

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"Chick lit" is a term used to denote genre fiction written for and marketed to young women, especially single, working women in their twenties and thirties. It is stylish and hip and the fiction traces their love lives and struggles in career, navigating between personal life and career choice. As a literature genre we may consider chick lit as a form of women's fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style. A serious consideration of the Chick lit genre brings into focus many of the issues faced by contemporary women and society-issues of identity, gender, class and self respect- basically issues of femininity.

Chick lit as a genre of popular literature arose in the UK and US towards the close of the twentieth century. The term 'chick lit' was originally employed ironically to refer to post feminist attitudes by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell in their anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* published in 1995. This volume was followed a year later in 1996 with the publication of another co-edited anthology *Chick-Lit: No Chick Vics*. In perhaps another ironic twist, the term only heightened the controversy regarding the distinction between feminism and post feminism. Women have benefited from the feminist movement and its push for the advancement of woman, but women still experience the desires for a family and hearth, of romance and kids.

### 1.1 Is Chick Lit Literature?

Though Chick lit has attained the status of a genre, the discourse surrounding it is polarized with one dismissing it as trivial fiction and the other admiring it for reflecting the life of a contemporary modern single woman facing issues of contemporary culture such as identity, gender, feminism and the like. The difference of opinion between the two groups is on the grounds that literature by and about women should advance beyond the political activism of feminism, and the other believes that struggle's of contemporary women should be represented through literature just portray the reality of women grappling with the pressures of modern life. Doris Lessing, for example, belongs to the category of stringent critics of chick lit and has lambasted their narratives as candy floss romance: "It would be better, perhaps, if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them, and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight" ( Ferris and Young 2006, 2).

Woman's fiction has always been popular with young girls and woman reading the popular series of romance like Harlequin in the Unites States and Mills & Boons in Britain. Marketing of the Harlequin romance exploded with the advent of second-wave feminism and chick lit emerged in the post feminism era, and has been said to evidence feminism's debilitation.

Pamela Caughie, professor of English and Women's Studies at Loyola University in Chicago, teaches postfeminist fiction, summing up Chick Lit says, "Postfeminist fiction does not conform to a set of beliefs about the way women are or should be. Indeed, the very writing that goes by

the name resists the kind of certainty, conclusiveness and clear-cut meaning that definition demands.” (Ferriss and Young 2006, 19).

The discourse surrounding Chick Lit is polarized between its outright dismissal as trivial fiction and support by fans who claim that the stories reflect the realities of life for contemporary single women and their contemporary culture-issues of identity, of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image. As popular women’s fiction, chick lit has been likened to the contemporary romance popularized by Harlequin in the United States and Mills and Boon in Britain which became very popular with women. But both fans and authors contend that the difference lies in the genre’s realism, reflecting the life of everyday working young women and men.

Ferriss and Young define the genre in this manner:

Chicklit.us explains that it reflects ‘the lives of everyday working young women and men’ and appeals to the readers who ‘want to see their own lives in all the messy details reflected in fiction today’. The typical chick-lit protagonist is, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting reader’s compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humour that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe that they are fallible – like them. ‘The heroine of these books can be rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above – but we love them anyway. (2006:4)

Chick lit may be traced back to the tradition of romance writing by women writers of the 19th century such as Jane Austen and Edith Warton. In fact, Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is considered to be the major source of inspiration for noughties writers of chick lit. Marriage, romance and self-growth of the female protagonist, the thematic concerns of Austen’s domestic novel or novel of manners, is a common link that may be found with contemporary chick lit writing as well. Of course, the two genres of writing are entirely different in their modes and style of treating the subject matter. Commentators of popular culture have pointed out that the ur-text of chick lit genre is Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, published in 1996. It is no exaggeration to claim that the entire chick lit tradition may be traced to this single novel. Written in epistolary form, the Fielding’s novel set the trend for writing about modern urban single girls, their careers and personal lives, in a humorous and zany style. Herein lies the chief difference between the 19th century romance novel and its modern version – that is, in treatment, technique and style of narration, chick lit novels rarely match the seriousness and complexity of the former. Indeed, Sandra Pozanesi has pointed out five ways in which chick lit deviates from the 19th century romance novel. These are:

- 1) Dating, multiple boyfriends, and sexual adventures substitute the earlier romantic quest of the heroine.

- 2) The importance of the nature of the heroine's work and her progress in the work place as a professional in the narrative structure.
- 3) The heroine's obsession and indulgence with shopping and consumer goods.
- 4) The indeterminate ending of the story about the chick lit heroine as against the final closure of Victorian romance novel.
- 5) Humour as the predominant narrative style rather than any experimental mode of storytelling such as multiple perspectives.

It may be argued that the Chick Lit has its beginnings in the nineteenth century with the birth and development of the modern novel. The entire chick lit phenomenon can be traced back to this single novel. Fielding source is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, from whom she admittedly borrowed much of her plot and characters. Fielding has freely admitted her debt to Austen: "The plot of *Bridget Jones's Diary* was actually stolen from *Pride and Prejudice*. I thought that Jane Austen's plots were very good and had been very well market-researched over a number of centuries, so I thought I would actually steal it." (*Daily Telegraph*, November 20, 1999). The book became so popular that it sold more than two million copies. Fans of the genre have their own websites, in both Britain ([www.chicklit.co.uk](http://www.chicklit.co.uk)) and the United States ([www.chicklit.us](http://www.chicklit.us) and [www.chicklitbooks.com](http://www.chicklitbooks.com)). As Kathryn Robinson explains, "Anyone familiar with Jane Austen's oeuvre will immediately recognize in chick lit a kindred wit, the same obsession with choosing a mate, and a shared attention to the dailiness of women's lives." (Ferriss and Young, 5). These same characteristics have continued to appear in each new form of chick lit. It is impossible to deny that chick lit continues to focus on women belonging to various age groups crossing across age, race and class.

Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell originally employed the term "chick lit" ironically to refer to postfeminist attitudes. In another ironic twist, the term was also taken up to refer to the popular genre of women's fiction. People are divided in their reactions to chick lit, some say it can advance the political activism of feminism and to represent women's struggle in patriarchal society and provide inspiring images of powerful women, and some feel that chick lit actually represents women in real life situations grappling with issues of modern life. Chick lit writers are exclusively women and its readers are overwhelmingly so, but people feel that the genre is not so literary because

## 1.2 Types of Chick Lit

Chick lit is fiction mainly written by women for women. It typically features a strong female character in her twenties or thirties who is trying to make it on her own in the modern world. This type of book is usually light-hearted, smart, and funny. While much chick lit is written about single women, there are a few subgenres, including, among others, "Mommy Lit" and "Bride Lit".

