

INDIAN CHICK LIT AS POSTFEMINIST TEXTS

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Abstract

Much of the critical literature term chick lit as postfeminist texts since an instrumentalisation of feminist theory takes place in these novels. This paper considers whether Indian chick lit directly or indirectly promote postfeminist beliefs and could be termed as such. The paper considers the problematics of the nomenclature 'Indian chick lit', followed by a discussion of its postcolonial identity and how consumerism, a staple of chick lit, is dealt with in the genre. It claims that humour, argued as a subversive tool, is revealed as a concealing mechanism which serves to obscure the fact that the genre produces and reinforces appropriate femininities. Within the dynamics of pleasure and escape promised by the genre of Indian chick lit, feminist concerns are glossed over and importance is placed on the resolution of the plot over the socio-cultural concerns raised.

Key words: Indian chick lit; postfeminism; feminism

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1 Introduction

Tabish Khair (2008: 60) identifies chick lit as a part of pulp fiction, which he defines as “cheaply published fiction aimed at the mass market.” Pulp fiction is “not necessarily bad literature, but” does not “set out to be consciously literary” (Khair, 2008: 61). It tends to be primarily concerned with the activity of narration –a sort of “what-happened-nextism” (Khair, 2008: 61). Chick lit could also be classified as a comedy of manners with the function of an etiquette book. It lays down certain traits desirable in young women who are the primary readers of this genre. The term ‘chick-lit’ was coined by Chris Mazza and Jeffrey Deshell to refer ironically to the various fiction compiled in their anthology, ‘Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction’ (1995). Mazza and Deshell pointed out patterns of instrumentalisation of feminist theory in these fiction. Mazza (2006: 18) explains that the term ‘chick-lit’ was created not to “embrace an old, frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging lingering stereotype”. The term was meant to point out the stereotype that classified women’s concerns and their writings as second class. However, Mazza also admits that commercial chick lit today has “stripped themselves” (2006: 28) of this irony.

The genre of chick lit largely features single women in their twenties and thirties navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers while in search of satisfying personal relationships. The tone of this fiction is usually light and humourous. The genre includes mainly formulaic stories about women living in urban centers with challenging careers often in publishing, marketing, television or journalism.

Many of the studies referred to in this paper, identify chick lit as ‘postfeminist’ fiction (e.g. Mazza, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Stockton, 2012). Postfeminism is a sort of conversion of feminism into a much more individualistic discourse, which is deployed in media and popular culture as a kind of substitute for feminism. It involves an internalization of basic liberal feminist goals while simultaneously depoliticizing them. The personal thus becomes no longer political, but “inherently personal” (Ghosh, 2013: 12). A concern to understand the dynamics of power and constraint gives way to celebratory connections between women who seemingly creates their own autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity. Chick lit, thus, draws from the language of ‘empowerment’, ‘free choice’ and ‘sexual liberation’, yet aims to succeed in an aggressively consumerist culture.

It is important to note here that this paper deals with the genre of Indian chick lit and examines its possibilities as postfeminist fiction. Moreover, Harzewski’s (2011: 23) warning of whether postfeminism as a descriptive term “can be used responsibly outside the context of white Anglo-American metropolitan feminism” is also taken into consideration.

2 Problematizing the terminology: Addressing the charge of ‘fluff’

There is an obvious derogatory connotation in calling a genre meant for a female audience and mostly written by women writers, ‘chick’ lit. The assumption is that this genre is characterized by ‘girl stuff’ and, as George Eliot (1856) suggested, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” is portrayed as a category in itself. Nobody wants to be caught reading chick lit as it is considered vain and shallow. Kehily and Nayak (2008: 333) deal with the romantic text as “an interactive activity providing collaborative acts of interpretation” and identity formation. This means that popular tropes of chick lit are juxtaposed with reader’s own

experiences as well as discussed between the readers to form collective interpretations. However, this view does not acknowledge the perception of chick lit as a lighthearted read that are a waste of time for serious readers. Such a perception would imply that the books are read as guilty pleasures and not as an interactive activity.

