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Marketing Indian Chick Lit and the Contemporary Feminist Subject

Nidhi Varma

A new genre of women's writing in English emerged in India in 2004 with Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake*. This genre of women's contemporary popular fiction in English in India, dubbed 'chick lit' by the media, represents contemporary women and their social and professional lives in metropolises like Delhi and Mumbai, and is marked by a racy style of writing and a humorous, witty tone. While writers like Shobhaa De were writing popular fiction in English in India in the 1980s, this 'popular' or 'commercial' genre has seen an unprecedented spurt since the publication of Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake* and Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (published the same year, i.e. 2004). This paper sketches the emergence and popularity of Indian women's popular fiction in English through the lens of the publishing industry and the media, and views it as an instance of women's writing representing the contemporary Indian feminist subject.

The main protagonists of this genre are single women, who are in the age group of 24 – 30 years, and are working in the private sector in the metropolitan city. They are usually Hindu and upper caste, and belong to the middle class with their parents usually having been in government service. Claiming to represent contemporary Indian women, the women protagonists of this genre live and work in the metropolis while their families are located in smaller cities/towns. The novels portray their lives at work and with friends, with the themes of professional success and (arranged or love) marriage. The phenomenon of women's popular fiction in English in India is steadily gaining importance as new small publishers mushrooming, and established publishers like Rupa and Penguin introducing new and affordable labels such as the Penguin 'Metro Reads' for women to read while travelling on the metro rail to and from work.

According to the 'Metro Reads' website, these books "do not weigh you down with complicated stories, don't ask for much time or do not required to be lugged about"; they are "fun, feisty and easy-to-read" books. Vaishali Mathur, Commissioning Editor, Metro Reads, who has been instrumental in the success of this genre in India says, "We felt that there was a great need in the market to have books for the youth. The college students and the working population which finds difficult to read heavy literature and prefers to read books that they enjoy, storylines that they can relate to and characters whom they can identify with. Penguin Metro Reads basically publishes what the reader would enjoy rather than what we as publishers would like them to read" (qtd. in Rose 2012). This genre caters to about 30 per cent of the population which is literate and keen to read in English.

Perhaps filling a niche earlier occupied by foreign Mills & Boon romances, this genre, featuring contemporary 'modern' women, combines romance, work and their urban lives, and has become hugely popular with the publication of Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake* (2004) and Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* (2007) in India. Women's popular fiction has since flooded the market, catering to a large readership of women in metropolitan cities and big towns in India, who are English-educated, middle class, working in urban centres, financially independent and between 18 to 35 years of age. The paperbacks are marketed as easily affordable for urban working women and as 'easy reads'. These are novels writing about single women characters in urban settings, are by women, usually for a female readership, are light and fun to read and

have a happy ending. They are available in bookshops usually under the category of 'Indian Writing', (not 'Indian Writing in English' with writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai) and on online stores under 'contemporary writing' or 'urban women', and also 'romance'.

Indian popular fiction has come to be addressed through several terms: 'commercial literature' in publishing houses and by Suman Gupta, 'pulp fiction' (Khair), 'popular fiction' (Turner; Mongia) and 'chick lit' by the media (Lakshmi). This body of popular or commercial writing acquires meaning in opposition to literary fiction. Whereas popular fiction (as 'low' cultural production) is driven by the market, by what 'sells' providing entertainment with simple, easy reading without the need for reflection, literary fiction (as 'high' cultural production) is more 'autonomous', indifferent to the market, to readers' responses, has a high cost of production, needs contemplation and reflection to deal with complex plots and ideas and is more about 'creativity' than 'craft' and 'skill' (Bourdieu). Popular fiction has a number of genres ranging from romance to crime and science fiction. The language used is usually simple; 'entertainment', 'pleasure' and 'leisure' are the keywords of the reading experience. It is important to recognise that this genre of writing has racy, well-defined plots, often at the cost of well-rounded deep characterization. The genre assumes greater importance than individual authors and the Internet is often used as the primary platform for advertising and marketing. The significant markers of this emergent genre of popular fiction are 'industry' and 'entertainment', rendering the production, marketing and consumption of the genre as important to its understanding as its content. 'Popular fiction' is not equal to 'bestseller' though bestseller lists may include popular fiction titles; at times popular fiction may have a small readership just as bestsellers may at times include literary fiction (Gelder).