(i) Classic Chick Lit

Chick Lit goes back much further than one might think. *Emma* by Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brönte and *Wuthering Height* by Emily Brönte. Of courses, these canonical works with women as protagonists are rather tenuously related to the hip and hype girls of the modern chick lit; nevertheless, these classic novels may be considered to be the literary progenitors of the contemporary chick lit in their shared focus on women's concerns – female subjectivity, independence, marriage and relationships, etc.

(ii) U.K. Lit

Many of the genre's defining works come from the United Kingdom. *Bridget Jones' Diary* by Helen Fielding, *Rumor Has It* by Jill Mansell and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* by Sophie Kinsella are some of the prominent examples of this sub genre. Fielding and Kinsella are considered to be pioneers who established the legitimacy of chick lit as a popular literary genre.

(iii) Mommy Lit/ Hen Lit/Lady Lit

*Baby Proof* by Emily Giffin, *French Kissing* by Catherine Sanderson, *I Don't Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson, *Momzillas* by Jill Kargman, *Wild Designs* by Katie Fforde belong to this class of chick lit. The protagonists are often mothers or middle-aged women on the 'wrong' side of forty but show the same feisty sexy selves as the younger heroines of chick lit.

(iv) Mystery Lit

These books present intelligent women solving crimes. *August Moon* by Jess Lourey, *Death and the Lit Chick* by G. M. Malliet, and Olivia Joules and the *Overactive Imagination* by Helen Fielding. These novels present their women-centered plots but by adding chill and thrill to the narratives. Their stories are often spiced up with murder and intrigue, and has surprise endings, a twist in the tale kind of end.

(v) Bride Lit

*By Invitation Only* by Jodi Della Femina and Sheri McInnis, *Otherwise Engaged* by Suzanne Finnamore, *Something Borrowed* by Emily Giffin, and *Arranged* by Catherine McKenzie. As the title suggests, this kind of chick lit foregrounds marriage as the starting point of their stories and then to unravel how women negotiate the tricky grounds of balancing the demands of marriage with their careers and professional ambitions.

(vi) Historical Lit

These novels feature historical women as protagonists of their narratives. Some of them are based on real heroines from the historical past and others are entirely creations of the imagination, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* by Amy Tan, *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation* by Lauren Willig, and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See.

(vii) Working Girl Lit

*The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger, *J'adore* New York by Isabelle Laflèche, *The Nanny Diaries* by Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus. The setting of these stories are advertising, marketing or fashion designing high end brand companies. The struggle of female lead characters with demanding bosses, and crazy deadlines is highlighted along with their issues of love, sex and body weight.

(viii) Ethnic Lit

Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* which is a novel not about a American single white woman seeking a fairy-tale romance but about an experienced black woman opting for the reality of friendship. Other recent chick-lit novels present the lives, loves and friendships of American Indian women, those who are second-generation born in the USA. The study will include this sub genre of chick lit in its examination of Indian chick lit.

(ix) Indian/ Desi chick lit: The subsequent chapter will focus on this sub genre in detail.

Thus the genre of chick lit has proliferated to include an amazing variety of characters, settings and situations from diverse locations and different cultures. Each of these types of chick lit has modified the original prototype in new ways, both in form and subject matter. This has also testified to the resilience and adaptability of chick lit.

Notwithstanding the myriad types of chick lit, there are certain features that are common to all. The notable ones may be mentioned below:

### **1.3 Feminism and Postfeminism**

In spite of the variety of forms that Chick lit has produced as a literary genre, critics have assailed it for showing a "cloying sameness" (Ferriss & Young 7). Substantially, there are three charges that are levelled against the 'sameness' of chick lit:

First, Whatever their type, as enumerated above, none of the representative novels go beyond a fantasy craving for better clothes, a better body and a better man. An overwhelming majority of chick lit focus on a specific age, race, and class: young, white, and middle.

Second, there is hardly any variety in the themes that are dealt with in chick lits. Even black or latino chick lit tend to plot the narratives of their protagonists on urban careers and rocky love lives. In that sense, there is a serious lack of thematic difference among the variety of chick lits that circulate among its elite and special class of readers. The governing impulse that explains the burgeoning of this kind of literature appears to be the pull of market economics and the availability of a generation of readers whose cultural tastes are dictated by their dominating life style.

Third, chick lit is all foam and floss, and therefore has no connect with political and social concerns. It treads an ambiguous ground between the ideological moorings of third wave feminism and the lack thereof of postfeminism. While its original word meisters, Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell, had deployed the term “chick lit” ironically to refer to postfeminist attitudes, it only heightened the controversy regarding the distinction between feminism and postfeminism. But first let us make the distinction clear before we take up the question of which position chick lit represents in this debate on women’s rights and lives.

According to Wikipedia post-feminism began in the early 1980’s, though the origins, according to Hawkenworth, seem to be from as early as the 1970’s, when journalists and academics began proclaiming that feminism is dead. The basic idea behind the movement is that feminism has achieved its goals and now it is time to distance ourselves from the movement. Postfeminism may be considered as a reaction against the contradictions and absences in feminism, especially second-wave and third-wave feminisms. It has also been, rather erroneously, labeled as “4th wave-feminism”. Perhaps, the most crucial difference in the ways of thinking that define the two feminisms is that whereas feminism strives for equality, postfeminism tries to move ahead or transcend the absolute need for male/female equality.

In past few decades postfeminism has come to denote meanings, wider in scope and connotations. Broadly, it falls into two categories: one represents an anti-feminism mode of thinking and practice; the second is a mode that intersects with other “post”-theories, such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism.

The term was used in the 1980s to describe a backlash against second-wave feminism. Postfeminism is now a label for a wide range of theories that take critical approaches to previous feminist discourses and includes challenges to the second wave's ideas. Other postfeminists say that feminism is no longer relevant to today's society. Amelia Jones has written that the postfeminist texts which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s portrayed second-wave feminism as a monolithic entity and were overly generalizing in their criticism.

The 1990s saw the popularization of this term, in both the academic world as well as media world. It was suddenly seen as a term of both commendation and of scorn. Toril Moi, a professor at Duke University, originally coined the term in 1985 in *Sexual/Textual Politics* to advocate a feminism that would deconstruct the binary between equality based on "liberal" feminism and difference-based or "radical" feminism. There is confusion surrounding the intended meaning of "post" in the context of "postfeminism". This confusion has plagued the very meaning of "postfeminism" throughout the 1990s. While the term has seemed on the one hand to announce the end of feminism, on the other hand it has itself become a site of feminist politics.

