

*Unraveling Themes of Feminism and Postmodernity in “And Just Like That...”*

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This essay examines the feminist and postmodern themes in *And Just Like That...* (2021–), and examines the malleability of their portrayal in its prequel, *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). Since its initial broadcast, *Sex and the City* has been the subject of several media and academic critiques, which argue that it inadequately addresses feminist themes, including the integration of sexuality and diversity concerns. Subsequently, the introduction of *And Just Like That...* has displayed a revised strategy for addressing issues from feminist and postmodernist perspectives. The essay concludes that *And Just Like That...* adopts a more implicit feminist approach and exhibits a diminished prevalence of postmodern ideas on current issues, tackling contemporary issues in a straightforward and earnest manner.

Keywords: *Sex and the City*, *And Just Like That...*, Postmodernity, Post-feminism, Gender Roles

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## Introduction

*Sex and the City* (hereafter, SatC) was an American romantic comedy-drama of the late 1990s and early 2000s, renowned for its frank depiction of life for single women in contemporary New York (Barton, 2018). HBO broadcast the series, which centres around four single women in their thirties: lifestyle columnist Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), world-weary lawyer Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), conservative art dealer Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), and sexually adventurous public relations consultant Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall). This allowed for more overt depictions of sex and discussion of topics too controversial for advertisers on American network television. The programme received both praise and criticism for its portrayal of a number of themes considered controversial or taboo, such as sexual liberation, modern romances, gender roles, female identity, and work-life balance (Demopoulos, 2024).

Following the release of two films in 2004 and 2008, the series was rebooted in 2021 with *And Just Like That...* (hereafter, AJLT), but without Cattrall's reprisal of Samantha, who does not appear as a main character in the series (White, 2021). With nearly twenty-five years having passed since the debut of SatC, the original series had received criticism in recent years on a number of counts, such as its portrayal of people of colour (Varghese, 2017), of certain elements of the LBG community (Da Costa, 2021), and of feminism's representation (Wignall, 2008). While the producers asserted that they would maintain the show's original focus while updating it to align with the moral expectations of a modern audience (Barr, 2021), others questioned if they could translate the original's straightforward tone into a more politically appropriate setting (Burnell, 2021). This sparks interest in the thematic content of AJLT from the perspective of contemporary feminism and postmodernism.

## Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

This study seeks to explore what themes AJLT contains from the feminist and postmodern perspectives. These frameworks have been selected because SatC received so many plaudits for its representation of feminist (Brandt, 2006) and unconventional issues. However, it has also received in recent years criticism of its handling of various themes (Silverstein, 2008). This has presented AJLT with a challenge, which its creators appear to be attempting to address by enhancing the show's representation of contemporary societal and universal values. This study aims to investigate AJLT's approach to these themes and draw comparisons with SatC's treatment of similar themes.

This study aims to address three research questions:

1. What are the main themes that *And Just Like That...* explores?
2. In what way does *And Just Like That...* deal with themes pertinent to feminism and postmodernity?
3. Does *And Just Like That...* differ in its choice and handling of themes as compared with *Sex and the City*?

## Literature Review

### Context and Impact

Columnist Candace Bushnell's real-life column, '*Sex and the City*' for the New York Observer, served as the foundation for SatC (Kurutz, 2018). In this context, Carrie emerged

as an alter ego of Bushnell, bringing a degree of verisimilitude to the character and stories. The series was an instant hit producing considerable praise for its tackling of difficult and controversial themes pertinent especially to modern women (Akass & McCabe, 2004). It has appeared in numerous polls as one of the best television programmes of all time (Poniewozik, 2007), highlighting its significant impact on popular culture.

