

Literature as a Reformatory Tool: The Role of Indian English Literature in Shifting the Stereotypical Paradigms of Womanhood

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Introduction

Indian English literature which has been a product of colonial encounter started with the imitative phase following the British models and went through various phases hence emerging as a distinctive voice in revealing the quintessential Indian experience. Due to the patriarchal postulations of superior male artistic creativity, the work of women writers has been prejudiced for inferior themes based on their circumscribed experience. The majority of these novels depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated house wives in search of their identity and self esteem. Literature often mirrors the culture that exists in a society. Hence, literature “grants us access to countless new cultures, places and inner lives” (Merrick 2006, ix). The aesthetic considerations which are made on the changing tastes of its captive audience compelled the Indian literature to experiment new trends and genres to keep up the spirit of their readers distracted by new media and the internet.

Chick Lit which is said to have a dual Anglo-American origin sprouted during 1996 with the publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in UK and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* in USA. Cris Mazza and Jaffery DeShell take the credit of coining the phrase for the title of their book *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* published in 1995. The genre is generally discussed in reference to post-feminism and popular culture and is described as ‘the new novel of manners,’ ‘snack-food literature,’ ‘the treadmill book club’, ‘the daughter of romance novel, the stepsister of the fashion magazines’ etc. It is a genre in the women’s writing written by women for the women. The general themes deal with the dilemmas which a modern working woman has to face on day to day basis. Elizabeth Merrick attempts to summarize the main plotlines of the typical chick lit novel in the following extract:

Chick lit is a genre, like the thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend. Chick lit is the daughter of the romance novel and the stepsister to the fashion magazine. Details about race and class are almost always absent except, of course, for the protagonist’s relentless pursuit of Money, a Makeover, and Mr. Right. (Merrick, 2006: 7-8)

Indian chick lit is the Indian subgenre of chick lit, a genre of fiction written for and marketed to young women, especially single, working women in their twenties and thirties usually featuring an airy, irreverent tone and frank sexual themes, penned by a woman. The adopted genre when adapted into the Indian context emerged as a new trend especially for the young autonomous working women who are struggling to find a space for themselves in the socio economic scene of the twenty first century. The rise of chicklit’s popularity in India begins with the publication of *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal in 2004. The success of the book prompted a flood of similar books in the book market such as Rupa Gulab’s *Girl Alone*, Rajashree’s *Trust Me*, Advaita Kala’s *Almost Single* etc. Terry Eagleton asserts that the “fact that we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns [...] might be one reason why certain works of literature seem to retain their value across the centuries” (10). Eagleton’s argument is applicable to this Indian sub-genre which typifies not only the experience of Indian women but also the experience of the tens of millions of women in the post-colonial developing world.

Like American and British Chick Lit Indian Chick Lit also has a face of its own. The main plot revolves around a thirty year girl who is into a glamorous job, but feels insecure in her life despite of all the materialistic pleasures. The singleness of the protagonist in Indian chick lit is a window of opportunity that allows space for self exploration. 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. It also shows the assimilation of western mode of living leading to the creation of a hybrid female identity. Now most of all this we find in Indian Chick Lit but in a different proportion along with a few ingredients so as to mirror the lives of the Indian urban woman.

Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas by Madhuri Banerjee explores the journey of a woman who meets a romantic relationship after a long wait, only to get all her notions shattered and discover a 'new' self. Kaveri, the protagonist of the novel is the epitome of the new woman in the chick lit who has everything that a woman needs to be contended in her life. She is in her thirties, single, an interpreter by profession who knows seven languages and enjoys the freedom of her life- an intelligent and autonomous woman but feels insecure and incomplete in her life in search of ‘The great love of her life.’ Kaveri perspicuously establishes her dilemma in the beginning of the novel: “Because no matter how much you achieved in life, a day would come when you would feel all alone in this world.” (*Losing*16). But the self exploration made her not to be scared of loneliness as after finding her great love she actualizes that she doesn’t need it to be happy in her life. She rejects Arjun’s love by telling him: “You have always taken charge and presumed what we should do. And I’ve let you because it felt nice to have someone lead the way.

But I've thought about what I've wanted to do and have been doing it for so long now that I can't have someone else lead the way." (*Losing* 220)

Stereotypes about gender can cause unequal and unfair treatment because of a person's gender. These stereotypes are forced to ignore their personality traits, temperament and unique characteristics that make them who they are. The conversion of gender stereotypes, an aspect in Indian chick lit provides an unlimited potential for the protagonist's well being. Indian culture demands women to be silent while choosing their partner. In majority of the cases the decisions are taken by parents and the ladies taciturnly accepts what they get, struggling to adjust with their partner in the rest of their life. But Kaveri reaches the position of an intellectual when she questions the very basis of marriages in India:

"We never compromise when we take up a job. We don't compromise when we buy new jeans. So why should we compromise on relationships that are supposed to be the most important aspect of our lives? When I go to buy something and it doesn't fit I don't say, 'at least' the color is right, or if we have to buy a house, we don't take give a crore and say 'at least' it's in a nice locality even if it is too small. We don't take anything in our lives we're not completely satisfied and happy with. So why do we take crap from men? Or for that matter, crappy men? Why are we saying 'at least' he is funny, or 'at least' he is rich? Why do women compromise on the biggest thing of all? The men!" (*Losing* 42)