Currently, feminist history is characterized by the struggle to find out the present situation-often articulated as a concern about whether there is still such a thing called "feminism"-by writing in the past. It is here that the meaning of "post" as a historical break is troubling, for "post" offers to

situate feminism in history by proclaiming the end of this history. It then confirms feminist history as a thing of the past, as something that we know to have existed because we can now say it no longer does. However it is impossible that feminism could be aligned with "post" when it is unthinkable, for example, that we would today speak of living in a post racist, post classist, and post sexist society.

Ultimately, postfeminism aims to help situate contemporary feminism as a continuation of the long history of the women's movement. Activism around women's issues exploded in the 1960s and 1970s and this activism was a part of ongoing historical struggle over women's situation. In the early part of the century, women's movement allied with the nationalist, anti-colonial liberation movements and labor activism and this brought about a positive change in women's social status and political rights. Feminist challenges to women's subordinate status rest both on activism and intellectual efforts to change the dominant conventions about sex differences. At numerous times and in numerous locations, belief about women's bodies, souls, character, skill or intelligence differed from men who justify their social position, political understanding, spiritual authority and intelligence.

#### **1.4 Is Chick Lit Feminist or Postfeminist?**

This question will be addressed in the detailed analysis of selected novels. The study will also draw some inferences on the basis of close reading of characters, motivations, relationships and the relationships with gender, race and class as depicted by chick lit writers. A few preliminary observations, however, may be made at this point.

Second wave feminists have often disparaged chick lit as "unserious" and antifeminist. The lack of engagement with women's fight for equality and dignity makes chick lit the target of their ire. Anna Weinberg's criticism is atypical of this brand of criticism: "Inside their dust jackets covered with shopping bags, martini glasses, shoes or purses, many of these titles really are trash: trash that imitates other, better books that could have ushered in a new wave of smart, postfeminist writing" (Skurnick 2006:43).

What chick lit does is to redefine the attitudes, values and behavioural practices that have been the markers associated with second and third wave feminisms. Female sexuality and gendered bodies is one domain that clearly spells out the differences in the subjectivity of heroines in feminist novels and chick lit. "Rather than presenting their protagonists as subordinate to male advances", say Ferriss and Young, "chick-lit authors present women as sexual agents" (10). Chick lit heroines are not averse to exploring different sexual experiences and to having dalliances with multiple partners. They are constantly on the look out to try out different relationships and establish gender roles on their own terms.

### 1.5 Chick Lit and the culture industry

The past few decades have seen a veritable explosion in chick lit publication. It has been written by female writers for female readers and with a distinct liaison with the proliferation of books as a cultural artefact in the burgeoning publication industry. The popularity of new kinds of millennial writings such as campus novel, metro reads, fantasy series, mythological fiction, graphic novel, chick lit too has entered into the demand supply market of books. Globalization, international finance and trade, internet technologies and mega publishing houses like Amazon have opened the corridors for new and first time writers enter into the fray. Chick lit has often been seen as an example of commercial literature – a kind of writing that comes out of a speed-writing and dollar-earning phenomenon which panders to the taste of a market researched audience. Clearly, chick lit like metro reads for example does not pose to be high on aesthetic quality nor does it attempt to sit comfortably with ‘literary’ counterparts on book shelves in the homes of the educated middleclass. Like fast food, it makes for a quick read on the go – at the airport lounge, while travelling, or simply after a leisurely Sunday brunch. Like merchandise, chick lit novels are packaged and sold as products; they often have attractive women with expensive and fashionable jewellery, phones, handbags, stilettos on the front cover. Pink is the favourite colour code of these books. Not surprisingly, it does not even draw the word ‘literature’ to its label and is rather in a short hand manner called ‘Chick Lit’. Ironically, the writings are mostly by well-educated urban woman writers who write about well-educated urban female protagonists usually trying to balance their professional careers with love, dieting, and marriage. The narratives often employ the same tropes, rhetorical strategies, and stylistic devices. In other words, the chick lit novels deal with formulaic plots with flat characters in stories that are predictable. Therefore, this kind of market driven writing by women, about women, and for women is at best an ambivalent and elusive category of writing. The genre is, therefore, subjected to a lot of criticism by feminists themselves as trash or pulp fiction. The critic Sandra Ponzanese observes: “This poses the question of whether chick lit, featuring empowered, professional women, actually advance the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences, or whether it mirrors the same patriarchal narrative of romance and femininity that feminist once rejected” (156).

As a recent phenomenon of the culture industry, chick lit has brought to its writers financial success, publicity and fame. While it may be inappropriate to consider these new age writers as the daughters of their more illustrious and canonical predecessors (Jane Austen, Bronte sisters), it is useful for cultural critics while tracing the genealogy of chick lit writing to think of their authors as their younger sisters.

The present study seeks to fulfill the following aims and objectives:

1. To study the origin and growth of chick lit as a literary genre



2. To contextualize the development of Indian chick lit as an offshoot of this global phenomenon of the popularity of this form of literature.
3. To examine in detail the plot, characterization, language and techniques used in select representative novels: Advaita Kala's *Almost Single*, Anuja Chauhan's *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, and *The Zoya Factor*.
4. To treat Indian-U.S. chick lit as an independent diasporic phenomenon and do a critical analysis of two representative novels: Kavita Daswani's *The Village of the Beverly Hills*, and Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire*.
5. To draw conclusions on the complicated relationship of chick lit with feminism and postfeminism.

## CHAPTER II: Chick Lit and the Indian context

It is an interesting paradox that precisely the time when the chick lit genre in the west was losing its hold with readers, in India, the home-grown variety of this genre was finding a readership and a market that was growing exponentially. The downturn in the popularity and sales of chick lit in North America, UK and Europe witnessed a corresponding rise of the genre in India during the first two decades of the twenty first century. Riding on the back of the success of other popular literary genres such as the campus novel, mythological thrillers, sci-fi fantasy, and the stardom of writers such as Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi, chick lit became from the first half of the millennium a major draw for urban middle-class educated women writers to try their hand at. As more and more of such novels got published, there emerged a clear-cut breed of women writers on the Indian literary scene who began to be labeled by the media and audiences as ‘desi chick lit’ or even ‘ladki lit’ writers. This exclusive group of writers seemed to show a set of common attributes: they were all women in their late 20s and early 30s, located in metro cities like Delhi, Bombay, and often were professionals with a corporate background in media, advertisement, and hospitality industry. More importantly, these group of writers seem to represent in their writings the aspirations of millions of women in post liberal India who were gaining access to education and opportunity thanks to changes taking place in the political and social reality. Advaita Kala, Anuja Chauhan, Swati Kaushal, Rajashree and several others were writing stories of the Indian ‘new woman’. Their writings captured the inflections of the new Indian woman of the twenty first century – ambitious, confident, career-driven – wanting to live a life of their dreams.

