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## **“I want the fairytale”: A Marxist Interpretation of Narcissistic Representation in Chick-Media**

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### **Abstract:**

“I couldn’t understand a word she was saying, but I felt I had in my possession all the Italian I’d ever need to know: Dolce, Dolce, Dolce.” - (Sex and the City)

Chick-media, a typically twenty-first century genre is dominated by material obsession and commodity fetishism. Every woman today is exposed to this pop-cultural world of celebrated attachment towards branded goods and destination weddings. The mass-mediated social landscape identifies women based on the worth of their dress and focuses primarily on the amount they spend in beauty parlours and cosmetic surgeries. There is a market that promises Disney-princess life and “Happily ever after” future. The image of achieved female self is portrayed to be achieved in acquiring a Louis Vuitton and Gucci in this materialistic world. In this chase for Harry Winston does media let women think about Marxism anymore? Is it really late capitalism? Or in this contemporary realm of self-obsession and narcissism, does Marxism hold water anymore? This paper would try to explore the boundaries set to Marxism by Chick-media by providing a sweep over Discourses focusing on *Devil wears Prada*, *P.S I love You* and *Princess Diaries*; television series like *Sex and the City* and other chick flicks and romantic comedies.

### **Keywords:**

Commodity Fetishism, Material Obsession, Chick-media, Narcissism, McDonaldization

Karl Marx envisioned the perfect society that emphasised on the interpellation of power in the hands of the strata of society that is involved in the process of real creation and production. Thus Marxism is a philosophy which attributed political dominance to the masses; an ideology which catered to ‘the sense of the real’, a statement usually relegated to the domain of Western Marxism perpetuated by a group of Marxists, led by George Lukacs. However two centuries since the rise of Marxism leads us to certain uncomfortable questions; has the near to perfect society that Marx et al dreamt of, emerged?; have those ideals being sustained? In case if it is divergent from the aspiration that Marx had, to what angle? These questions are mandatory in understanding the *Zeitgeist* and *Weltgeist* of the society. The utopian society of capital communism that Marx envisioned assured equal distribution of wealth, was against materialism and promised emotional stability by the means of surety that a worker will not be cast out. The theorising of Marxist ideology is in the cross-roads between the principles he put forth and the application of the same in the society we live in. There is a serious societal interrogation as to how far have the concepts of Marx been transgressed and how much of it has been reinserted or reinforced. In the year 1910, when Coco Chanel begin her first clothes outlet, she worked on the principal of creating a unique suit which concentrated on her philosophies of simplicity and sophistication.

Today, after 100 years, her brand is considered the most expensive in the world. The Marxian statement of “Workers need to see themselves in the object they have created” was the only mantra Coco Chanel followed to achieve this stardom. This success is attributed to customised, tailor made and designer outfits she made, in the times of mass produced commodities. The period of Fordism that concentrated on bulk productions differentiated her products for her exclusivity. It is mandatory to remember that, while creation of brands concentrated on quality instead of quantity that is what Marx also proposed for his utopian community. The only major difference was the overturning of the concepts of Marx by attribution of label to the commodity. In the television series, *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw the protagonist states, “Year after year, twenty-something women come to New York in search of the two L’s: Labels & Love”. It is important to question if this statement is true. In case if it is, then why are the women of the twenty-first century obsessed with brands and labels?

The first wave feminist movement that limited itself to education and voting rights underwent a massive transformation during the second wave feminism when women felt that operating in such smaller extents will not provide the required result; hence women took to the streets. Every notion that they found patriarchal was inverted and challenged during this time. The major factor of oppression according to most women during that period was caused by certain pieces of garments that they were expected to wear. The bra-burning movement that rejected restricting clothing fashion; that rebelled against the constrained of girdles, laces, bodices and brassiere that women were wearing in order to accentuate their figure for the other gender was one such important landmark in history. This tendency can be felt in utmost every theoretical and feminist work and even the television shows that were created during this period or that represented that age. The television series, *The Alienist* set in earlier part of twentieth century, captures the conversation between Sara Howard, the female lead and her maid:

Sara: I don't know if they abhor our shape or crave another.

