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CHICK-LIT IN INDIA: THE DILEMMA AND THE DELUSION

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ABSTRACT



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Chick-lit as a genre came to India after establishing itself with a thunderous applause in Britain and America already. As the genre developed and perpetuated itself amongst the readers there were certain (un)said conventions that went into the making of the defining features ('formula') of this genre. These said features were rooted very much into the context of the society (American and British) in which these novels became bestsellers. They talked of the life of allegedly liberated women in which of course they were the central characters. These women and in fact the whole genre is said to have flourished in the backdrop of the fact that the women it portrays are the women who have received the 'benefit' of the feminism. To read such a contextualized text in India where we have multiplicity of contexts when it specifically comes to feminism, it poses a dilemma of association, recognition and representation with its readership. Hence, resulting into the creation of a delusional world which constricts itself to the pages of the novels. Chick-lit does not take its roots and even aspire for this sort of delusional world; on the contrary it bases itself on the newly forged identity of the new modern woman who is very much alive to herself and her surroundings. This paper questions the reading of this genre in India vis-à-vis the social realities and contexts from which it takes its subject matter in most of the cases. It would also read Chick-lit as a 'stereotyped' genre and its dynamics across cultures. It will track down the points at which the Indian chick-lit diverges/conforms with this formula ridden genre with respect to the characters and context, which will further lead to and resolve the question: Is Indian chick-lit carving its own space (as chick-lit from India)? Or is it ending up being a travesty of the stereotyped chick-lit merely scratching the surface of the Indian female psyche and what goes into its making?

Key words - Chick-lit, stereotyped genre, Indian Chick-lit, feminism, representation.

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It was in the beginning of the 1990's in Britain and United States of America when Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* made ripples in the publishing world selling millions of copies around the globe. Come 2007, appears Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* in India and yet again makes waves in the Indian publishing market. What followed was a tsunami of many such women writers like Anuja Chauhan, Nishat Fatima, Tisha Khosla, Swati Kaushal, Rupa Gulab, Meenakshi Madhvan Reddy, etc. reveling, laughing, lamenting and even lampooning in the lives of single 'working' cosmopolitan women in 'pink and black'¹ A coming-of-age story revolving around the life of a young woman and the roller coaster ride of her career and romantic life provides the ground-work of these novels which are categorized as Popular Women's Fiction or precisely 'Chick-lit', often with derision. The genre and its tag originated in the United States and therefore have the women in their society as its context. The women we see in these novels are the creation of the neo-liberal, free-thinking scenario with which they grew up. In other words, they seem to be enjoying the "benefit from the accomplishments of the 1970's and 80's feminism" (Maureen Dowd, qtd. in Butler and Desai, 6). However, this case of "benefit" is not entirely true when it comes to the Indian scenario.

"Chick lit is a genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women ... There is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books...The plots usually consists of women experiencing usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more.", says Rian Montgomery of Chicklitbooks.com. Sarah Mlynowski and Farrin Jacobs in "See Jane Write: A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit" write:

Chick-lit is often upbeat, always funny fiction about contemporary female characters and their everyday struggles with work, home, friendship, family or love. It's about women growing up and figuring out who they are and what they need, versus what they think they want. It's about observing life and finding the humour in a variety of situations, exchanges and people. It's about coming of age (no matter how old the woman is—chick-lit heroines can be anywhere from teenaged to beyond middle-aged). It's generally written by women for women. It's honest, it reflects women's lives today—their hopes and dreams as well as their trials and tribulations—and, well, it's hugely popular. (qtd. in Maher, 195).

Besides this, to talk about chick-lit as a literary genre, it can be observed that it is symptomatic of the 'girl power'² which third wave of feminism much talks about as we see their world replete with characters who may appear shaky on the surface but as the plot unveils they emerge out to be assertive, self-reliant and ambitious passing through the alleys of a big city all on their own.

Certainly, it has the set of sisterly concerns which reasserts the sisterhood with the target sister audience not only at the level of the romantic life and inclinations of the protagonist but also by the choices she makes in terms of her clothing, hair, perfumes, shoes and the obsession with their physical appearance. When viewed under the light of this obsession chick-lit novels also become an echo of the step taken back from the expression 'breaking of the feminine stereotypes' which the Feminists have been fighting for so long. This is one of the reasons that the entire genre has been called "fluffy", "retrograde" "tawdry" "apolitical" and what not. Defending chick-lit authors, Stephanie Harzewski contends, "The critical reception of chick lit can be seen as another cycle of gendered antinovel discourse directed at the composer of romance and amatory fiction, a discourse that has punctuated the novel's three-hundred-year history" (40-41).