Desi chick lit, therefore, may have taken its inspiration from the Anglo-American trend of chick lit; nonetheless, as it evolved, it took a path all of its own with its unique set of themes, conventions, tropes and style. Indian chick lit novels show a distinctive set of characteristics that we shall examine in the close analysis of selected novels taken up in this section. What is clear is that desi chick lit was not the result of merely imitating a literary trend that became popular in the west, and one that brought to its writers a lot name and fame. Indian chick lit clearly emerged out of the specific social, cultural and economic factors that were rapidly transforming India in the new millennium. In trying to capture the ever-changing social reality, such novels chose to write about the new Indian woman. The ‘new Indian woman’ is one who tries to negotiate the demands of age-old traditions of family and society of the old India, while at the same time maneuvering her career at the work place. In contrast to their western counterpart, Indian chick lit are not preoccupied with consumerism, high heels and handbags; rather, they seem to engage with the psychological struggles of their heroines within the matrix of family and society.

In the case of Indian chick lit, their protagonists are on par with the aspirational energies and the sexual drives of the western chick lit. They are shown to be upper or middle-class urban educated girls who wish to break outside the frame of patriarchal and heteronormative society in order to fulfil their career and personal ambitions. The novels focus on the tension and conflict

that are ridden in the lives of the new age Indian women by the changing contours of a postcolonial nation. While finding the right partner and getting married continues to be the dominant preoccupation of the women portrayed in the novels, there is also now the added challenge of getting a lucrative job and becoming financially independent. In fact, in many of the cases, the protagonists whose careers are shown to be in the hi-fi world of the fashion, marketing or advertisement industry, the salaries they bring home make a substantial difference to the lifestyles of the entire family. So, doing a power-packed job and occupying an office position of authority is shown to empower them at the work place and bestow a professional status. Indian chick lit, therefore, is narrative of the postmodern Indian woman who seeks fulfillment both at home and at the work place.

There is, however, the other side of the story of modernity. And that is the new age Indian woman who makes amazing strides with the march of modernity, also continues to be shackled by the prejudices and practices of a feudal patriarchal mindset, a legacy of the colonial past that is still the controlling impulse of the post independence India. The discourse of the nation today is one of contradictory pulls and ambivalent tendencies. On the one hand, the engine of growth fuelled by rapid industrialization, growth of information technology and capital consumerism, has changed the dynamics of our ways of living. Post 1980s the winds of globalization and liberalization transformed not only the market economy but also radically altered the social and cultural practices that define the daily ebb and flow of life. The spaces of the individual, family and community have undergone sweeping changes: while some of the social mores have become more entrenched than ever before, others have given way to new trends and movements. The streak of individualism, collapse of the joint family system and the rise of nuclear family, the rise of mall culture and increasing buying capacity of the middle and upper classes, were some of the sociological factors that have led to the weakening of the hold of traditional structures of society. The image of 'shining India' became a celebratory signifier of the story of success of the postcolonial nation.

In the midst of such drastic transformation, the position of women in society has shown great improvement. Women have more choices and alternatives today both in their personal and professional lives than in any other age. With access to education, new career opportunities, particularly in the IT and BPO sectors, along with the increasing ease of mobility, the Indian woman, at least the affluent, urban and the educated, are enjoying a heady mix of freedom along with purchasing power. It against this background of tremendous socio-political change, that we need examine the popularity of chick lit not simply as a literary phenomenon, but a cultural practice of social empowerment and economic mobility of women.

Clearly though, the present study acknowledges one of the riders that is attached while accounting for the popularity of this genre in India. One, this literature represents a minuscule of India's reality – the girl city slicker in the age group of 20 to 30s whose empowerment is reflected in her ATM card, her branded clothes and shoes, and her eating out at expensive restaurants. Second, these books are 'consumed' as any other status-driven product by a

readership that is elite and exclusive in terms of class and social position. In other words, the phenomenon of chick lit will be examined by placing its narrative within the social site of conflict between modernity and tradition. At the same time, the analysis will aim at investigating the many ways in which the two opposite forces inscribe chick lit with elements that intersect with one another. The protagonists, for example, will be analysed in the manner in which their coming-of-age story tries to steer through traditional expectations of marriage and a 'settled' as against the free-swinging life of pub-discotheque-bistros. The girl power on display will be animated by the competing demands of family, caste and community on the one hand, and by the women's push for romance, sexual freedom and financial independence, on the other.

Chick Lit in India has been around for ages. It's literature written by women using a distinctly feminine style and address. Today critics and defenders cannot negate the amazing commercial success of these books. 'As popular women's fiction, chick lit has been likened to the contemporary romance popularized by Harlequin in the United States and Mills and Boons in Britain.' (Suzanne Ferriss, 2006, p.3). Chick lit has become extremely popular because it talks about the lives of everyday working young women and men, their careers, dreams, financial security, family etc. These youth between the age of 25 to 40, live in metropolitan cities of India, representing the socio-economic transformation that is taking place in the present century. The lit is significantly composed of stories of young women residing in metropolitan cities, educated and working, truly independent full of aspirations.

Moreover, desi chick lit espouses a brand of feminism that is distinctly Indian. Writers like Swati Kaushal (*Piece of Cake* 2004), Rajshree (*Trust Me* 2006), Advaita Kala (*Almost Single* 2007) and Anuja Chauhan (*Zoya Factor* 2008) project their heroines in a way that does not fit neatly into the category of chick lit heroines of the west. Unlike their sisters abroad, these writers steer the more difficult path of highlighting the complexity of Indian society and the position of women therein. On the surface, most desi chick lit novels seem to tick all the boxes of the genre-defining Anglo-American chick lit, yet there are significant differences reflected in desi chick lit. The following analysis will uncover these striking differences between the western chick lit and the Indian chick lit by providing a detailed analysis of a few select novels.

