

Manic Pixie Dream Politics: A Focus on Postfeminist Muses

Nicole Vincent

Political Science

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Heather Yates

In a world that appears to be making a definite shift toward postfeminism, the outline of femininity and womanhood continues to evolve into new forms. The modern woman looks different to every individual, but it can no longer be overlooked that some lenses provide more clarity and truth than others. The tropes uncovered in the media, in literature, and even in modern politics, often work toward forming women into inimitable figures. One such contemporary trope is the manic pixie dream girl. Initially brought to life in prose and poetry, the concept of a manic pixie dream girl has created a set of unachievable guidelines that seek to turn women from their former organic selves into caricatures. The manic pixie dream girls of the modern world are considered ancillary characters to the greater story of male growth; they remain small and temporary, yet truly unforgettable. In regard to how a set of character traits can potentially mold the role of a modern

woman, this postfeminist trope has taken to American politics and is now associated with voters, first ladies, and female politicians alike. The power of the manic pixie dream girl image and its distinct efforts to linger in a post-feminist environment poses a potential problem for young and impressionable women. Although many consider the trope unworthy of serious consideration, the feminine imagery it condones continues to prevail, making it deserving of a closer look, and perhaps, a new perspective concerning women in politics.

While some might claim the manic pixie dream girl may have been created by accident, her characteristics have surely existed for longer than the name itself. In truth, labeling the character described by the term in question was a contemporary effort. The phrase itself appeared in print for the first time in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin. While describing Kirsten Dunst's character, Claire Colburn, in the film *Elizabethtown*, Rabin (2007) coined a phrase never before used: "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl" (7). He used this particular set of words to describe a version of women that "exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors" (Rabin, 2007, 7). The image depicts a woman who is both imaginary yet important to driving the plot of a story: a useful beauty. Rabin (2007) even went a step further, describing these mythical women as being tasked "to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures" (7). The term produced a significant amount of criticism, and in 2014, Rabin wrote an unexpected follow-up apology. He admitted that the term he created was "fundamentally sexist" even though the concept itself has "existed in the culture for ages" (Rabin, 2014, 4-6). As Rabin (2007) noted, "the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing-proposition" (7); she is either loved or hated, but the important and all-deciding opinion regarding her purpose has always been left up to men.

Prose continues to sustain the life of the manic pixie dream girl; some authors criticize her existence while others seem to profit off of it. Famed author John Green's string of young adult novels contains several female protagonists that follow the same set of guidelines established by Rabin. More specifically, his characters, Margo Roth Spiegelman, from *Paper Towns* and, Alaska Young, from *Looking for Alaska* remain two of the more commonly cited variations, characterized by the traits that turned them from potential heroines into reckless subordinates. The male protagonists in each novel are overwhelmingly infatuated with them, a hypersexualization that makes these fictitious women appear less human. Margo Roth Spiegelman's very existence was the force that drove the entire novel - a critical aspect of her character being her inability to be understood. Quentin Jacobsen, the male protagonist ponders that perhaps "she loved mysteries so much that she became one" (Green, 2008, p. 8). Spiegelman's behavior is risk-oriented, and her persona inspires Quentin to live more adventurously after she disappears (Green 2008). Still, once his search for her draws to a close, Green (2008) is intentional in illuminating the realization that the image Quentin made for Margo was hollow:

Margo Roth Spiegelman was a person, too. And I had never quite thought of her that way, not really; it was a failure of all my previous imaginings. All along — not only since she left, but for a decade before — I had been imagining her without listening...The fundamental mistake I had always made...was this: Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl. (p. 199)

Spiegelman's character certainly helped Quentin to grow, but little time was dedicated to exploring how Margo herself might have changed over the course of the novel. Her character remained trapped in her old ways, frozen in time, and waiting for the next boy to come along so she could save him.

In the same way, Miles Halter comes to a similar realization about his dream girl, Alaska Young. Having arrived at Culver Creek Preparatory School with no concept of adolescent fun, Young introduces him to the hidden world of teenage angst and risk. Miles considered Alaska “endlessly fascinating” (Green, 2005, p. 110), and her “tight tank top” (Green, 2005, p. 24), cigarette addiction, and casual attitude toward sex make her character all the more appealing to a group of teenage boys filled with the desire to find themselves in someone else. Until an untimely death, Alaska remained convinced that no one could truly love a “crazy, sullen bitch” (Green, 2005, 120). In choosing to write women as deeply objectified and two dimensional, Green (2005) may have left his characters “irretrievably different” (p. 213), but he also provided the template for a trope that would continue to prevail in young adult literature. The concept of the manic pixie dream girl deprives women “of self-perpetuating motivations and reinforces compulsory, conventional femininity” (Watson, 2015, p. 3). In truth, the creation of Margo Roth Spiegelman and Alaska Young all but solidified the role of a woman to act as a catalyst for male character development and to remain useful only until outgrown.