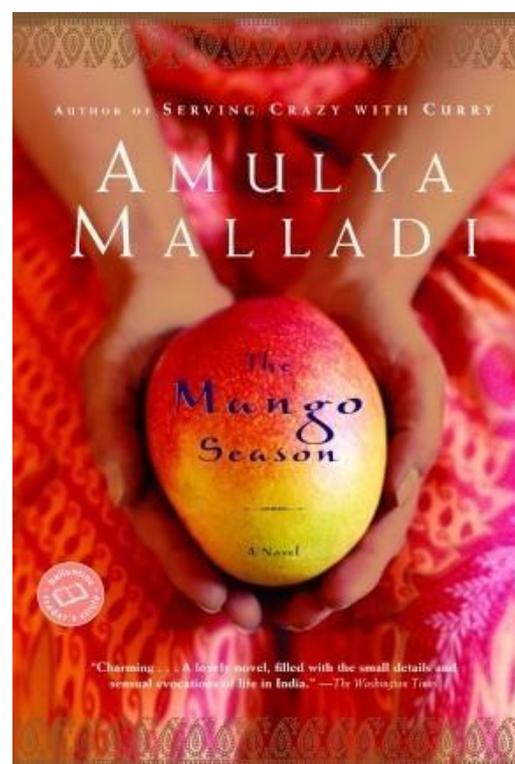
Also, the classification 'Indian' thrusts the literature into the box of sub-genre, an ethnic version of chick lit. This classification of subgenre implies an imitation, a change of appearance from "pink cover art of stilettos, martini glasses and lipsticks" to "*bindis*, saris and bangles" (Kumar, 2006), but essentially referring to similar problems and desires of their Western counterparts. Thus, the term elicits a perception of Indian chick lit as a "gossipy café of Indian writing in English at home" (Kumar, 2006) underscoring its difference from the more 'literary' Indian writing in English which finds its home in the West. This further solidifies the conception of Indian chick lit as a domestic product consumed primarily within India; its narratives mainly of India and primarily for Indians. Since Indian chick lit implies entertainment and mere imitation, it is distanced from its potential relationship to Third World or postcolonial literature.

Yet, according to Ronald Klein (2009), being part of the wave of "masala chick lit" is a question of labelling and marketing. He explains that Penguin India and Harper Collins have employed authors to write for this market, utilizing certain narrative strategies and modes of illustrations of covers to promote various fiction as chick lit. A book is named chick lit due to three reasons – it's association to books of other authors or it's association to a known chick lit author, similarity in cover designs and colour scheme to other chick lit novels, and finally as a result of branding by blogs that spread the word of publication of the novels.

Much of the audience for chick lit is motivated by "the notion of fantasy and escape" (Maher, 2007: 198). Chick lit, much like popular fiction, is valued for its fast paced narration rather than literary credibility. Indeed, it is seen as a "purely commercial phenomenon" (Ponzanesi, 2014: 156), designed to attract target audience with readymade plotlines, rather than as fulfilling any aesthetic expectation. In fact Harzewski traces a lineage for chick lit¹ so that it becomes "*respectable* enough to pass critical muster" (as cited in Stockton, 2012: 471). However, she admits that what came to endear this genre to the critic of mass fiction is its "humour, identification, delight and fun" (as cited in Stockton, 2012: 471). In this regard, this paper is useful in describing what women read for pleasure and why.

3 Postcolonial concerns of Indian chick lit

It is quite evident that the marketing strategy of these fiction aims for the brand of exotic otherness. For instance, Amulya Malladi's 'The Mango Season' (2003) has a cover illustration with bright colours and Indian print patterns (See Figure 1.). It shows a mango presented in a woman's hands over a bright *pallu*. The identification that the book is Indian and exotic is immediate. However, both Indian and Western cultures are hardly depicted as static. While their parents have fashioned their own



idealized fantasies of homeland, the protagonists of Indian chick lit such as Maya Mehra, from Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire* (2004), find themselves alienated from these ideals. This represents two ways of perceiving the postcolonial identity in a diaspora. While the parents set up "little Indias where they settle and practice traditional Indian conventions," their children who have "no instinctive bond with their heritage" (Ghosh, 2013: 195) do not show a tendency towards ethnic absolutism. As Maya Mehra discovers that she is the incarnation of the goddess *Kali*, her materialist American identity transforms through the imagined space of the supernatural to incorporate her latent ethnic background.