### **Indian chick lit in the U.S. or Diasporic chick lit**

One must mention here the emergence of another substantial body of writings that may be called Indian diasporic chick lit. This category of fiction is not to be considered as an offshoot of the desi chick lit version; rather, diasporic Indian chick lit has followed its own trajectory. What however is fascinating is that this sub genre of chick lit is written by Indian women who have migrated or settled abroad in the US, UK, Canada. So Indian diasporic chick lit is the literary outcome of the increasing migration and settlement of Asian and South Asian people to North America, Europe and UK. On the back of a phenomenal increase in the size of the expatriate Indian population in these countries, especially of software engineers, doctors, technocrats, and academicians, the multicultural and transnational aspects of such diasporic communities have

gained prominence. So along with a proliferation of diasporic writing of mainstream women writers like Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Devikarauni Banerjee, a number of professional women settled in the West have also made forays into the creative realm and have come up with what is called diasporic chick lit. Riding on the wave of economic boom, easier modes of transnational communication and travelling, and new technologies of the World Wide Web, Indian women professionals in the US and the UK have grabbed the opportunity for writing stories about young people like themselves – tackling career, love, and lifestyle with humour and panache. This breed of diasporic chick lit writers includes, Kavita Daswani, Sonia Singh, Amulya Malladi, Anita Jain, Anjali Joseph, and others. Their books have found a ready market among the sizeable Indian expatriate populations in the US and the UK. While the mother genre of chick lit was declining after the spectacular success of Bridget Jones's Diary (1996) and Confessions of a Shopaholic (2001), books written by these Indian women writers were being voraciously consumed by transnational readers. Indian diasporic chick lit signaled the cross pollination of themes, sharing some of the narrative tropes of their desi sisters – arranged marriage, tradition, rituals, family ties – but also incorporating the complexity of making lives in a foreign location. They scripted stories that captured a variety of experiences of migrating Indian women as newlywed brides to NRI husbands, or as professionals seeking better career opportunities in the west. However, these stories also overlapped the traditional chick lit themes of women's individuality, sexuality and financial independence with diasporic issues of cultural conflict and alienation, nostalgia for home, and the turmoil of both physical and emotional dislocations. Taking their cues from well-established diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, Indian chick lit writers were recentering the female diasporic subject, one who is often marginalized in mainstream writing. In other words, Indian diasporic chick lit writers were writing their own special women-centric stories that were being lapped up by readers both in India and abroad. The transnational popularity added a new dimension to the phenomenon of desi chick lit.

## THOSE PRICEY THAKUR GIRLS

This book is of great delight to those who read the standard Mills & Boons with a spirited and gorgeous heroine and a dark satanic type handsome hero. Those Pricey Thakur Girls is not a standard romance but has the ingredients of a romantic novel. The romance runs like an undercurrent which enthralls and captivates the reader. High quality fluffy romantic comedy might not be easy to write but Chick lit does not connote serious and difficult reading. In this genre the story must follow a predictable pattern and yet hold the reader's attention. The narration of the story should be light-hearted but yet intelligent, appealing to readers of all ages. The characters must be lovable, approachable, divorced from reality and yet very true to life and neighborly. Most Indian attempts at chick lit have not hit very high notes, which is why Anuja Chauhan deserves three cheers for the novel.

First look at the cover and the title actually mesmerizes the reader. Chick lit's packaging aims to attract the readers in a big way. The covers usually depict the protagonist in some shade of the pink color palette, with heels and a trendy handbag which usually appeal to the urban young professionals. Those Pricey Thakur Girls finds a modern girl in a frock and a grumpy cat and a perfect title on the cover which allures the reader not just to skim through the pages but settle down on a cushiony soft to the inviting smell of coffee and read. The title lends a touch of class and arrogance to the characters, and it arouses the curiosity of the readers. It sets an ambience of leisurely reading but to its surprise the reader is very soon gripped by the story and become a part of Justice Laxmi Narayan's family.

Chick Lit has found criticism on the genre's ubiquitous fashion-conscious covers, and highbrow critics have dismissed it as trashy fiction, but no one can ignore its commercial success. Chick lit's popularity does not stop with the print. Not only writers and journalists, but film producers also wish to cash on its popularity. The contemporary set up, the premium Delhi feel, the rich and spoilt snobbish girls grappling with the challenges of contemporary society, concerned but open minded parents, a love angle and the career problems form the central theme of this story. The choice of words and the narration make it all the more absorbing.

Anuja has always been inspired by what goes on around her and both her previously written books 'The Zoya Factor' and 'Battle for Bittora' have autobiographical elements. 'Those Pricey Thakur Girls' is also autobiographical in the sense that the story is based on her relationship with her elder sisters. She shares that she was the youngest of a set of four sisters, and they were very pretty and had a lot of admirers hanging about, they were actually very nice to her in the hope of putting in a good word for them.

The Thakur girls are five in number and alphabetically named by their father, a man of intellect and a retired judge. The story is a warm potpourri of hilarious overtones, namely Debjani's beauty spot; a stubborn mole on her chin which she fears will grow hair one day, Dev Pawar, one

who boasts of being a bit too eligible a bachelor for her, Purshottam Ohri, the fat old man of the Indian Publishing and several other amusing references. The story is a story as lived in Delhi complete with the salty language. The story is a simple one with some complications which keeps the reader reverted to the book.

The story begins with Justice Laxmi Narayan Thakur squatting in the grass, removing the weeds from his treasured flowerbeds. The thakur mansion is built on a 4,800 gaj plot on leafy Hailey Road, with a seven-feet-high boundary wall circling the garden. The fortification is to keep the amorous males away, who were always trying to catch a glimpse of Judge saab's real treasure-five beautiful daughters! Judge saab has a younger brother living next door, Ashok Narayan Thakur, who had only one son and no daughters to lavish attention upon. Both Laxmi Narayan and his wife Mamta were proud parents of five beautiful daughters, amongst whom three of the paragons were blissfully wedded and only twenty-three year old Debjani, aka Dabbu and seventeen year old Eshwari remained at home. When we meet Dabbu she is at the threshold of fame because she has been selected as a newsreader for the country's very own National news broadcaster, DeshDarpan much to the delight of her parents. Judge saab had named his daughters in the alphabetical order, Anjini, Binodini, Chadralekha, Debjani and Eshwari, whom he lovingly calls as A, B, C, D and E! He himself is addressed as LN by his wife mamta.

At the outset of the story we have our main protagonist Debjani, whose stars were in sputa vasta, much to the concern of the parents, they are very happy that she has landed up with a very good job but now the worry was regarding finding a suitable boy for their pretty girl. So the story begins with the thakurs excited because it is Debjani's first broadcast on DD's National programme which all of India will watch. LN is a proud father today and nothing can mess up with his princess's best day.

