In this case, anti-heroism functions as a dispositif of gender socialisation, expanding the range of possibilities by legitimising a female subjectivity that is not reconciled, not fully performative, and not necessarily "improvable", yet nonetheless acceptable to the subject who performs it.

By contrast, *Bridgerton* presents a more tempered and negotiated form of female anti-heroism. Its protagonists do not break the symbolic order, but seek margins of self-determination within it. The body, desire, reputation, and love become tools of negotiation, and it is precisely here that the category of anti-heroine must also be understood as a continuum. Not all anti-heroines destabilise the system in the same way: some challenge it directly, others exploit its contradictions, while others adapt to it selectively. In *Bridgerton*, this dynamic produces a representation of femininity in which agency and conformity coexist. Female characters gain narrative space, but within coordinates still strongly shaped by romantic logics.

From the analysis of these series, it follows that the rise of anti-heroines undoubtedly contributes to redefining female roles, but not in a single direction. On the one hand, it normalises ambivalence, failure, contradiction, and deviation from normative models; on the other, it risks absorbing these very ruptures into postfeminist or neoliberal frameworks, in which complexity is reframed as an individual project of self-management. Yet the complexity of these representations cannot be reduced to postfeminism, even if it frequently intersects with it. The series examined here are better understood as texts in which postfeminism coexists with political feminisms, intersectional tensions, forms of resistance, market logics, and narrative ambivalences.

Overall, the findings suggest that both feminisms and anti-heroines should be understood as complex and nuanced continua. Contemporary series do not position themselves stably "within" or "outside" feminism, just as their protagonists are neither simply heroines nor anti-heroines. What emerges instead is a constellation of figures and discourses in which

emancipation and normalisation, critique and adaptation, agency and constraint, visibility and subordination are constantly intertwined.

In essence, the present study contributes to redefining - and, we would argue, expanding - the paradigm of complexity developed by Mittell (2015), by integrating it with a specific focus on female characters, whose articulations, dissonances, and unpredictability play a significant role in the renewal of serial forms and in the configuration of new narrative horizons.

Figure 1 - Comparative analytical framework applied to the four television series

Analytical dimension	**Orange Is the New Black**	**The Handmaid's Tale**	**Fleabag**	**Bridgerton**
Predominant feminist sensibility	Plural, intersectional and queer feminism combined with postfeminist tensions	Political/structural feminism with elements of domestic feminism	Critical postfeminism and critique of neoliberal feminism	Negotiated feminism combining popular, postfeminist and symbolic intersectional elements
Configuration of femininity	Collective, intersectional and anti-stereotypical femininity	Femininity regulated through biopolitical control of bodies and reproduction	Imperfect, vulnerable and self-reflexive femininity	Performative femininity based on visibility, reputation and desirability
Relationship with work	Work as limited agency within prison hierarchies	Erasure of economic autonomy; women reduced to social functions	Work becomes a space of failure, mourning and resistance to neoliberal success	Work largely absent; female value produced through marriage and symbolic capital
Relationship with the affective sphere	Relationships destabilise normative femininity and reveal identity conflicts	Love functions as survival and memory rather than liberation	Desire, instability and emotional experimentation challenge romantic norms	Marriage evolves from social strategy to personal desire
Relationship with the self	Identity reconstructed through bodily discipline and multiple biographies	Split subjectivity; body disciplined through biopolitical control	Selfhood negotiated through irony, failure and self-narration	Selfhood mediated through desire and public recognition rather than autonomous identity formation
Relationships with other women	Situated solidarity mixed with rivalry, domination and institutional conflict	Ambivalent relationships marked by resistance, complicity and surveillance	Family tensions, loss, rivalry and fragile solidarity	Solidarity coexists with competition and female surveillance
Configuration of the anti-heroine	Collective anti-heroism rooted in structural inequalities	Ambivalent anti-heroine oscillating between resistance, survival and complicity	Failure becomes a form of agency and feminist resistance	Negotiated anti-heroism operating within rather than against patriarchal norms
Intersectionality	Central analytical dimension (class, race, sexuality, mental health)	Gender intersects with religion, class and political power	Social privilege acknowledged but critically problematised	Symbolically present through colour-blind casting, but politically limited
Transmedia dimension	Memoir adaptation, streaming circulation and digital fandoms	Novel adaptation, film, protest performances, memes and activist hashtags	Theatre-to-television adaptation and online fan engagement	Literary adaptation, fandoms, social media, merchandising and immersive cultural experiences
Implications for critical gender media literacy	Encourages critical reflection on structural inequalities and multiple female subjectivities	Promotes awareness of authoritarian control over bodies, rights and reproductive politics	Challenges neoliberal ideals of feminine success by legitimising vulnerability and failure	Reveals how aestheticised and apparently empowering representations may reproduce symbolic forms of gender regulation

5. Concluding reflections. Series as devices of social learning

The findings of this study have shown that the evolution of female characters in television seriality cannot be interpreted as a linear process of emancipation, but rather as a stratified, ambivalent, and deeply contradictory process, in which traditional models, feminist concerns, postfeminist sensibilities, and intersectional openings coexist, overlap, and are continuously redefined. In this sense, the analysis responds to the three key axes outlined in the introduction. First, it has shown that models of femininity in contemporary seriality are no longer organised around a single normative ideal, but are increasingly configured as plural, unstable, and hybrid constructions. The female characters examined do not simply replace traditional femininity with emancipated models; rather, they rework domesticity, sexuality, motherhood, professional ambition, vulnerability, and autonomy in ways that reveal both continuity and rupture with inherited gender norms. Within this process, as discussed, the category of the anti-heroine, as theorised by Levy (2022) and Buonanno (2017), has proven to be particularly useful from an analytical perspective.