Additionally, Khair identifies a kinship between language of Indian pulp fiction and the language concocted by Rushdie to accommodate various versions of Indian realities. A combination of gossip and reportage, middle class voyeurism, English sentences and Hindi words provide the imaginative and linguistic base for Indian chick lit. This could be attributed to the growth in numbers (and in confidence) of a certain kind of Indian urban middle class whose "nostalgia for self" (Khair, 2008: 68) is reflected in these commercial fiction. Here is what Anuja Chauhan's *Zoya* reveals:

I still bear the scars of One Who Has Done Cricket-Based Advertising. And I know it can completely backfire on you. You spend like half your annual advertising budget on a cricket campaign and then they go in there and play abysmally and the public says it's because they do too many ads and they start hating your product. [...] Even after our best performance in recent times, when our team managed to make it to the finals (and then lost miserably, but why go there?), this chain SMS did the rounds saying: On this shameful day, we hereby promise to boycott every product the team endorses, *Jai Hind*. It doesn't help that the channel guys seem to get a sadistic pleasure out of running a player's ad right after he gets out for a duck. One moment he's out, and the next he's in the ad break, receiving phone calls from his mother telling him, '*Beta, karlo duniya mutthi mein...*' That's why I say, give me movie stars any time. I mean, a lot of people say Shah Rukh can't act but at least he's never given a performance so bad that it incited people to climb up ladders and put *gobar* on his hoardings. (2016: 26).

The writing style is informal and confessional to establish an intimacy with the readers, who are mostly educated middle class women. The humour incorporated serves to make the readers recognize themselves in *Zoya*. Chick lit novels are thus ultimate "romances of the self" (as cited in Stockton, 2012: 472); a self fashioned by the condition of postcoloniality and the dynamics of postfeminism.

4 Consumerism: the real deal?

As Angela McRobbie explains, postfeminist chick lit is in a "double entanglement" (as cited in McRobbie, 2009: 6) as far as feminism is concerned. Neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life coexist with liberalization in the matter of choice in domestic and sexual relations. A woman may defy even supernatural powers for love, as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Tilo* does in 'The Mistress of Spices' (1997), but the emotion must be limited to heterosexual monogamous love. Even in Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions' (2008) in which Draupadi marries the five *Pandavas*, it is made clear that she had no say in that arrangement. Moreover, Draupadi falls in love with only one man – Karna. Likewise, none of the Indian chick lit heroines question the gender essentialism – they are emphatically women who are attracted to men, a fact highlighted by the cover illustrations of these books which often display women surrounded by evidently feminine articles. Thus, in place of feminist politics, "appropriate femininities" (as cited in Kehily & Nayak, 2008: 332) are suggested as models of ideal behavior. "Young women are offered a notional form of equality, concretized in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer"

(McRobbie, 2009: 13). In short, a link between liberal feminism and femininity is created through individualism, and the tensions between the two form the basis for the plot of chick lit. For instance, Lina Ray, the protagonist of Anjali Banerjee's 'Imaginary Men' (2005), who claims to be "allergic to India" and declares herself as "an independent American woman" (as cited in Ghosh, 2013: 191), eventually falls in love with Raja, whom she had previously described as traditional.

Mlynowski and Jacobs describe chick lit as "honest" (as cited in Maher, 2007: 195), reflecting women's lives today. In truth, they appear so due to their self-monitoring tendency through confessions. Indian chick lit packages the "appropriate femininities" (as cited in Kehily & Nayak, 2008: 332), spun into the stories through the confessional and intimate writing style, to be sold as readymade commercial fiction through which consumers negotiate their identities.

Perhaps then, the motive of these fictions seems, in the first place, their marketability to which these "appropriate femininities" are tailor-made. As Minal Sharma in Swati Kaushal's 'Piece of Cake' (2004) proclaims – what women actually desire (or read for pleasure) is "no postcolonial hangover, no quixotic desire to reform the world, just a healthy, wholesome, twenty-first century pursuit of wealth and prosperity" (as cited in Ghosh, 2013: 181). If consumerism, is the ultimate aim of authors who write chick lit and the readers who consume it, then there seems no real reason to challenge the principles upon which capitalism is based.