All the five sisters are very pretty and they get their looks from their father, all oval and honey, with lustrous hair. On her big D day Dabbu, as she is fondly called, is mortified by the still persisting 'mole', which others consider a beauty spot bang in the middle of her chin. She thinks the so called beauty spot is her nemesis and will soon grow into an ugly wart with hair sprouting from it. Though Debjani's spirits have taken a beating since she lost her previous job in an advertising company, HTA, today despite the ugly pronounced wart no one can take away her excitement. She quit her job there because neither she nor the bosses of the advertising agency saw eye to eye. Debjani was a modern woman who knew her mind and also knew when to let go when people didn't need her. Her assertiveness of course would have taken a beating had she not landed up a job as the newsreader at DD. Though outwardly Debjani is grace personified, her heart palpitates and speeds up as they reach the gates of the broadcasting house. The family calls it a 'Debjani-ka-debut' day! They all feel sentimental on such a momentous day and get nostalgic about days when she was a young girl. The girl before time for her news reading slot and was told to stand out on the corridor to await her turn for makeup. Debjani was not the makeup sort of girl, preening and pruning in front of the mirror, but she realizes that to be visibly seen on National television one has to maintain certain beauty standards. She is very pretty

according to her beloved parents but enhancing the beauty is the trick of the trade. This is the first lesson she learns, to be fashionably and to be professionally late! As she waits the turmoil in her mind increases and loses confidence, berating herself for ever thinking she would fit in here. As she thinks:

“I’ll never fit in, she tells herself miserably. What was I thinking? That I could waltz in here and read the primetime news live on DD? I’m going to be a disaster. Just like I was in HTA.” (Those Pricey Thakur Girls,12)

As she is lost in her own world of self pity, suddenly she is approached by The Amitabh Bose, the famous news reader. Debjani is stunned to hear from him that they will be reading the news together, and he takes her on to show the ropes of the new job. The first reading goes smoothly, without the world knowing that her heart nearly clawed up to her mouth. The whole family is proud of her and her mother cries tears of joy. She is no longer worried if Debjani will get a good rishta, she believes the best of rishtas will pour in now. But LN is a proud father of all the five daughters, being a very modern father; he behaved as if he was doing the boy’s family good by bestowing upon them the undeserved daughter that is a Thakur daughter!

One of the factors of Chick Lit is the concept of a dysfunctional family; the Thakur family is not the story of a perfect family. We have certain skeletons in the cupboard which is revealed as the story unravels. We have Chandralekha, the third Thakur daughter who is the blight of the family because she eloped with a shady American-Estonian a night before her wedding. That experience has left a bitter taste in their mouth and now no one wants to talk about Chandralekha. Debjani is often teased by Eshwari for her lack of interest in boys and being very finicky in her choice of them. Debjani is a woman who does not believe in mushy love stories, neither does she believe in fawning on men, playing to the hilt, the poor helpless girl who needs to be protected from the big bad world by a knight in a shining armor. Moreover when she falls in love, she falls, hook line and sinker. This concept of one-man women is characterized in Chick lit.

Chick lit as popular women’s fiction has been likened to the contemporary romance popularized by Harlequin in the United States and Mills & Boons in Britain. The protagonist, a bold yet shy heroine, romancing one and only one man, portrays a realistic portrait of a single life. The typical chick lit protagonist is, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting reader’s compassion and identification simultaneously. The heroine’s flaws and foibles not only entertain the reader but also make them believe that they are fallible-just like them. Debjani is different from her sisters in a sense that she is not overwhelmed by the opposite sex, does not believe in beautifying herself for attracting them, neither does she plays the helpless woman in need of a strong male arm. But her younger sister believes that Debjani suffers from low self-esteem and that’s why she quickly judges them before they judge and dump her. Mamta, the mother of course agrees with this and is worried that Debjani will ever like a boy well enough to get married to him.



Dylan Singh Shekhawat is a journalist at the India Post as an investigative editor, fearless and in pursuit of truth and justice. The story is set in the year following the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the protests against the Sikhs. Dylan is haunted by the massacre of the Sikhs in east Delhi and undertakes a personal mission to bring to book the Dilli ka neta who led the mobs. This quest forms an absorbing sub-plot and his character is shown to be hardcore. His introduction becomes all the more prominent because he doesn't like Debjani's news reading on DeshDarpan and he makes it very obvious when he writes about her in the India Post 'DD's dumb doll doesn't please at all.' Dylan is the eldest son of Juliet Lobo and Second Lieutenant Saahas Singh Shekhawat. Just as mamta worries about Debjani's marriage, Juliet, Dylan's mother worries about Dylan's attitude towards marriage, which is very negative. The Shekhawat's have three sons, Dylan is the eldest followed by Jacob and Ethan. Brigadier Shekhawat, fondly called Bobby by Juliet is friends with LN, they meet regularly along with other friends to play cards. All are retired and spend quality time playing cards and chatting. The first meeting of Debjani and Dylan takes place in one such card sessions, when Dylan comes to pick up his dad from the thakur home. It was not a happy meeting because Debjani was of the opinion that Dylan was deliberately kicking her beloved street dog, moti when he was waiting outside for his father. This brief encounter of sorts did not impress Debjani, as it is she was always wary of suave young men. The first meeting of theirs ends in a sort of disappointment for Debjani, though Dylan was attracted to her tawny eyes.

Later Debjani is in for a rude shock when she reads an article in the newspaper about her reading the news, not knowing it was Dylan who commented on her debut performance at DeshDarpan, her heart breaks and she feels DD will never call her again to read their primetime news. As she sobs,

Calling me Dolly. Saying I'm en-en-enthusiastic. (TPTG, 44).

She feels very vulnerable and affronted, knowing that now she would become the butt of many a male joke. LN and Mamta are very worried that the write-up has come in the India Post which is read by most of Delhi. Mamta is worried that this incident might push back Debjani back into her shell. Debjani's sisters are all bold and beautiful except Debjani who is too sweet to face the world head-on. As her mother says,

Debjani is sensitive. She feels things. (TPTG, 46)

Mamta is worried whether Debjani's sputa vastha is really over, as according to predictions of her stars, her bad are over and now she would bloom wherever she is planted. LN does not agree with his wife and is still a proud father that she was interviewed by DD and had got the job which by no means a small feat.

As fate would have it, Dylan gets invited to the thakur house along with his father to play cards, and Dylan is very enthusiastic about the idea because he would get an opportunity to meet the

girl with the disturbing tawny eyes. He doesn't realize that the Debjani he is talking to is actually debjani the news reader at DD, and when he realizes that his head goes on a spin.

Every chick lit novel centers on a love plot, although the nature of the plot varies in accordance to its heroine's age and marital status. If the heroine is single and unattached like Debjani is, she will attempt a relationship only which would seem beyond her control, that is attracted to the boy despite disliking him. Most of the chick lit writers have borrowed the twist in the love tale, the girl least interested in the boy at first, from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. A happily ever after, some frank scenes of romance, a central love plot-all combine together to create women's literary history. "Anyone familiar with Jane Austen's oeuvre will immediately recognize in chick lit a kindred wit, the same obsession with choosing a mate, and a shared attention to the dailiness of women's lives" says Kathryn Robinson. (Chick Lit, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young.) These same defining characteristics have continued to appear in every form of chick lit irrespective of generation and nationality. Though Debjani is considered to be a pale copy of her beautiful elder sisters, she is the one who strikes a chord with the readers because of her genuineness and sincerity. She realizes there is a deep attraction that she feels towards Dylan and that is what makes her all the more vulnerable. Dylan is completely bowled over by her honesty and the way she is so open with her feelings.