'Chick lit' emerged as a genre with Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) in the United Kingdom and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996) in the United States and was followed by its emergence internationally in a number of countries. In the Indian genre, everyday language of the metropolis – a mixture of English slang and Hindi words – is used along with Indian life-themes (like the institution of arranged marriage) to add local flavour to the genre. While Chetan Bhagat has become the representative for contemporary Indian youth, "something of a public intellectual, promoting liberal secular values, such as meritocracy and government accountability, in newspaper columns and on television news programs" (Sadana 176), writers like Advaita Kala, Anuja Chauhan and Milan Vohra have been tapped by the media to opine on contemporary Indian urban women and to address "issues of modern womanhood" (Chowdary). Kala has also been a scriptwriter for the Bollywood film *Kahaani* (2012) with a strong main woman protagonist, and Chauhan's novels are being made into Bollywood films.

Popularizing the Genre

In a 2007 article in *The Washington Post*, Rama Lakshmi writes, "Indian bookstores these days are stocking up on a new kind of English-language novel – the kind in which twentysomething urban women put their careers first, ridicule arranged marriages and wrestle with weight gain" (Lakshmi). In book reviews and newspaper articles in the media, the emergence of this fiction is understood to lie in the experiences and the growing confidence of urban, English-educated, middle class women working in the private sector in metropolitan India. These novels recount the everyday lives of contemporary Indian single urban women and are narrated in a "cheeky" tone the readers enjoy. V K Karthika, publisher and chief editor at Harper Collins India, says this woman "is single, has a career and is willing to have fun, take risks and find a man her way, and not necessarily her family's way. It is a woman we have only

read about in books from the Western countries and now, suddenly we are finding her on Indian roads” (Lakshmi). According to her, this genre explores the theme of women’s urban loneliness. These novels are popularised by the media as light (as opposed to heavy, drama-laden) reading, often with a humour that is alternately self-deprecating, irreverent and witty. The typical chick lit protagonist is one who has “a propensity to get into trouble, who lies and fibs her way, but still finds her Mr Right in the end” (Kumar). They purportedly tell the story of ‘everywoman’ – the common woman (with the pun on ‘the common man’) – and the staples of the Indian genre are arranged marriage, matrimonial advertisements and interfering parents, ... love, work, bitchy bosses, brand names, weight loss and addiction” (ibid). These novels talk about their lives, love, friendships, work and thoughts around marriage – arranged versus love and finding a male partner they like. As Advaita Kala, author of *Almost Single*, states, “I rooted the story in urban India and it was born out of my observations of so many single women with great careers who had to deal with the 'you are not complete till you wed' routine” (Raaj).

The media plays a significant role in the reception of books in this genre, especially since it is ignored and devalued by literary critics as frivolous writing with little literary merit, if any at all. At the same time, the platform provided by the media is well-used by the writers of this genre along with those of social media, websites and blogs, which they use for introducing their books and obtaining feedback from their readers. Most of these books are available in bookstores as well as on e-retail stores as hard copies as well as digital e-books. A number of these novels have also been translated into several Indian and non-Indian languages. Moreover, the media has also become important in providing a platform to writers for expressing their opinions on varied matters. Visibility in the media and public platforms is important to the success of a writer or a novel.

The publishing industry in India has undergone a number of changes in the past few years with more international publishers entering the field, especially post-liberalisation. Recently, Random House, Hachette and HarperCollins followed by Tata-supported Westland have begun publishing Indian writers rather than only bringing international fiction to India. The past few years have also seen the emergence of new publishing houses like Srishti, Grapevine, CinnamonTeal and LeadStart along with a number of websites offering self-publishing options. India today is the third largest market for books in English after the U.S. and the U.K., and the Indian publishing sector has seen a 41 per cent rise since 2011, which could be attributed to the growth in regional and national literary festivals, book and author promotions and the emerging e-book market. About 20 per cent of the published books are in English, 25 per cent in Hindi and the rest in other Indian languages (Chalmers). The Indian publishing industry has grown despite the global economic slowdown since “the Indian middle class can afford to spend more on books and also because publishers have kept a tight rein on prices... [and] the book industry distribution network has expanded hugely” (Balakrishnan).

The emergence of commercial/popular fiction has also accorded importance to the publishing professional. While literary fiction has been attended to by academics and critics, it is the ‘publishing professional’ who wields authority over popular fiction, according to Gupta. These publishing professionals are “cited as experts ... in mass media forums and [are] devoted to both Indian ‘literary’ and ‘commercial’ fiction in English” (47). Literary fiction and academics have attended to questions of postcoloniality and history; publishing professionals, on the other hand, attend to the discourses of globalisation. In an attempt to mould a ‘commercial’ genre in English in the country, the publishing world has adopted the categorisation, packaging and marketing practices of popular fiction in the West. However, the content represented in the novels is ‘Indian’, by Indian authors and exclusively for an Indian

market. Gupta terms this merging of the global and the local in contemporary commercial fiction a ‘glocal’ phenomenon. However, the popular fiction template is adapted towards the Indian experience with the use of “particular approaches to the English language, and social themes of specific moment in India” (50).