Chick-lit is basically a formula ridden genre whose equations can be well traced in many novels that have flourished under its name. The heroine at the center of the plot is always an urban single woman who has a very urban job in Ad agency, animation, hotel management, publishing, fashion designing etc. They always have a very good looking male superior or colleague, therefore ensuring our heroine where to look when she is tired of being ambitious and cribbing about her singlehood. Romance, is one of the themes of these novels and that is why they have also earned the tag 'working women romance'. The urban setting provides for the night-

¹ name of the chick lit novel by Tisha Khosla ('and' added, replacing 'or')

² Term made popular by the all-girls music band 'Spice Girls', Prof. Susan Hopkins discusses this term in her "Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture" with reference to the Wonder Woman, Madonna etc.

life-pub-bar-discotheque-scenes where the characters meet, socialize and carry the plot forward. The heroine is not the suave femme fatale but the person of a deeply diffident self who habitually looks at the greener grass at the other side. The poster girl of all the chick-lit novels- Bridget Jones fits into this description with her job as an assistant at London Book Publisher with a charming Daniel Cleaver for her boss and her bouts of hyperventilation every time her weight crosses the appropriate mark. Not only the themes and characters but also the cover of these novels are very telling of the genre, one can enumerate some recurring images on the cover easily, for example- a pair of high heeled stilettos, a wine glass and a shopping bag, a woman's red mouth with the pearl necklace, or simply a silhouette of a perfectly proportioned figure of a woman- all in flashy colors.

This formula is earnestly replicated and exploited to produce similar bestsellers in different nations with different characters and here it becomes a misplaced travesty of itself, specifically in the Indian background which this paper focuses on. When it comes to the 'serious' analysis of chick-lit as a genre, what is focused mainly is the consumerist and post-feminist framework, which is very much embedded in the discourse of American and British chick-lit. In Indian scenario consumerism is no anathema but then again it is the offshoot of the Western one, much like the chick-lit novels themselves. A Helen Fielding's and a Sophie Kinsella's protagonist has the liberty to date the men she desires, choose the life, a job and friends she wants without any second thought because she has been the product of a culture that has been not only proliferating such 'new' women figure but also been comfortable with, accepting it as a norm. What escapes most of the time in these criticisms, as pointed out by Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai as well, is the acknowledgement of the many works which have taken the roots of chick-lit across cultures, race and nations which further expose the 'contradictions in producing such subjectivities and therefore underscoring the ways in which...neoliberalism is an incomplete formation' which also prevents a 'reimagination of the possibilities and limitations for representation of the subject in the context of...globalization'(1-2).

This is the very 'limitation' that renders the Indian chick-lit dealing with very Indian cultural intricacies appear like a farce. However, this is not to discredit the various diversities of chick-lit that have developed under the rubric of the tag. Critics have acknowledged that there exists several sub-genres of the chick-lit, to name a few, 'black chick-lit (*Diva Diaries*), Bollywood chick-lit (*Salaam Paris*), Jewish chick-lit (*The J.A.P. Chronicles* and *The Matzo Ball Heiress*) and assistant chick-lit, which has its own subsection of Hollywood: assistant chick-lit (*The Second Assistant*), mystery chick-lit (*Sex, Murder and a Double Latte*), shopping chick-lit (*Retail Therapy*), the self-loathing genre (*This Is Not Chick Lit*) and Brit chick lit (*Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*)' (Butler and Desai 3). They have, in their own way, dealt with the 'formula' of chick-lit and altered/extended its boundaries. Probably, this range has lead Chris Mazza to point out that "chick lit has the potential to skillfully represent a whole range of women's concerns while entertaining its reader" but she also adds that this genre has "morphed into books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels" (qtd. in Maher 196). This sort of morphing has given birth to a genre which has its "preoccupations in U.S mainstream feminism" and it is represented in the popular fiction (read chick-lit) of the time (Butler and Desai 3). The paper's concern is the Indian version of these chick-lit novels which in following the 'formula'(which is the result of the 'morphing') has become very exclusive, be it in terms of its readership or the characters it concerns. The cover page of *Almost Single* (2007), with the count 'over one lakh copies sold', also flaunts a comment by *New York Post: Required Reading: "It's Sex and the City except the city isn't New York it's New Delhi"*. I fail to understand how this comment is touted as praise with all its pun-intended-ness. The novel's unwavering faithfulness in following the formula of the chick-lit which is essentially, to speak in plain terms, 'western', loses its very appeal, i.e. the association, recognition and representation with its readership. The target audiences of chick-lit often have this "oh-this-is-so-me" expression while reading the novels. It goes for a twist when it comes to the Indian counterpart. For example, in *Almost Single* Aisha is often crashing parties and night-outs, getting drunk, chain smoking, too often without anyone to answer at home. The absence of the father and the perpetual presence of the mother, 'the Mamma Bhatia' in the narrative can be seen as one ingenious move on the author's part to give her heroine a limitless freedom much in tune of the 'western' woman. Moreover, the acceptability of such women in the Indian

society (notwithstanding the class factor here) is always dubious. In a way this genre is the representative example of what Homi Bhabha calls 'culturally hybrid, hyphenated' identity wearing 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Bhabha, "The White Stuff") on their sleeves. Aisha, the central character is as efficient in wrapping saris over her jeans as in recognizing the brands of wine. This identity negotiates the old and the new, the global and the local and cannot be entirely accused of the counterfeiting. The language used in the novel is symbolic of this identity. The readers not only come across the words like *tokoed*, *tappakhaed*, etc. but also can listen to what they sound like when speaking literally translated English. For example, "You are Zoya, no?" and not the correct "Are you Zoya?"³ (*The Zoya Factor* 74, 167)