A hint to the fact that Indian chick lit is not concerned with the relations of power and powerlessness within which women find themselves inscribed is given by Maher when she remarks that the genre avoid "serious treatment of cultural, political and social concerns" (as cited in Maher, 2007: 195). For example, Chauhan's 'Battle for Bittora' (2014) mention the issues of scarcity of water and honour killing, but only to the extent of the protagonist's point of view and to aid the development of the plot. Similarly, consumer goods appear essential to chick-lit heroine's "self-conception and self-presentation, and writers commonly give as much attention to the obtaining and assembling of outfits as to the maintenance of faces and bodies" (as cited in Barber, 2006: 27). Hence, Singh's Maya Mehra proudly drives a yellow Hummer and downs Starbucks' coffees. On the other hand, these instances of worship of consumer goods also seem like a parody referring to Euro-American chick lit's obsession with capitalism. Every time Maya puts on "a pair of jeans she reminds us that they are her favourite 'Seven' brand jeans; she fights crime not simply in high-heeled designer shoes, but specifically in Sergio Rossi slingbacks" (Butler & Desai, 2008: 21).

5 The concealing effect of humour: A case study of 'the zoya factor'

Anuja Chauhan's 'The Zoya Factor' pits an executive, Zoya Singh Solanki, the 'lucky charm' of Indian cricket team with the skeptical Indian skipper, Nikhil Khoda. The novel is hilarious; which is typical of chick lit, according to Mlynowski and Jacobs who deem chick lit as "funny fiction, [...] finding humour in a variety of situations" (as cited in Maher, 2007: 195). But what function does this humour serve? McRobbie (2009: 19) implies that humour remains a part of a "self-monitoring mechanism" through which women assess their identities. When Nikhil starts lecturing Zoya about discipline and hard work, she often reflects snidely that there was "no need for him to start talking like a Nike poster" (Chauhan, 2016: 47). Her sarcasm serves to underline the fact that she does not appreciate him acting superior to her. This wit progresses through the use of hyperbole, creating drama and tension within the plotline. Monita, Zoya's friend, remarks of the upcoming India-Pakistan match as thus:

It's India–Pakistan today!’ Mon said dreamily as she threw an orange dupatta over her white kameez and green salwar. ‘Drama, Tragedy, Emotion...twin siblings with bleeding umbilical cords, seeking closure, in love and death.... Ahhhh....’ She placed a blue bindi on her forehead and added, ‘It's like *Deewar*, only better, because there's no Nirupa Roy’ (Chauhan, 2016: 329).

The exaggeration also highlights the importance of the match to the Indian imagination. Thus, comedy and hyperbole goes hand in hand to stress the formation of specific realities and identities in Indian chick lit.

However, this humour, while empowering the self that is produced through this novel, particularly “preserves the status quo (and) prevents rage from being funneled into political involvement.” (as cited in Maher, 2007: 197). ‘The Zoya Factor’ hints of issues of race and superstition, while at the same time employing these as comical interludes, which does not affect the character of the heroine or that of the reader. In a talk show, in the book, one of the speakers judge the concept of ‘the spirit of cricket’ as pompous and British. He points out that the game is played at its best in India, Pakistan and West Indies, thus considering the notion a British attempt to retain control of the game. However, the seriousness of the argument is spoiled by the next comical comment, “I vote we call in a capable ghost buster and finish it off for good!” (Chauhan, 2016: 349) Likewise, humour conceals the fact that the text produces a popular femininity, amidst all the accusations of sexism and prejudice. Zoya’s perfect ending has a Bollywood-like quality to it. As Monita says mockingly, first Zoya would make Nikhil *paranthas*, then he would open a bottle of wine while she pours *Zing!*³ into the World Cup. They would fall back on pillows and Just Do It (Chauhan, 2016: 137).

Indian chick lit are postfeminist texts as these utilize humour not as a tool of subversion, but to conceal and gloss over the seriousness of the social commentary made. Instances of bias and racism are laughed away as comical interludes. This helps to shift the attention away from these instances to accomplish the happy ending. Humour, thus, dilutes the social criticism and conceals the fact that what is produced is not a feminist sensibility, but appropriate femininities. Humour makes it acceptable and even admirable for women to revert to a seemingly simpler and more natural feminine nature. As Maher argues, “I hesitate to believe that just because something is enjoyable, it points to a powerful, new, relentlessly apolitical brand of (post)feminism” (2007: 200).

In addition to the important observation on the function of humour in this genre, the paper initiates viewing the genre as not only texts but as texts in action, read collaboratively. The focus, then, would be on the readers and what they read or interpret from these books in their quest for understanding their sense of self. Furthermore, the fact that these novels are read as guilty pleasures would imply such a negotiation of self is done in private and not through collaborative acts of interpretation among readers.

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