A further element that deserves attention concerns the nature of the theoretical and critical contributions employed in this analysis. A significant portion of the reference literature underpinning this work consists of studies produced by women scholars. This aspect should not be interpreted in essentialist terms, but rather as an indicator of the growing centrality of female and feminist perspectives in the production of knowledge on media and gender representations. In line with feminist media studies, such perspectives help direct attention towards dimensions that are often overlooked, such as the ambivalence of subjectivities, the complexity of women's experiences, and the tensions between agency and constraint. At the same time, this perspective reinforces the idea that the critical interpretation of media texts is itself a situated process, shaped by diverse sensibilities, experiences, and interpretative frameworks, which contribute to multiplying possible readings and to highlighting the negotiated nature of meaning.

Building on the results obtained, the series analysed demonstrate that female representations do not produce linear or universally shared effects but rather constitute spaces open to plural readings and interpretative negotiations. As Cultural Studies have shown, the meaning of media texts is constructed through the interaction between production, text, and reception (Hall, 1980): the same product may be perceived as emancipatory or conservative, progressive or regressive, depending on the interpretative frameworks activated by audiences and on the historical, cultural, social, and biographical conditions in which reception takes place. Contemporary seriality thus emerges as a site of symbolic negotiation, in which audiences are not passive recipients, but active agents in the construction of meaning.

It is precisely from this perspective that contemporary television seriality can be understood as a device of social learning and, more specifically, as an informal pedagogical device of gender socialisation (Masanet, & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024). Television series do not merely reflect social change; they actively contribute to the construction of the collective imaginary, offering models, counter-models, and identity configurations through which viewers learn what it means to be a woman, a man, or another subjectivity, both within and beyond rigid gender norms, in contemporary society. In this sense, seriality functions as a space of symbolic and emotional literacy, in which not only roles and expectations are learned, but also languages, postures, desires, forms of relationships, ways of engaging with conflict, possibilities of resistance, and models of agency.

The global diffusion of platforms (van Dijck, Poell, de Waal, 2018) and the transmedia dimension of serial products (Scolari, 2013; Gambarato, Alzamora, Tárcia, 2020) further

amplify this process. Gender representations and models of femininity are not merely consumed on screen, but are continuously circulated, imitated, discussed, performed, and reworked across different contexts of media circulation. Transmedia dynamics thus reinforce the pedagogical function of television series, extending the narrative experience into everyday life and making these texts integral to public debates on feminisms, bodies, identities, and power relations. Characters, images, costumes, phrases, symbols, and imaginaries produced by seriality become cultural resources that circulate within the social space, contributing to the formation of shared knowledge, collective emotions, and practices of recognition.

For this reason, it becomes essential to develop forms of *critical gender media literacy*, that is, critical competences that enable viewers to interpret television representations as cultural constructions rather than as simple reflections of reality. Analysing television series means interrogating the ways in which they produce meanings, naturalise or problematise inequalities, and shape expectations and desires (Tirocchi, 2024), contributing to making certain forms of femininity more visible, desirable, or legitimate than others. From this perspective, media education, as well as education in gender and sexuality (Corbisiero, Nocenzi, 2022), cannot be limited to registering the presence of more numerous or more central female figures, but must critically examine the symbolic and material conditions under which such figures are constructed, valorised, or neutralised. The increasing complexity of female characters does not automatically entail a disruption of the structures that continue to organise their representation at a symbolic level.

In conclusion, the evolution of female characters in contemporary television seriality can be understood as a cultural laboratory of social learning, in which new configurations of femininity are experimented with, different forms of anti-heroism are tested, and the boundaries of what is possible are continuously renegotiated. Rather than replacing traditional models, television series tend to rework, hybridise, and problematise them, demonstrating that gender identities are historical, narrative, and cultural constructions in constant transformation (Butler, 1990). It is precisely through a critical and reflexive engagement with these narratives that it becomes possible to understand the role of media culture in shaping female subjectivities, contemporary feminisms, and the processes of socialisation that traverse them.

Within this perspective, television series contribute to the construction of what may be defined as *literacy models*, understood as cultural frameworks through which individuals learn to read, interpret, and make sense of gender representations. These models are neither neutral nor univocal, but situated and negotiated, and therefore require the development of critical competences capable of interrogating the meanings, implications, and conditions of production of media texts.

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Notes

[1] In the Italian context, a progressive articulation of female figures can be observed. While productions such as *Il bello delle donne* (Canale 5, 2001–2003) and *Commesse* (Rai 1, 1999–2002) foregrounded solidarity and relational dynamics within predominantly female work environments, more recent series such as *Imma Tataranni – Sostituto procuratore* (Rai 1, 2019-) and *Blanca* (Rai 1, 2021-) feature protagonists occupying roles traditionally associated with men - investigation and the judiciary - combining attention to the professional dimension with the complexity of their private lives. In these cases, the female investigator is no longer a narrative exception but a structural element of established genres.
[2] From now, OITNB.
[3] When *Fleabag* appears in italics, it refers to the TV series; otherwise, it refers to the character.