The manic pixie dream girl has also found a place in cinema; audiences are so used to seeing these characters, that their inclusion has become commonplace. Renditions of this character have become “the most powerful embodiment of postfeminist ideologies within independent cinema” (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 168). The inclusion of the trope only works to extend the pattern of the hypersexualization of women in film and further emphasize the supposed inability of a woman to act as both a love interest and a heroine. In film, the presence of a dream girl “subverts female progress by glorifying the role of the caretaker,” deeming it a mere means to achieve male self-realization (Joyce, 2014, 1). Increased sexualization and pornification, common in movies that feature manic pixie dream girls, significantly distort public

perception, altering the way the modern woman is viewed. In film, it has been documented that female leaders “are more likely to be sexually objectified than male leaders: fifteen percent compared to four percent,” and women in leadership roles in film are “far more likely than [men] to be shown wearing revealing clothing” (*Rewrite Her Story*, 2019, p. 7). Directors feel the inclusion of a “dream girl” character draws a crowd, completely ignoring “the visceral danger of treating women, real or fictional, as satellites orbiting the lives of men” (Barratt, 2017, p. 164). Films noted for including these fictitious versions of women include *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Almost Famous*, *Ruby Sparks*, and *500 Days of Summer*. In each of the films, the female lead is tasked with the sole responsibility of bringing the male protagonist back to life while still appearing beautiful, comical, sexually experienced, and open to being rescued. Instead of realistically portraying the ability of women to be autonomous, these films instead capitalized on “perpetuating the myth of women as muses and caregivers rather than independent entities” (Joyce, 2014, p. 169). The shift that brought the trope from print to the big screen is still causing damaging effects to the image of real women across the nation.

Feminist theorists and authors alike agree that tropes such as the manic pixie dream girl and a shift in the attitudes of modern feminists have had a profound effect on the modern woman. Contemporary poet and Title IX Compliant educator Olivia Gatwood gained a fair amount of acclaim for her poem “Manic Pixie Dream Girl.” The poem outlines the distinct effects a negative image of women can produce in the female population. As a feminist herself, Gatwood’s poem makes concepts of modern-day feminist theory more accessible to young readers. Her writing is prophetic in the sense that it crafts the image of a postfeminist relationship a woman has with both a lover and herself. Even in her more recent works, Gatwood (2019) presents an aspect of the trope not often considered: the desire to become what they

have fallen in love with. A postmodern approach to feminism “makes individuation of its members a principal goal but cannot be employed as a politics of resistance” (Brabon & Genz, 2009, p. 111). Thus, it is then made impossible for women to claim that their struggles are political in nature. The ability of postmodern feminist theory to tear down the attempt to bring women’s issues into the political sphere is only bolstered by the prevailing nature of antifeminist imagery. In fact, the tendency of women to “behave in ways that they find sanctioned in stories written by men” exposes the dangers of allowing both the trope and the postmodern model to survive (Watson, 2015, p. 3). The presence of manic pixie dream girls in the world does not just impact the male gaze; upon further inspection, their existence can change the way women themselves want to be seen. The potential harms that lie within a postfeminist lens can easily be linked to the media’s tendency to turn a capable woman into an “almost broken accessory” (Gatwood, 2017, p. 35). If postfeminism can be defined as an era in which women are hopeful for a world that does not degrade women while still living in the reality in which women are still looked down upon, then the survival of the manic pixie dream girl image can also be a product of this blindly complicit lifestyle. In today’s world, a postfeminist ideology’s pursuit “to undermine women’s/feminists’ sense of selfhood and their capacity for criticism and resistance” has been allowed to thrive (Brabon & Genz, 2009, p. 116). Postfeminism has allowed some women to become tired in their efforts to destroy the muse that inspires sexist literature, media, and now, political strategy.