Maid: They believe us to be delicate creatures.

Sara: Then to hell with them. (*The Alienist*, Season 1, Episode 1)

The cosmetics, garments, stilettos and any such fashion accessories that were considered oppressive in nature were rejected and condemned during this period. Particularly, long tresses, perfect figures and other attributes that created a duality between sexualities were dismissed by erasing the feminine features and incorporating manliness and attributes of men’s physique. In a sense these feminist ideologies appropriated the thought put forward by Friedrich Engels who in his monumental book, *The Origin of the Family*, stressed on the fact that women were relegated to the home and “made to bear the yoke of womanhood” only during the second phase of Homo Sapien development when society transformed from a hunting to a farming one. So, essentially, women were also domesticated; in the same way that the animals were tamed. This is true because there are evidences to prove that during the hunting period, women were also incorporated into the group taking down prey. The traditional concepts of femininity lead to sexual objectification of women in the social scenario. However, after second wave feminism, when difference feminism evolved, the thoughts of women changed and this paved the way for lipstick feminism and stiletto feminism both of which supported traditional concepts of beauty and rejected anti-sex feminism. Difference feminism objectives questioned why women have to uglify themselves in order to fight against oppression as even uglification against patriarchy

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was considered a form of male domination. Stiletto feminism and lipstick feminism derived as movements against disfigurement that women underwent in earlier feministic phases. The women of difference feminism considered embellishing oneself as empowerment and firmly believed that if their sexual power provided benefit, there was no mistake in using their power for betterment. Chick-lit is a derivative of difference feminism, which has grown into a gargantuan genre both in terms of literature and media. The chick, usually a derogatory term to represent women, is used by women themselves as a status symbol; these chick women, belong to the age group of 20 - 40.

The Chick genre concentrates on young women and their psychological, marital, relational, financial and other problems. These works are generally set in an urbane environment and capture the everyday life and whims and fancies of these womenfolk. While majority of the works in chick genre focus on creation of an individual identity of the protagonist, it is replete with brand consciousness and commodity fetishism. The locus of the genre shifts the Rene Descartesian philosophy of “I think, therefore I am” to ‘I shop, therefore I am’. Chick-lit can be called a mediated version of postfeminism, despite it capturing the zeitgeist of the society. There is a visible transference of relationships into materialism. The statement of Rebecca Bloomwood in the series *Confessions of a Shopaholic* when she says, “A man will never love you or treat you as well as a store. If a man doesn’t fit, you can’t exchange him seven days later for a gorgeous cashmere sweater” illustrates the obsession towards labels over love. The high stand that women gave once for family, children and relationships changes into ambitiousness for power, money and denominations. The protagonist of *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw states that, “The most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all is one you have with yourself”. But when and how did women, the epitome of sacrifice, transform themselves into self-indulgent creatures and wrapped themselves into the cocoon?. It is both humorous and fear inducing when Carrie states, “I have spent \$40,000 on shoes and I have no place to live. I am will literally be the old woman who lived in her shoes”. In order to understand the mind state of these Chick women, it is important to probe into the history of how media created this brand myth and how it turned women into the narcissists they have become. The World Wars which lead women to experience the new found freedom, made them experience financial independence for the first time. The vacuum that men created when waging wars, in factories, offices and other organisations were filled by women. The women stepped out of their houses for the first time and started being part of a work force that extended to the level of handling heavy machinery and flying airplanes. They had to both take care of children and earn the livelihood and interestingly the need to carry vegetables, food for children and themselves and vanity kit along with child in one hand while proceeding to workplace was the reason to design the first handbag. When the World War ended, the women who were used to economic independence and keeping themselves busy were expected to remain at home and take care of their husbands. This created a void in their hearts, which is termed as *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. The women were asked to let go of something that they had yearned for so long, the revival that happened during the absence of men has to be substituted and the market tried to do the same by objectification and creating commodity desire. The war that women waged this time was an ugly one as after experiencing freedom to let it go was tough. It was during this time that Marx pointed out, it was women and children that capitalists exploited the most and he was against the notion of happiness measured in terms of women being employed. The traditional role of “Kirche, Kücher and Kinder”