AJLT was created after the cancellation of the third *Sex and the City* film due to Cattrall's refusal to reprise her role (Lewis, 2021). Notwithstanding a robust commencement of the series (Del Rosario & Andreeva, 2021), audience attrition by the second series indicated a notable decrease in viewership (Fitzgerald, 2023). Critical assessments were predominantly unfavourable, with some characterising the series as having excessive, or as having forcibly integrated, social and cultural consciousness into a narrative that did not seamlessly accommodate it (Singh, 2021; Wright, 2021). Certain reviewers contended that the show has been acclaimed for including individuals from marginalised gender identities and ethnic backgrounds (Behzadi, 2022), efforts to address critiques regarding its previous treatment of LGBT matters and portrayals of people of colour resulted in superficial gestures and tokenism, which appeared inconsistent with the earlier approach of the show to candidly confronting current issues (Corry, 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study takes a feminist perspective on its analysis of AJLT. Typically, feminist perspectives on film and television scrutinise the construction, reinforcement, or challenge of gender roles, power dynamics, and the representation of women and other marginalized genders through media (Gaines, 2004). A feminist study may interrogate women's agency, their representation in relation to men, and intersectional identities within a post-feminist and postmodern cultural context (Mayne, 1985). Feminist cinema theorists analyse the influence of context, including the 'man gaze', on content and how narrative frameworks can undermine female autonomy, particularly through male decision-makers steering narratives (Mulvey, 1975). The methodology frequently critiques perceived patriarchal frameworks in both production and content, whereas modern feminist critics may target 'lazy' feminist tropes or narratives that perpetuate hegemonic feminism (Kaplan, 2004). Thus, a different critical lens can apply to the content, production, and context of a given film, rather than a single feminist approach or methodology.

Moreover, this study incorporates a postmodernist perspective on its analysis of AJLT. Analysing media from a postmodern perspective emphasises the deconstruction of traditional narratives, contests the concept of hegemonic or absolute truth, and embraces representations of reality that are ambiguous or fragmented (Constable, 2004). In particular, postmodernists may seek to challenge depictions of reality in media that are objectivist from their perspective, preferring portrayals that emphasise subjectivity and leave some aspect of interpretation up to the viewer (Rodowick, 1988). Postmodern literary critics may also favour stories that elide genres and reject storytelling conventions such as linearity (Connor, 2004). Postmodernist film theorists tend to be positive about filmmaking that reveals self-awareness and a willingness to break the fourth wall, thereby rejecting the depiction of events as definitive reflections of an objective reality (Constable, 2014).

To cultivate a nuanced comprehension of the themes of AJLT, it is imperative to recognise its similarities and differences with its prequel, *SatC*. A comparison between AJLT and *SatC* is

undertaken to deliver an in-depth examination of the construction and malleability of the themes in AJLT.

## **Analysis**

This section presents an analysis of aspects of AJLT relevant to certain themes of feminist and postmodern critique of film, television, and society, supplemented with its comparison to SatC. It is important to acknowledge that SatC and AJLT collectively comprise over 100 episodes; this research does not aim for exhaustiveness but rather emphasises trends by highlighting major sequences from both series.

## **Feminist Themes**

### **Gender Roles**

The theme of gender roles dominates AJLT, much like SatC, and explores how women can balance their individualistic desires with the roles society expects of them. AJLT differs significantly by emphasising women's roles more than those of men. In the initial episodes, the death of Carrie's husband, 'Big' (Chris Noth), prompts Miranda to contemplate leaving her husband. In terms of their interactions with men, AJLT delves deeper into the roles that women play, particularly in relation to their relationships with men. This to some extent abandons a form of feminist critique evincible from SatC, which considers how the role of one gender is influenced by their relations with the other against a backdrop of a still largely patriarchal society. However, a recurring theme is the ongoing concern about women's ability to balance a career, a love life, and marriage. One such case involves the difficulties Nya (Karen Pittman) faces in conceiving a child, with a significant portion of her story centring around her fears that her husband might abandon her as a result. Ultimately, this issue leads to the couple's breakup, reflecting, to a certain extent, the reality that men often view women in long-term relationships as potential mothers.

Another theme of SatC was the rejection of homogenous femininity in favour of multiple ways to be a woman and occupy gender roles. However, AJLT tends to interpret dissent from traditional gender roles as a rejection of a cisgender identity, making such discussions less prominent. This is especially evident in the instance of Charlotte's daughter Rose (Alexa Swinton), whose repudiation of conventional gender roles prompts her to renounce her identity as a woman. A discernible shift in social attitudes is seen, moving away from recognising rebellious or non-standard gender roles for females as acceptable within the identity of 'woman' and towards associating similar tendencies or behaviours with other genders. AJLT perceives non-traditional gender roles as indicative of gender variation, whereas SatC acknowledges non-traditional femininity.