The tendency to label women entering politics as being already disadvantaged is not necessarily a new trend. Popular imagery intends to establish a woman’s place as outside the political realm which, in turn, attempts to convince the masses that women are not worthy of political action. Manic pixie dream girls do not take an interest in holding positions of significant and lasting influence, so why should

modern women? The media asks this question each time it perpetuates the spread of negative press regarding a woman seeking political office. In turn, women are made to feel more objectified and less capable. Due to a surge in sexist media, “women’s objectification has become normalized and thus invisible in contemporary consumer culture;” objectification has the capability to make its way down the lines of consumer culture until it reaches the individual in question (Cahill & Heldman, 2007, p. 23). Thus, if a woman is living in a society where it is common to objectify women, then she will internalize the process of self-objectification and start to see herself as less capable. As a result, a negative self-image will yield “a negative effect on internal and external political efficacy” (Cahill & Heldman, 2007, p. 24). Political efficacy can be directly tied to participation in matters of politics like voting or choosing to run for office. The effects of continued support for postfeminist doctrines that turn a blind eye to the often objectifying motives of modern media can impact even the next generation of women interested in politics. Caroline Heldman (2007) published research results of a test regarding the aforementioned trend in “self-objectification” that “the more college-age women [who] self-objectify, the less confidence they have that their actions have the potential to influence politics” (p. 22). Heldman’s research paired with evidence that women feel less confident when entering politics speaks volumes about the obvious yet often subdued effects of turning the modern woman into an incapable and mythic creature as opposed to a confident and powerful figure of society.

In politics, female candidates and politicians alike have become subject to comparison to this popular, yet problematic, trope. Additionally, first ladies seem particularly vulnerable and subjected to comparisons that involve an unrealistic standard for women. When all is said and done, after the arduous election cycle, filled with crucial debates, countless interviews, and ongoing travel, first ladies take on

the job of representing what it means to be the spouse of a sitting president. In short, their job is to represent womanhood publicly to American citizens, meaning “first ladies, [over time] become ‘sites’ for the symbolic negotiation of female identity” (Wertheimer, 2004, p. 18). Like manic pixie dream girls, first ladies are expected to facilitate her husband's popularity and ability as president while still remaining an ancillary character. As each administration enters the White House, leadership teams “consign first ladies to the performance of gendered diplomacy roles that ideologically objectify their conduct and voice” (Erickson & Thomson, 2012, p. 239). Even the title itself, “first lady,” suggests that she is meant to represent women as a collective body as well as “feminine normativity and American womanhood ideals— family, motherhood, and spousal loyalty” (Erickson & Thomson, 2012, p. 240).

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was often viewed by the media as strictly a fashionable accessory to President John F. Kennedy. Her efforts to be involved with maintaining positive foreign relations when on trips dedicated to the president's job as head of state were often overshadowed by her trivial affinity toward the color pink and appearing presentable at all times. During her time at the White House, the President noted that his wife was an incredible representative for the United States in terms of diplomacy (B. Brown, 2012). Despite his thankful nature and any efforts to cast his wife as a fabulous leader for keeping foreign relations intact, the media decided to place her fashion choices in the spotlight instead. Quickly, Mrs. Kennedy was hailed as a candidate for “the first lady of American fashion,” but reporters also made sure to mention that most “women resent her because she is ‘too chic’ and spends too much money on clothes” (B. Brown, 2012, p. 10-11). The inherent jealousy found in the female critics of manic pixie dream girls in storylines translated directly to the ways in which the media both objectified Kennedy and put her in a different sphere than the

average women of America. Even on the campaign trail before the Oval Office was won, Jacqueline Kennedy was confused by “all the talk over what [she wore] and how [she fixed her] hair” and wondered publicly what it had to do with her “husband’s ability to be President” (B. Brown, 2012, p. 20). The true answer to this seemingly rhetorical question is nothing. Both the media, the public, and the campaign team of John F. Kennedy knew that Jacqueline’s appearance had little to do with public policy, but little was done to break the cycle of the press. Although slightly “distressed by the...over-emphasis of fashion in relation to her life,” Jacqueline Kennedy used her critiques as a platform for her efforts in diplomacy (B. Brown, 2012, p. 26). Like the best of the manic pixie dream girls, she too found a way to remain unforgettable.

This specific imagery is not only outdated, but further represents institutional barriers in the way of providing women access to political influence. Loss of influence observed with First Lady Michelle Obama’s tenure exposed the media’s choice to focus more on her fashion choices than her public agenda. After the media began to control her public image, First Lady Michelle Obama went from being viewed as powerful and influential to subdued, dropping her approval rating eleven points in one calendar year - all due to her newfound status (Clement, 2016). Her change in appearance on the cover of *The New Yorker* from a combat-boot-wearing defense strategist to a fashionista strutting the runway “had morphed [Obama into a] media darling, [transforming] from menacing malcontent to celebrity clone” (C. Brown, 2012, p. 241). Whenever Michelle Obama attempted to become more involved with her husband's presidency and be a proactive first lady, she was immediately labeled by the press as “too outspoken, [and] not domestic enough” (C. Brown, 2012, p. 244). Like manic pixie dream girls in novels and on the big screen, first ladies in the White House have become accustomed to a pattern of behavior that works to continuously

tear down the capabilities of one of the more important influences on the sitting president.