Rupa Gulab, author of *Girl Alone* (2006), compares this writing to McDonald’s food in India, “It’s like the McAloo Tikki Burger. You like the burger concept and you like it more, if the flavours you grew up with are packed inside” (Kumar). The Anglo-American genre of chick lit has been populated with Indian women and men speaking ‘Hinglish’, a combination of Hindi and English, and dealing with particular kinds of situations like arranged marriages. References to advertisements circulating in popular media and to Bollywood films builds a locale of the novels that is Indian. For instance, the chapter titles in Varsha Dixit’s *Right Fit Wrong Shoe* (2009) are based on the titles of Bollywood films of yester years.

This fiction is produced solely for Indian consumption; the idea – even for international publishers – is to tap into the Indian market rather than take Indian fiction to an international market. This fiction usually lacks the explanations and glossaries to what they write in their particular English. The fact that many writers in this genre are young professionals from fields such as banking, IT, hospitality and journalism and that they place their stories in present metropolitan personal and professional spaces help the readers relate to the novels. For these writers, connecting with ‘the average Indian reader’ is more important than literary merit and acclaim. Indian women’s popular fiction has found national as well as international readership by appealing to the ‘sameness’ of experience of young women. International readership of Indian chick lit is growing with a number of the novels being released outside India simultaneously with their Indian release (Lakshmi).

This genre has strong connections with the Internet, films and other electronic media. The e-book (digital books) industry is steadily gaining ground at two to three per cent of the market. Because of reduced pricing, discounts offered on online retail stores and a large distribution network, this genre is able to reach a wide array of people cutting across classes and regions including metropolitan areas and small towns as well as the upper middle class and the lower middle classes with aspirations for socio-economic mobility. The profiles of the writers reveal a similar spread from upper middle class, metropolitan, English-educated women to middle class, small town, migrated-to-the-city ones who do not necessarily have perfect fluency in the English language. While this range of writers and the experiences they bring to the novels may be considered a positive sign, many believe that it has also led to a reduction in the standard of Indian English writing with the discovery of a market of “first-time readers” and “first-time authors” (Khanna). Thomas Abraham, managing director, Hachette India, likens this phenomenon to contemporary cinema with the blurring of lines between commercial and art cinema (Dua). Though the numbers for copies sold for Indian chick lit are unclear at the moment, Kala’s *Almost Single* (2007) and Rajashree’s *Trust Me* (2006) have both said to have done a 50,000 run (Raaj; Balakrishnan) and Chauhan’s *The Zoya Factor* (2008) began with 20,000 prints (Raaj). Since a 5,000 print run is considered above average in India for English fiction, the popularity of this genre is a novel phenomenon especially when translations into other languages are also considered.

Women’s Writing

Chick lit has been made possible by the existence of women’s writing yet it is very different from it, especially with humour as an element, since women’s writing has been

associated with serious prose handling important issues pertaining to women's oppression. The differences maintained between women's 'writing', 'fiction' and 'literature' may allow chick lit into the first two categories though not into 'women's literature', which has been associated with feminist writing. While 'women's literature' has been considered a serious task with serious issues and goals, 'chick lit' makes light of everything, even the woman protagonist, with the use of humour. One of the very visible distinguishing aspects between the two genres of women's writing – women's literature and women's fiction – is, therefore, humour. It also serves to illustrate the way in which feminist writing, and therefore feminism itself, can be understood to have evolved.

Chick lit has come to be located in the category of women's 'postfeminist' writing. Feminist responses to chick lit illustrate the complicated relationship between chick lit/postfeminism and feminism. On the one hand is a group of chick lit supporters who relate to postfeminism and view chick lit in terms of representing contemporary real women who are empowered individuals rather than helpless victims of patriarchy. On the other hand is a group that associates itself with the political cause of feminism and considers chick lit writing that represents "helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight" in the words of Doris Lessing (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 2) and located in "a jumbled, half-fantasy version of reality, a reality in which a better wardrobe, a better body, and a better man are not yet out of reach" according to Jessica Jernigan (ibid 7).