### **Sexuality and LGBT Issues**

Miranda's plotline in the first season of AJLT sees her enter into an affair with a non-binary female in episode 3. This mirrors her plotline in episode 3 of the first season of SatC in which Miranda questions her sexuality and resolves that she is heterosexual. The implication of this earlier episode and a focus of the episode is that being a heterosexual woman does not necessarily involve a commitment to hyperfemininity. The intentional erasure of this previous message is evident in the reversal of plotlines throughout the episodic sequence, as Miranda's traditionally masculine character becomes bisexual. From a postmodern

perspective, this mirroring of plotlines across equivalent SatC and AJLT episodes coupled with art mirroring reality constitutes a breaking of the fourth wall given the audience's potential knowledge of the context. The inclusion of a non-binary character in this episode likewise appears to contradict the hostility towards 'confusion' between the genders mentioned above. One of Charlotte's children expresses that they no longer feel like women and want to be referred to at school as "Rock." The inclusion of these trans and non-binary characters in the show in a manner that is not derogatory or stereotyped thus reflects a significant break with its past representation of trans characters. However, there is little reflection upon what it means to be non-binary and how, as a bisexual female, this intersects with other related issues facing the character within society.

It is in this respect that the programme's handling of sexuality may be interpretable within a post-feminist lens. While the series' positive portrayal of bisexual and trans characters raises sexuality issues common to a feminist lens, the series' lack of criticality in their representation suggests a society that has largely settled feminist issues. Even in the case of Charlotte, her initial shock at her child coming out as trans soon gives way to acceptance without much discussion of underlying issues regarding social attitudes toward gender dysphoria. From a feminist perspective, the programme seemingly neglects to critically address the challenges encountered by trans and bisexual individuals, nor does it engage with the characters' prior perspectives on these subjects. Modern culture predominantly portrays marginal LGBT identities as blindly embraced, mirroring a post-feminist framework akin to the earlier post-feminist context but now incorporating LGBT identities into the spectrum of permissible sexual identities.

### **Race and Diversity**

AJLT is, to a large extent, more diverse in its representation of ethnic minority women than SatC. The earlier series was criticised both for its lack of diversity as well as for its epistemic elevation of the worldviews of privileged white women (Jones, 2018). Specific criticisms include an episode where Miranda heavily stereotypes and fetishises a black partner (s03e05), as well as its depiction of Middle Eastern culture's attitudes towards women in *Sex and the City 2* (Makalintal, 2020). AJLT sees its three main protagonists strike up friendships with a number of women from different ethnic backgrounds, though it has received criticism on this front for the depiction of their ethnicity as serving as 'accessories' to the main characters (Nair, 2022).

Despite some accusations of tokenism, the show explores the cultural backgrounds of its characters, particularly in relation to their status as women. An example of this is the character of Seema (Sarita Choudhury), who talks about her family's expectations for her to marry, yet she prioritises her career and finding an equal partner over marriage. Another example is that Miranda's interactions with Nya portray her as adhering to racial stereotypes, particularly when she misinterprets a black professor (Nya) as a student. However, the main characters serve as mentors for their non-white friends, such as Charlotte's recognition of the monetary value of Lisa's (Nicole Parker) collection of black artists, while the women of colour alleviate their anxieties about the lack of diversity within their friendship group. The series seeks to allay white concerns about their guilt for microaggressions or other forms of exclusion or discrimination.