America's current First Lady, Melania Trump is also subject to the same bias. However, journalists chose to first focus on her "unusually slow transition" (Davis, 2017, 3) to her role as first lady. Mrs. Trump was noted as absent for much of the beginning of her husband's move into the White House. She decided to postpone the dates that confirm both a move to Washington D.C. and the designation of her chief of staff, a hesitant attitude that might have contributed to her initial approval rate which was under forty percent (Davis, 2017). Mrs. Trump was placed "far behind the curve" of traditional first ladies, but this label had less to do with her intentions and instead revolved around the fact that she was in "no rush to establish a public presence" (Davis, 2017, 6-7). Like all first ladies, Melania Trump was expected to bond with the media as soon as possible in order to become likable, but her decision to remain more private automatically branded her as uninterested in politics and her new place in the White House. In addition, Melania Trump was also "rendered silent" (Mandziuk, 2016, p. 147) and incapable as news sources began to publicize her previous history with modeling, published nude photographs, and the potential affair between her husband and adult film actress 'Stormy' Daniels. Like the manic pixie dream girls of the political world, news about Melania's initiative against bullying titled 'Be Best' and efforts to be an active mother and role model for son, Barron, were supplanted entirely by stories that aimed to sexualize her existence.

Initially cast as an outsider, Melania Trump's status as an immigrant to the United States cast her as being unable to properly understand the inner workings of American politics and also worked to destabilize "the expectation that the first family must serve as the distinctly American ideal" (Mandziuk, 2016, p. 145). Mrs. Trump's focus on public duties compounded with her wardrobe choices further

worked to curate negative press surrounding her approach to being first lady. During a trip to visit “detained immigrant children in a Texas border town,” she wore a now-infamous jacket that read, “I really don’t care” (Rogers, 2018). Although her office identified the choice as “just a jacket,” the press had a field day using said jacket to defend the theory that Melania Trump would be unsuccessful as first lady. Being married to Donald Trump allowed Melania newfound autonomy due to her reluctance to act as a solely political wife. However, the media is often quick to accuse her of being an enabler of misogyny and a bystander of her husband’s offensive actions and dialogue regarding women (Hutchinson & Underwood, 2019). Stepping into her new role reluctantly automatically made her a target for labels like ‘cold’ and ‘distant.’ Regardless of her attempts to be maternal and focused on a more private approach as first lady, the media has deemed Melania Trump as silent and politically useless (Mandziuk, 2016). The tendency of the media to casually refer to the current first lady as a “sexualized vamp” (Hutchinson & Underwood, 2019, p. 16) is only a direct reflection of the skewed standard that exists for first ladies and how they are treated after attempting to break traditional behaviors.

However, it must be noted that first ladies are not the only subjects targeted by this trope; modern women politicians are still subjected to its sexualizing and objectifying lens. Due to the often sexual implications associated with manic pixie dream girls, one could also draw a connection between the trope and the current trend of sexualizing women with careers in the government. In addition to first ladies, women officeholders from both sides of the aisle have often been compared to manic pixie dream girls and placed directly in the context of the male gaze. New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has recently fallen victim to caricature. An article from *The Bulwark* remarked how the public was quick to notice Ocasio-Cortez for her “slender” form, “big eyes, and wide, toothy smile” (Tracinski, 2019, 5).

Author of the article, Robert Tracinski (2019), also made note of her “boundless nervous energy,” comparing her approach to policy as being the dream in manic pixie dream girl (6). While the intentions of the aforementioned article are not explicitly stated, its publication only added to the idea that if a woman is bold in her approach to politics, she is subject to ridicule. Eager to rebut opinions like that of Tracinski in the previous year, *Washington Post* political commentator Helaine Olen (2018) noted that articles like the one found in *The Bulwark* are rooted in the general fear that “a woman can be more talented, successful and publicly prominent than a man” (1). After a slight altercation on Twitter with Ben Shapiro, Ocasio-Cortez earned criticism from both sides of the aisle when she refused a public debate with him. Her responses were short and to the point, a communication style usually gendered as masculine. Olen (2019) remarks that the congresswoman’s critics were more than likely stuck in the idea that “women are supposed to be cooperative, while men can showboat all they want and not fear judgment” (10). The rebellious spirit that often lies within manic pixie dream girls and the desire to be noticed and respected for more than physical characteristics or bold behaviors is indeed similar to the public frustration Ocasio-Cortez exhibits for the way the media has gendered and ostracized her.