Indian chick-lit definitely internalizes the genre to this extent but it falls short of it when one looks at the female characters it deals with. The new women identity that is pushed forward in these novels is the privilege of the bunch of middle and upper-middle class women who have crossed the threshold. Advaita Kala is also mindful of this. Rama Lakshmi in the article, "India's Cheeky Chick-Lit finds an Audience" quotes Advaita Kala, "I am keenly aware that my book represents a sliver of Indian society, but it is a growing sliver" (*Washington Post*, Friday, November 23rd, 2007). This 'growing silver' however becomes the object of alienation and aspiration across its setting and these women become the 'other' which borders with being 'bad', for the majority of the women in India- not only the elder ones but also the twenty something-the age group chick-lit focuses on. Aisha's mother can be seen exemplifying this attitude. Aisha confides in the novel, "Take my mother to look at being independent and socially active as a handicap *when it comes to marriage proposals*" (italics mine) (234). These characters become an empty sigh for many, much like the Lata didi in the novel. She is in an unhappy relationship with a drunkard husband but bears it because she is 'only a college graduate'. She says, "Where can I go? Papa has also retired....It's good you have waited. You have a job, a life, friends, an identity..." (276).

Secondly, this whole concept of new cosmopolitan women becomes so hollow when we look at our stark realities. As Rama Lakshmi, in the same article, opines:

Many Indian women live in worlds that bear no resemblance to those in chick-lit novels. Nearly two-thirds of the population here still lives in rural areas, where girls grow up in families that provide many opportunities to boys but none to girls...In a country where marriages are usually arranged by parents in consultation with astrologers, and where women are traditionally expected to sacrifice their own aspirations in the interest of family, the cheeky chick-lit heroines are being embraced by readers who see the lighter side of Indian mores" (*Washington Post*, Friday, November 23rd, 2007).

If only these novels could be seen away from the larger discourse they are situated in, the 'lighter side' could make more sense. Therefore, chick-lit does face the dilemma of association, recognition and representation when we see its readership and the depiction of the characters across the target audience, i.e. the urban working independent young women, and it does not if we ghettoize these novels for the target readers, which seems very irrelevant considering the publishing market these novels have nowadays. Extending one's thought to what an Indian chick-lit with a wide readership and a larger representation would look like, the film *Queen* comes quite handy. The film not only reflects the transformation and growth of Rani (the central character) but also describes the ways an average Indian woman assimilates the global which may or may not culminate into the character like Aisha – telling her wines apart. It can be argued that Rani isn't the truly liberated woman as she returns to the same world she decided to take off from, but she is the story of the most of the girls/women in India. Compared to the character of Aisha and many like her with stilettoes, wine and branded pair of jeans the character like Rani seems much more alive in the Indian context and hence can extricate chick-lit from the dilemma and the delusion it faces and creates respectively. However, this does not mean that the realities that the present formula-following chick-lit deals with do not exist, but then again there is an entirely different picture when we look at the condition of women's safety in our metropolitan (because these stories deal with this metropolitan background exclusively) cities. Liberation does come with the choice of leading a life in a certain way but it becomes complete with the respect of those choices being a norm in the

³ A character in Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* talks to the central character Zoya.

society we live in. What the Indian chick-lit and to cite a recent example, the Vogue India online video advertisement celebrating women empowerment, does is to go for a sectional representation of the women empowerment. Jennifer Maher corroborates this when she writes in the context of chick-lit, "I am equally suspicious of representational "empowerment" discovered via female characters who can run in high heels, fire a gun, and bed the boss"(195).

A conglomeration of cultures that allows certain liberties and a way of life enters the metropolis and seems to be creating this very class of chicks the consumer/reader of chick-lit but it stops right there becoming a mirage for the rest, thus an incomplete and fractured project called globalization. While our version of globalization allows a 'nikki' for a 'nike'⁴ (Mishra, 15), it still has long way to go to reconcile with many images of women that have refracted, assimilated and even re-invented the new-ness in the society which may or may not be in sync with that of the 'chicks' in these chick-lit novels.

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⁴Pankaj Mishra in his book *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana, Travels in Small Town India* talks about the imitation industry which seems to give us a sense of 'personal independence and self-sufficiency' (xv, Prologue).