## **Postmodern Themes**

### **Narrative Structure**

The original *SatC* played around substantially with narrative structure. For instance, in the first season of *SatC*, Carrie would frequently break the fourth wall and address the viewer directly. Other minor characters occasionally addressed the camera directly, prompting the viewer to assume Carrie's perspective as she probed them about their perspectives on relationships and gender roles. Later seasons replaced this with Carrie acting as the narrator, putting her thoughts into text as she sat at a typewriter under the conceit of writing her column. One should understand that the use of first-person perspective and switching between various individuals addressing the camera emphasised the subjectivity and plurality of various positions on love, marriage, and sexual etiquette, whereas Carrie's narrativising monologues typically ended in a question: 'Is it that men have an innate aversion to monogamy, or is it more than that? I wondered, in a city like New York, with its infinite possibilities, has monogamy become too much to expect?' (*SatC*, s01e07). By way of comparison, *AJLT* eschews all fourth-wall breaks as well as Carrie's narration of events. One could interpret this as a liberation from elevating Carrie's perspective to contextualise events and issues for the audience. On the other hand, it conveys an association that specific themes tend to serve less as the overt focus of each episode and that there is no overt questioning of grand narratives through the use of narration.

However, the show questions some grand narrative tropes. For instance, Big's sudden death immediately shatters Carrie's lasting happiness, which she sought throughout the series and confirmed in her marriage to Big. In addition, Miranda's exploration of her sexuality and subsequent divorce shatters her own happy ending, while Charlotte's marriage and happiness remain the most intact among the three. However, it may be argued that these grand narratives are frustrated more so than deconstructed, given that fulfillment through relationships is an unspoken end for practically all the main and secondary female characters on the show. The notion that women's pleasure is contingent upon successful relationships, a prevalent theme in women's television programs (Smith, 2016), remains largely unchallenged compared to the original series, where Miranda emphasised profession and Samantha focused on sexual fulfilment.

Furthermore, the changes to narrative structure have implications for *AJLT*'s approaches to the programme's approach to epistemology. The context is arguably more post-feminist than *SatC*, but it is postmodern in a non-critical sense. The protagonists' choices about how to live their lives as women receive little in the way of challenge, unlike in the original series. Contemporary ethics such as acceptance of diverse LGBT identities, IVF, divorce, reparations, etc. are monolithic, and whilst the characters at times struggle to navigate them, they at no point challenge or reject them. *AJLT* shifts to a more conventional narrative, firmly rooted in a clearly realist ontology and epistemology, thereby making both social reality and morality more objective compared to *SatC*.

### **Identity and Meaning**

Within *SatC*, the women struggle at times with the compartmentalisation of various aspects of their identities. For instance, in *SatC* s03e12, Miranda assumes the role of an air hostess after discovering that her career as a lawyer intimidates men. There are numerous instances where sexual fetishes and other identity-related features intrude on people's personal

relationships, highlighting the highly compartmentalised way people interact with each other. However, identities with AJLT are more clear-cut. Miranda's admission of her attraction to women after twenty years of marriage does not raise questions about her true identity or seem to clash with her other identities (such as wife, ciswoman, mother, etc.). Similarly, Rose's coming out as Rock does not appear to alter how Charlotte approaches parenting her child, nor does Big's death see Carrie grapple with her loss of status as 'wife', a status much elevated and sought after in SatC. Transitions between identities are distinct and involve little personal struggle in terms of transitions or inter-identity conflicts.

### **Self-Referentiality and Pastiche**

AJLT leans into its connections with SatC and makes continual reference to previous plotlines. For example, the AJLT season 1 finale alludes to the SatC season 6 finale, reversing the roles of Miranda and Carrie as they plead with each other not to follow their boyfriend abroad. Parallels between series episodes of the present and the past make occasional use of this form of self-referentiality. Other references tend to be continuations of the original series rather than self-referentiality. In the SatC finale, Carrie scatters Big's ashes on the Parisian Bridge, symbolising the sentimentality of the show's self-references. Callbacks to SatC rarely appear to directly critique or parody the material, while AJLT also appears to be somewhat less self-critical than SatC. SatC's fundamental component was its plurality and self-conscious exploration of contemporary social mores, whereas AJLT lacks any controversial challenges to the established norms of contemporary culture and ethics. Compared to SatC, AJLT is less self-parodying and significantly more sincere, with callbacks and self-references designed to evoke nostalgia rather than serve as self-criticism or pastiche.

### **Discussion**

The preceding analysis examines how AJLT articulates themes prevalent in feminist and postmodernist film critiques, encompassing gender roles, sexuality, LGBT concerns, and race, alongside postmodern elements such as narrative structure, identity and meaning construction, self-referentiality, and the employment of pastiche and parody. The analysis situates AJLT within the post-feminist framework commonly linked to SatC (Press, 2009), potentially addressing its topics in a manner that is less overtly feminist than SatC.