Chandralekha is the third sister of Debjani and her introduction in the story is just that she is the bane of the thakur family because she has eloped with her lover, that too a night before her wedding. Chick lit is the genre where women authors present woman protagonist as the hero of the novel, dealing with her various issues and her independence, whether it be choices in life, career or romance. Rather than presenting their protagonists as subordinate to male advances, chick lit authors present women as sexual agents, free to make advances and choices. Chandu, alias Chandralekha like most other women in the post modern era does not shy away from her sexuality, and experiments in a very light way, to the effect that she does not think twice of her family, or society and blatantly elopes with her lover. The genre dawns a new era, of women claiming a stake in society, ostensibly on her own terms. The genre has been criticized for presenting love as a commodity, though this approach to romance is very much welcomed by young girls who can choose and cast aside love. Debjani who has grown under the shadow of her elder sisters is always conscious of her appearance and her lack of success in romance and work place, which has long been central to discussions of feminism. Once again detractors find chick lit's obsession with appearance a cause for disdain, though it doesn't mean that chick lit endorses certain cultural expectations of women's beauty. Chick lit author presents woman as per se, as they are in real life minus the body beautiful. This fiction is about women to 'new women' contemporary reader; it identifies and blends with contemporary culture and situating it in relation to the women of the twentieth century.

Romance blooms though Dylan knows that Debjani is not the post-modern woman she shows to be, because she has hardly traversed the path of love or flings. Debjani's father, the judge does not like this new development and believes Dylan to be too cocky for his darling fourth daughter.

Dylan the boy who has played the field and debjani, the girl who is uncertain of herself as far as love angle goes, seem an odd pair. She actually reveals to Dylan that she doesn't know how to talk and that surprised him. Women as far as Dylan is concerned are to be played with, and the modern women know the score of every relationship, a fling with cling!

Anjini, the eldest daughter of the thakurs is an incorrigible flirt, who has always stolen boyfriends from her younger sisters. Though she is married, she never stops at any opportunity of trying to flirt or gain attention of the opposite sex. She feels being the eldest of five daughters, her parents have bundled her off to the first bakra they found, that too a divorcee with a child Samar. Anjini feels quiet indignant about it and looking at Debjani working she wistfully thinks she too should have tried for a career first. At present she is desperate for a child, and in her desperation she flirts with men including Anant, her husband's boss. This leads to a showdown and Anant leaves for the US without a word to her. Her desperation shows on every count but instead of wilting like a poor Victorian heroine, she tries to spice up her life when she visits her maika. She tries to take over Debjani's life, interfering in her love life and making no bones in insinuating that Debjani is too dull regarding her love management. Chick lit women are at once feminine and powerful, they know how to wheedle out a good life for them, negotiating and categorizing life with their choices, choices not forced upon them by society. The new genre embraces all the pleasures and pains of the new discovered womanhood with irony, wit and sentimentality.

One fine day both Mr and Mrs. Thakur discuss about Dylan and how does he rate in their eyes for Debjani. Though Mamta feels they can't be too choosy since Chandu did the family in by eloping with her Estonian lover on her wedding day, LN does not agree. They are very protective about Debjani and decide to talk to the Brigadier if Dylan is really serious about their daughter. Dylan on being questioned by his parents gets real uncomfortable because his father tells him in no terms that Dylan is not to mess with his friends' daughter. On Dylan getting exasperated by the ultimatum dictated to him by his parents asks:

'But how can I decide if I'm serious about her if they won't even let me meet her?' (TPTG,148)

In modern times the boy will not get hitched to a girl if he doesn't get to know her. He lets his displeasure know by saying

'Can't I ever come to Delhi without you guys trying to arrange my marriage? And I'll be damned if I'm interested if she isn't interested.' (TPTG,149)

His work pressure is such that he returns home exhausted every night and things are not made easy for him with his parents breathing down his neck regarding Debjani. Dylan sulks, thinking that the girl is interested in nothing except looking pretty. But then he decides to meet her to apologize for kissing her cheek one day at her house. Dylan meets her but then again things go wrong between them as they are not able to communicate with each other minus their egos. When their conversation ends in the dead alley Dylan feels consternation and thinks that this

can't end like this between them. Debjani makes it clear to him that she is not into 'without any-string attachment' and friendships that lead nowhere. Though she shows him that she cares two-hoots for his philandering ways, she nevertheless cries bucket of tears on the idea of losing him. Debjani soon becomes very famous as a newsreader and mama is very happy that her daughter is in such demand in the marriage market. Debjani turns down every 'rishta' that come her way on some pretext or the other. But her real reasons were:

He didn't have long dimples in his lean cheeks.

He wouldn't stealthily drop a large clean handkerchief into her lap if he saw her weeping.

Her life wasn't on hold till he kissed her again.

He wasn't Dylan Singh Shekhawat. (TPTG,179)

But as it happens in the ego tassels between the would-be lovers, Dabbu and Dylan both suffer from the want of being the first one to approach the other. Nevertheless all hell breaks loose in Dabbu's house when the proposal for marriage comes for her from Dylan. Dabbu is shocked by the turn of events and wants to have a talk with Dylan for his sudden change of mind. As it happens in every Indian family, the boy's family come to 'see' the girl and everybody is uncomfortable knowing the differences Dabbu and Dylan have. In the meantime Dabbu realizes that it was Dylan who had written the first acrimonious article about her as a newsreader and she refuses to further the relationship. Her pride is touched to the quick and she can't accept the fact that Dylan would misjudge her so much. The friendship between the two families was at stake because of the ugly incident, nevertheless the maturity of the parents warded the catastrophe. Mamta, Dabbu's mother is at her wit's end. All her daughters are unhappy for some reason or other and she had to agree to what Dabbu's chachiji says:

What sad days for the Thakurs of Hailey Road! First girl is Banjjar, second girl is Khanjjar...third girl ka toh what-to-say, and the fourth girl has been rejected by a Christian! And the fifth girl wears such short skirts and plays basketball with boys. (TPTG,222)