did not satisfy the women anymore and hence the market created the facade of the Happy Family, the ideology where men went to work and women took care of the household and children went out to school. This representation is one of the most overused in advertisements, movies and television series. The programs like *American Housewives* exemplify the same. The stereotyping spread irrespective of geographical location and even the early twenty-first century movies like *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham* portray the same where the character played by Kajol is considered the ideal housewife as she is religious, loving, caring, patriotic and above all, a mother and wife. The literature of the late twentieth century captured the newly created emptiness in women's heart in fictional works like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *A Doll's House* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. The rejection of Helmer's plea that, "I will work day and night for you" by Nora when she states, "I must stand on my own two feet if I'm to get to know myself and the world outside. That's why I can't stay here with you any longer" exemplifies the want of women during this period. The wife of the army veteran in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, when she begs, fights and argues with her husband has to be understood in same light.

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

"I never know what you are thinking. Think." (The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot)

The marketing media during this time-frame used and abused its power to sell the consumer and luxury goods that were being produced, with the tag of status symbol rather than as a useful commodity. Dolce, Gabbana, Luis Vuitton, Ferrari, Prada, Michael Kors and many others were established during this time. Though the chick-media concentrates on women, it is also men and their brand consciousness that is being displayed. The market of men, though may not consist of shoes, jacket, handbag and make-up like women, consists of a far more larger arena comprising of personal products and accessories to Sports Cars, Coolers, Electronic Goods and watches; also the men who gift women with expensive items are considered to be the perfect gentlemen. The chick-flicks and chick-lit operates on the firm ground of marketing brands in the twenty-first century, that every woman character has a passion for branded goods and her ideal man is one who can understand her passion. The chick-media takes it a notch up when it starts with branding the person by the clothes they are wearing. In the movie *Devil Wears Prada*, a movie set in the fashion industry, the protagonist Andy comes to be interviewed by Miranda who epitomises the Devil. When being interviewed she is seen as one who has no fashion sense. "Fashion is the instant language" states Miuccia Prada, "I firmly believe that with the right footwear one can rule the world" states Bette Midler. These quotations do not merely represent the spirit of the time but also prove how much brand consciousness was created at times when mass-production was at its peak. It is an ironical yet questionable attitude. The educational rights and economic freedom expanded the fashion industry and in turn fashion industry represented women as powerful with the ability to buy anything they want. The representation of women as cash-cows is one of the primary themes of chick-media which does not simply end with beauty products and accessories but extends to the next big market of cosmetic surgery. It is inevitable for us to avoid any contact with words like nose job, enlargement, liposuction and augmentation among others. In *Bad Teacher*, the protagonist takes up a teaching job, only to get her breasts augmented as it happens to be one of the most important goals for her. In recent times, one is ready to substitute one's body to achieve the ideal notion of beauty. The particular conversation between two friends in the movie *Sex and the City* goes as follows:

Carrie Bradshaw: Well I made a decision I hope you’ll be happy about.

Samantha: Oh honey, you finally got botox.