In 2008, candidates Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton suffered similar criticisms during their campaigns, and the media transformed into an adversary rather quickly. Perhaps the best explanation for this shift comes from Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) who described the basis of the treatment of these women as a double bind. She explained this concept further by citing that “women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine” (Jamieson, 1995, p. 16). Jamieson’s observations correlate directly to the lives of Palin and Clinton who attempted to enter a career in politics only to be objectified and vilified, respectively. The dramatic emphasis

placed on Palin's physical appearance led many voters to view her "as less competent, warm and moral" despite her efforts to maintain a professional reputation (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 1). Several times the media compared Palin's features to that of a doll, labeling her "Presidential Barbie" and sexualizing her role in a political campaign (Conroy et al., 2009, p. 17). The press that surrounded Palin's campaign was significantly more consistent than that of her running mate John McCain, but over fifty percent of the content of the media published regarding Palin was tied to her physical appearance further stripping Palin of her political capabilities and replacing her platform with an objectified persona (White, 2017). Hillary Clinton's maternal tendencies were highlighted toward the beginning of her campaign, but these potentially positive aspects of her personality gave way to later characterizations such as 'cold,' 'power-hungry,' and 'unattractive' (Parsons & Shoaf, 2016). The two women were equally turned into tropes instead of candidates and were consequentially "referenced more often in relation to their families or spouses, and [were] referred to by their first name more often than the men" they shared the campaign trail with (Parsons & Shoaf, 2016, p. 4). Just as the manic pixie dream girl preys upon characters who resemble ideal women, a similar pattern applies to women in politics; these women are often stripped of their true identities and are instead treated as incompetent, loud, and otherwise incapable sexual objects. A once seemingly harmless trope presenting the ideal woman has turned into a monster of transformative power, seeking to steal the truth of womanhood from those that deny more traditional qualities of femininity that focus solely on pleasing the male gaze.

The birth and survival of the manic pixie dream girl has transformed the way modern womanhood is viewed by both men and women. While the trope does cater to the male gaze and the sexualization of women, it also demonstrates a proven political effect.

Women pursuing careers in politics and first ladies alike are often viewed with the same lens used by protagonists of literature, film, and now, the modern world; they are objectified and rendered incomplete without the guiding force of a male presence. Jamieson (1995) was ultimately correct when she uncovered that women “who succeed in politics...will be scrutinized under a different lens from that applied to successful men” (p. 16), but she did not often mention that women still hold the power to shatter this lens and replace it. When political conversation is moved away from a woman’s competencies and instead toward her physical assets, she begins to lose credibility in the eyes of the public, and her professional image begins to crumble. Coverage that takes the focus from policy to physical characteristics further distorts the image any one woman in question may be attempting to produce for herself. Heldman and Cahill’s (2007) Objectification Theory mentioned the tendency of “girls and women [to] internalize the male gaze and...view themselves through this lens as a result of...objectification” (p. 13), a pattern of behavior that mimics that of the women film directors and fiction writers have brought into existence. Another truly sobering concept she comments on is that of “double consciousness...a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). Despite the fact that all manic pixie dream girls and objectified female politicians perform this critical view of themselves, they are rarely mentioned as doing it together. Perhaps solidarity remains the hidden force capable of shattering the media and the political world’s tendency to trap womanhood under a ceiling of glass. When treated as prized possessions, to be guarded and stared at, there remains little room for movement. However, solidarity and mass movements are capable of bringing all women together and giving them a way of seeing themselves in each other. This ability to relate and find comradery gives women the chance to create a type of feminism that both acknowledges the need for equality and solidifies a desire to

involve all women in the fight to destroy the lack thereof. Just as John Green and Nathan Rabin realized how their actions tore women apart, women from all walks of life can make the now political choice to claim ownership of their own womanhood. Women must give themselves the platform to become the new writers of what it truly means to live as a woman in this current society. By reconstructing the image of the modern woman and her successes, the manic pixie dream girls are subject to change, and eventually, take a final bow. Olivia Gatwood (2017) writes of this future when she tells her audience that these muses are not meant to last forever:

Manic Pixie Dream Girl doesn't go on,
there's no need for her anymore
Manic Pixie Dream Girl is too dreamgirl
and you just woke up. (p. 36)

Her haunting truth delivers the final message that the manic pixie dream girls deserve to be emancipated to exercise their gifted identity, independence, and authenticity. In this new perspective, women are allowed to stand together without comparison; their solidarity dismantles the trope and further gives them the greatest ability of womanhood: calling themselves by name.

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