The series maintains its predecessor's emphasis on women's difficulties and gender roles, although it lacks the same pluralistic viewpoint on gender roles as its earlier version. The series interprets divergence from conventional feminine norms as unequivocal evidence of belonging to an alternative gender. This represents a substantial change in a series where the characters were highly doubtful about the conflation between binary genders. The acceptance of non-binary individuals and transitioning children is often complex and not instantaneous; yet, the notion that gender variety is normative faces minimal opposition, which illustrates the show's context within a post-feminist framework.

Similarly, there is a deliberate attempt to diversify perspectives away from cis, white feminism towards admitting diverse sexualities and ethnicities into the show. However, this only serves to challenge the characters' assumption that there is an outdated feminist mode regarding certain incidents involving women of colour. The show initially explores the race or ethnicity of non-white characters but then tends to ignore their ethnicity and its potential intersection with their womanhood. For instance, the second season does not focus on Seema's struggles with cultural expectations of marriage, instead implicitly equating her

status as an unmarried woman with Carrie's as a widow. Issues of identity receive little exploration in the same way as they did in the original series, despite the identities of characters being far more diverse in AJTL.

Moreover, AJTL adopts a more traditional narrative structure, eliminating the unreliable narrator present in *Carrie* and the *vox populi* segments where ordinary New Yorkers express their diverse opinions on the episode's subject matter. The episodes exhibit a less distinct thematic structure, as it emphasises the presentation of events in a more objective fashion, with diminished apparent subversion of ontological and epistemological objectivity or narrative authority. AJTL tends to pose fewer enquiries on contemporary topics and aims to elucidate the appropriate ethical stances rather than reflecting the realities of modern pluralism and cultural relativism. Charlotte's social conservatism is now limited to remarks about hair dye, rather than addressing more significant social concerns where disagreement is minimal.

In other respects, AJTL displays a high degree of resemblance to *SatC*. It remains uncritical of capitalism and effectively glorifies a consumerist lifestyle in which consumption serves both to elevate one's social status and is a therapeutic means for resolving one's emotional problems. Inclusion within the show may be regarded as tokenistic, failing to challenge contemporary feminist perspectives from a postmodernist critique of it as a monolithic ideology.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has explored AJTL and how it handles themes relevant to feminism and postmodernity through the text, comparing this approach to that of *SatC*. The analysis highlights how themes such as gender roles, sexuality, race and identity are represented by the show, taking a less overtly feminist stance than its predecessor and situating itself more firmly within a new, third-wave post-feminist paradigm. Unlike *SatC*, AJTL does not prevaricate long over gender roles and treats deviations from its accepted canon of femininities as indicative of alternative gender identities. Though targeted at being more inclusive, its handling of LGBT identities, sexuality and ethnicity often sees exploration of intersectional issues happen in an introductory and perfunctory manner, with the characters often becoming immediately thereafter integrated without experiencing any additional challenges or generating unique perspectives resultant from their identities.

Despite acknowledging past transgressions, the show maintains its updated progressive approach through casting and character diversity without delving deeply into the exploration of intersectional issues. The handling of AJTL on themes is less exploratory and takes on a more superficially didactic tone, offering clear ethical positions that are represented, accepted, then moved on from immediately. As a result, it is interpretable as not only post-feminist but post-postmodern, shifting away from the irony and cynicism of *SatC*'s take on the social and personal lives of privileged New Yorkers towards attempting to affect a sincere engagement with contemporary progressive ideals and indeed between individuals in their interpersonal relationships.

Lastly, it has been observed that characters' identities have become cohesive and stable, while their roles as women in society are less ambiguous, despite their fluctuating statuses and identities, from wives to widows, heterosexuals to bisexuals, and girls to non-binary individuals. Consequently, the show embodies wider cultural transformations, which are



undoubtedly evident in the gradual emergence of post-feminism in SatC and are now deeply embedded in media portrayals of reality as both post-feminist and post-postmodern.

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