Today, the concept of Retail therapy can be visualised in every household. The scientists have proven that stress level considerably decreases and our body secretes endorphins, the hormone that elevates mood and keeps us in euphoric state when one does shopping. Many of the generation are compulsive shoppers. It is also true that shopping has changed from an endeavour to recreation. It is either in dream of acquiring or it is in acquiring something that humans spend most of his/her life. The phrases window shopping and online shopping have crept into our vocabulary and everyday life, with such an ease; chick media captures the same. Every rom-com and chick-flick operates on the concept of makeover. The transformation scene from the Ugly duckling that a protagonist is presently to the beautiful swan is an unavoidable theme in chick-media. However, the amount of money and time that a normal human being spends for this transformation that does not restrict to personal makeover, but has transformed to make overs of homes, cars and offices. YouTube is replete with makeover videos that promise instant changes and redressals in life. Any hard times, be it divorce, break-up, being out of work, or any physical, psychological or relationship problems are promised to be weeded out with make overs, as it provides a New Beginning. Movies like *Princess Diaries*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Sex and the City*, *Pretty Woman*, *Mean Girls* and *Legally Blonde* are a few examples that portray a makeover scene and interestingly these are the most watched videos in YouTube and Daily motion. Contemporary cinema represents women as powerful and with an ability to achieve anything. It also portrays them as defining fashion sense as one of the best secrets for success. The word acquire is prominent as women earn a lot more than men in today’s generation and most of young woman are not interested in a relationship. This shift in ideology is cashed on by consumer markets and the advertisement world. Carrie Bradshaw states, “I’m not afraid of heights, have you seen my shoes?” The power is always parallel with accessories in recent times.

This ideology of obsession with brands is not restricted to capitalist countries like the US, but it is a prominent phenomenon in socialist countries like China also. In today’s world China is considered to be leading user of iPhones, the Chinese are regarded as the most brand conscious in the whole world. There are also numerous Chinese Chick-Flicks, novels and TV series that prove the same. In the movie, *Finding Mr. Right*, the protagonist questions “Who does not love money?” The Chinese chick-lit is as abundant with brands, labels and denominations as its counterpart in the west. Even India a country that has amalgamated the best of both socialism and capitalism characterises the consumer fetishism. There is a visible McDonaldisation in terms of culture in India. Bollywood is the best example for the same. Desi chick-lit portrays women with material obsession as they are no more novices in fashion world. Our exorbitant marriages and our passion for gold and diamond jewellery prove the fetishistic attitude that predominates Indian society today. The big fat Indian wedding is obscene in its extravagance and indulgence. Haven’t we been subjected to the recent phenomenon of a marriage where the invitation card itself was to the tune of a couple of lakhs INR? Isn’t it true that in a Communist state too, today the best businesses are the marriage related ones which advertise opulence? Similarly, the Mia advertisements are typical examples; as Mia, a jewellery collection of Tanishq launched exclusively for working women uses the catch phrase, “As beautiful, as your work”. The amount

of money an individual spends in buying a commodity is seen as an investment in recent times. There has always been a very Indian way of mythifying Gold as Investment, but it has considerably changed and every costly product the consumer buy from a 100 dollar sweater or shoe to a condo apartment is compared in same scale. In *Confession of a Shopaholic*, Rebecca Bloomwood says

“So I buy it. The most perfect little cardigan in the world. People will call me the Girl in the Gray Cardigan. I’ll be able to live in it. Really, it’s an investment.”

This proves that this self - obsession is not a national phenomenon; rather it is a *weltgeist* as people all over the world irrespective of every diversity live in a world filled with commodity and with the opinion that, “The more, The better”. It is at this juncture that one has to question how the ideals of Marx hold relevance today. Karl Marx introduced the term commodity fetishism in the first chapter of *Das Kapital* and envisaged a society in which material objects would take centre stage over human society and relationships. He advocated the subject (human) over the object (material) and warned that a reversal would be inevitable over a period of time. The contemporary society that we live in today, the reality of the pop cultural identity of ‘late capitalism’ that engages us, the process of ‘reification’ as put forward by Georgy Lukacs, and that we see around us everywhere; leads to a contemplation that socialist ideals are sacrificed on the altar of commodification. The narcissistic nature seems to be the only truism in today’s realm. As Samantha says, “I love you, but I love me more” and women are proud to portray the same. Though it is market that is responsible for this change, it is not because women are easy targets, but because they have in them the ability to buy. The women today expect nothing less than the fairy tale. It is a questionable attitude as at least half of the movies produced and almost every advertisement focus on achieving self, by achieving a Good. A quick look at numerous fair and lovely advertisements is enough to represent the same. If this is a healthy way of representing a person? Or is it even a healthy lifestyle? It is not; but it is the sad state of affairs, as contemporary times dictate and values a person only by their possessions.

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