Indian chick lit shows the assimilation of western aspects which creates a hybrid feminine identity. The moralizing given by Kaveri's friend Aditi to attract the male gaze welcomes the western way of living as she predicts it as necessary to attain stability. Aditi believed that "men were supposed to be used" (*Losing* 12). She recommends Kaveri western costumes to define herself:

'First of all,' she started... 'We need to get your hair straightened or colored'.... 'Nobody likes to screw a frizzy haired chick. A new hair style is what you need. Then we need to get a better wardrobe. Something more revealing. All these kurtas make you look too intellectual.' (*Losing* 23)

Thus the women in Indian Chick lit show an affinity towards western culture to be recognizable in the public. Kaveri preferred western costumes when she goes for dating. It gives her an impression that Westernization always brings acceptability among men.

Chick literature assumes the role of a critique of post feminism when it is being evaluated from the feminist view point. Though there are several criticisms against the development of this genre, the universal phenomenon of celebration of imperfections for a happy and satisfied life finds identification among women all over the world. Today's women are just a break away from their traditional stereotypes knows their potential and how to lead an autonomous life. They are more practical and career-oriented but they are free enough to choose and the outcome doesn't bother them at all. They don't need a man to complete them. The norms are changing: if one is happy with what she has, loves herself with her imperfections and leads her life without causing problems or hurt to others, that itself is a big achievement and everything will come to her on her way. This is the message that chick lit heroines always give to their female counterparts. Rather than blaming the fate for their misfortunes and imperfections the chick lit heroines takes up the bold stand to make their misfortunes their fortunes.

An immaculate representation of Indian culture and society is another conspicuous feature of Indian chick lit. Kaveri's mother just like a typical Indian mother is always worried about Kaveri's marriage. She considers it as a great shame to be unmarried at the age of thirty. She constantly searches for an ideal man for her daughter. Even the maid of their house sympathize Kaveri for her fate. Indian culture always looks upon aged unmarried woman with a suspicion. . The independent and educated girls of India want career as well as marriage. They know that for an Indian girl having a great career is not enough in life she wants/has to be married also. Similarly though the women in Chick lit is very bold, autonomous and have a feministic outlook but when entrapped in a relationship enjoys male supremacy. Kaveri's relief is a nightmare for the feminists:

"For so many years I was the one who had decided everything, my move to Mumbai, my translating projects, my apartment, my maid, my daily groceries, paying bills, taking broken things to repair shops.... I could finally surrender to someone who wanted the best for me. And Arjun did it so well. He made my home his home.... He took control. And he controlled my life." (*Losing* 86)

The woman who at the outset of the novel wanted her husband to be an intellectual partner, an equal, had succumbed to the chimera of domesticity willingly submitting to the control of her partner and even secretly enjoying it. This shows the reflection of Indian culture in Kaveri.(Sugandha)

Indian chick lit novels are the advocates of the Indian feminism. After finding her one great love she realises she does not need it to be happy in life. So finally when her love returns to her at her own terms she finds herself telling him: "You have always taken charge and presumed what we should do. And I've let you because it felt nice to have someone lead the way. But I've thought about what I've wanted to do and have been doing it for so long now that I can't have someone else lead the way." (*Losing* 220). When her love was back on her own terms she didn't want him. She did not need him anymore- emotionally, physically, financially and spiritually. She acted like a typical Indian woman who is not ready to snatch away another woman's husband.

Even though she lost her love, she learnt that she does not need it to be happy in life. She is not scared of alienation and the idea of marriage. She tried almost everything which was daring in order to step out of her comfort zone.

"And then I revealed myself to a total stranger. I told her who I was. Something no one ever knew and something I had kept hidden for a long time. I told her I was a woman who believed in Love. Not with one man. But with the concept that it existed, and that it was strong and powerful. I was a woman who

believed in travelling the world and experiencing Love in its myriad ways. What I wanted from my life was a fusion of art, languages, men and the independence that defined Love.” (*Losing* 212).

Kaveri, through her journey finally explored herself and emerged as an independent woman who believes in love but not domesticity. She lets lose herself only to emerge out more self confident. Similarly Indian chick lit too provides a ray of hope for the readers to chase their dreams.

CONCLUSION

Indian chick lit, a contemporary genre for the new women provides a hope and optimism for the new woman of the twenty first century. It helps her to redefine her womanhood, trying to carve a niche for herself in the society. Indian chick-lit is valuable because it is a cultural artifact; it is a genre that represents Indian female characters’ issues like discovering love, being beautiful, and obtaining an ideal career in the twenty-first century. Indian chick-lit’s adherence to mainstream culture grasps readers’ attention and acts as a gateway for readers to become immersed in more serious novels by Indian female authors. There is no denying that Chick Lit is an emerging and evolving genre consisting of bold and heartfelt stories specially written by the young Indian women, about the young Indian women, and for the young Indian women of the contemporary India.

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