India's urban centres are a central motif of contemporary fiction that focuses on young people's struggle for identity in a cosmopolitan city, which is closely tied to their professions and the other towns they have moved from to the city (Varughese). This struggle for identity is to be independent and free while negotiating emotional relationships and, often, the normative, religious and philosophical views passed on from families. Varughese emphasizes the fluidity of traditional-familial and globalised identities in contemporary fiction in the same person. Indian chick lit focuses on "characters [who] often find themselves at crossroads with modern day India, a family's expectations, the challenges of juggling a career and a relationship as well as finding a life partner on their own initiative" (43).

Chick lit, it seems, has become the site of the conflict between feminism and postfeminism. It is a conflict that brings into question the very concept of (feminist) 'choice'. Postfeminists view feminists as helpless victims who can talk only about women's oppression and feminists view postfeminists as helpless victims of consumer capitalism. What is also put to question in this debate between postfeminism and feminism is the 'reality of women's lives' where each camp professes to represent this reality more fully and realistically than the other. McRobbie suggests that postfeminism treats feminism as "a spent force", which has fulfilled its purpose – that of achieving equality – and is thus no longer required (12). Postfeminism means "gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements... [like] sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent" (ibid). Postfeminism is characterised by neo-conservative values coexisting with processes of liberalisation focusing on choice with regard to gender, sexuality and family. The existence of feminism has become 'common sense' while it is also hated.

Most women protagonists in the genre work in the upper end of the private services sector from hotel management to advertising. For the women, having a career is very important; it is one of the main aspects through which they define themselves. This genre represents the importance of a career in a woman's search for an individual identity and her journey towards self-realisation through a career of her choice. Sexuality is one of the most

distinguishing themes of this genre through the expression of women's ideas on marriage, love, respectability, sexual attraction and intimacy, their bodies and feminine beauty. The genre represents contemporary women being comfortable with talking about such matters to their friends and expressing them in writing in a novel meant for public consumption.

One of the things that marks this genre as distinctly Indian is its theme of arranged marriage. The mother comes to represent this institution of arranged marriage since she is insistent on the woman protagonist marrying soon if not to someone of her choosing then someone of her parents' choosing. However, to the women protagonists, arranged marriage is unacceptable. The institution of arranged marriage belongs to the past and to the realm of women's oppression, where women were married to a man of the family's choice by the family regardless of their consent. Therefore to assert themselves in the choice of their partner becomes a way for the women protagonists to assert their freedom and their position as a liberated contemporary woman. The women exercise autonomy in choosing their partners based on the criteria set up by them. These criteria include being treated equally and having the freedom to make their own decisions regarding whether or not to have a career, financial freedom and social freedom (for instance, what to wear and who to associate with). Suitors with patriarchal views, who devalue women's professional work or objectify and assess them on the basis of their domestic skills and beauty, are rejected in the course of the narratives.

This genre can be understood as one that gives substance to the images of contemporary Indian urban women that populate popular culture and the mass media, giving them voice and agency towards self-fashioning as well as self-representation so that the women in the genre - as authors, protagonists and readers - are not just re-productions of the images of women in the mass media and popular culture but are also responding to them. In the novels, there is an active moving away, or rejection, of the popular image (in terms of looks, body types, the purported 'efficiency' of the woman). They are also not willing to bow down completely to the family's expectations and/or social norms in the private sphere. Rather than grooming themselves into the image of a perfect woman - either in their role as wives, mothers, sisters or in their appearance as the graceful, sophisticated woman - these women choose partners who are willing to accept them as they are, for their own values and individuality.

The women protagonists in this genre are portrayed as fun-loving, independent, single women, who project confidence but are also often unsure of themselves. Nevertheless, they are individual women, not drawing their identities from the men around them, making their own decisions, and familiar with vocabularies of gender equality and feminism. Being a liberated Indian woman means the women see themselves neither as victims of oppression (like their mothers' generation) nor as holding on to apparently passé ideas of arranged marriages, government jobs, social responsibility, sexual prudishness, domesticity and traditional religious and caste beliefs. The idea, on the contrary, is to perform well in a competitive, corporate, privatised work sphere, earn and live well without middle-class thriftiness, have fun with friends in the city and hopefully find a good partner in the process. It is in the aspects of financial independence (in terms of earning as well as spending) and sexual freedom that the women exercise their autonomy and agency.

Women's popular fiction in English in India represents the contemporary Indian feminist subject. While the women in the genre may not refer to themselves as feminist, there is a strong sense of being a liberated woman along with an insistence on not being victims. Feminist sensibilities in the women are couched in the language of individuality rather than an overt proclamation of feminism. The publishing industry, the media and the content of the

novels constituting this genre have served to make this genre representative of contemporary Indian women as feminist subjects.

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