An accidental meeting of Mamtaji and Juliet Bai ensures all is well between friends and Juliet invites the Thakurs for their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Dabbu is in a world of her own, feeling wretched and unhappy to the core. Her parents fret for her and Mamtaji asks her to go for a different job, which Dabbu refuses and says 'Besides, I don't feel like going anywhere nowadays.' (TPTG, pg. 243). Finally Debjani Thakur and Dylan Singh Shekhawat meet in the party thrown by the Shekhawat's thirtieth wedding anniversary. Initially they ignore each other royally and finally when Dylan asks her for a dance Dabbu complies. As they get talking their egos again are in combat and in vexation Dylan says:

Today I thank you for saying no to what would clearly have been a hugely incompatible match. (TPTG, 265)

When they continue dancing both Dylan and Dabbu can't help their hearts beating for each other, but are unable to tell each other how much they matter to the other. Dabbu still carries the old complaint against him and finally tells him that she hates him because of his article on her reading skills. She says that he is just a cold professional hack, chasing a big fat story and doesn't have any feelings. That's because he didn't tell her he wrote the article when they had first met. Finally Dylan comes clean and writes her a letter explaining everything, the reason why he wrote such an atrocious article in The India Post and his fear later on in revealing himself to her, because he was attracted towards her and didn't want to lose his chance in forming an honest opinion about himself. When Dabbu finally gets to read the letter after a few mix-ups of situation, she accepts his proposal to marry him. Mamta is ecstatic but LN doesn't give knowing that Dabbu has insulted the Shekawats when they came to see her, the traditional way. LN is rightfully upset because he has lost his good friend through this misunderstanding between their kids, Dabbu and Dylan. He feels even if they get married, their children would be brought up like Christians and he doesn't like the idea. He tells Mamta to search for a decent boy for his favourite Dabbu!

In the meantime Dylan is cheated by a girl who acts like she is a riot victim giving him information. He is caught on the wrong foot and is wrongly arrested on charges of bribery, witness-tampering, falsification of evidence, rumour mongering and slander. Dabbu's heart goes to him and fights for his release and for her family to understand that he is not a bad boy and he has been trapped. Dylan too understood that the girl was a set-up to discredit him and the paper. But it was the efforts taken by Mitali, the correspondent for Viewstrack and Varun's attempts that Dylan is able to prove his innocence and is freed. Mitali and Dylan went to college together, and they broke up a month before Dylan met Dabbu. Mamta thinks that Dylan's love for Dabbu was a rebound sorts and was glad that the marriage thing didn't work out. As she says:

Sounds like a rebound affair to me. Good thing it didn't work out. Let's just rally around Dabbu and cheer her up. (TPTG, 331)

One day Dabbu along with Amitabh Bose read the news on DD and it is Dabbu who reads:

In a startling development, video news magazine and Viewstrack and the India Post conducted a joint investigation and discovered that the bribery and testimony tampering charges against journalist Dylan Singh Shekhawat are entirely false and were fabricated by MP Hardik Motla in a scurrilous bid to discredit the highly regarded journalist. (TPTG, 343)

The rest of the news read by her in continuation propelled a storm of sorts in the entire country because she read the news which was not approved by DD, that too at prime time! Her main concern in doing this was that Dylan would know how much she loved him and she is mortified by the thought. DD sacks her and told her in no uncertain terms that she will be fined and there would be criminal prosecution. But in a sudden turn of events it is Purshottam Ohri who realizes

that Dylan has been neatly trapped, who uses this opportunity to help save Dabbu and in the same breath get Dylan out of prison.

### DeshDarpan Grows Up

Hats off to state broadcaster for ushering in an era of independent, fearless reporting (TPTG, 351)

Dylan was implicated and framed by MP Hardik Motla, the man whose hands are stained with the blood of the thousands who died in the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. Debjani was praised for her independent news reading, the sort the country looks forward to, as said by the Prime Minister:

This government is both progressive and responsive and seeks the support of a free, fearless and vigorous press to take us into the twenty-first century. (TPTG, 352)

Nevertheless, Dabbu's father asks her to look out for a new job knowing well that DD will sack her on some pretext or the other. Dabbu fervently wishes that Dylan will come and meet her and propose undying love but that doesn't happen because they split in bad terms and he has no idea that Dabbu read the news of his innocence all by herself. When he is informed about it by his friend Varun, he is flabbergasted! He goes back home and questions his mother if Dabbu visited them when he was in prison. Mama Juliet is surprised at this sudden re-interest of her sonna in the girl. And immediately he goes to meet her at her place when he comes to know she had come home. When they finally meet she feels she could die of joy. All their misunderstandings are solved and they find perfect bliss in each other's arms.

Chick-lit heroines are invariably more likeable than the other characters around them, more so because of their endearing faults, and they know it. They don't think they are paragons, and it is this all-too-human ineptitude that wows the readers. The dignified simplicity of the heroines tug at the heart strings of the readers and they immediately fall in love with such characters. In reality one is able to identify with the characters in the novel. Some of the stories end in blissful marriage and mutual declaration of love but not before a long and tumultuous period of misunderstandings that might seem to veer towards a catastrophe but usually it is all's well that ends well.

There is always an elder namely a mother who worries over her brood of girls and is only interested in getting a perfect boy for her girl. This is understandable because every mother's dream is to see her daughter settled well and secure in life. Mamta was very happy that after a tumultuous period of misunderstanding both Debjani and Dylan are finally going to be united in wedded bliss.

Anuja Chauhan's TPTG, like her first book *The Zoya Factor* (2008), was a huge success and won accolades from her readers. Unlike her debut novel, TPTG is set in the 1980s India of the Licence Raj, Doordarshan TV, caste politics, sati burning, and Maruti cars. There are references

to Indira Gandhi's assassination, the anti-Sikh riots, corruption and nepotism in the corridors of power. Undoubtedly, the main focus of the book remains Debjani's love interest, but the references to the socio-political milieu of the period imparts to the narrative a strong realism. Despite the novel giving us a vivid picture of the India of that period, Chauhan's book, much to her chagrin, was slotted as 'chick lit' on its release. While romance, marriage and melodrama do make the characteristic tropes of the narrative, the story of the five Thakur girls, perfectly embody the modern Indian woman. The women, especially Debjani, comes across as self-willed character with a strong personality. Debjani is shown to be snooty, privileged though not in terms of wealth, but "khandani" (Chauhan's description in an interview). Each character is drawn by the writer in a special way with unique traits. Debjani's love for dogs, her debut as a newsreader and her soft corner for losers, all go to make her a round and not flat character. Along with a realistic style and a racy technique, the characters come alive to give the book a light, sassy flavor.

Are the Thakur girls just 'pricey' to slam the book as anti-feminist? A close reading of the novel reveals the answer in the negative. After all, through the story of the lives of the five Thakur girls, Chauhan tackles issues around women's emancipation, career, balancing tradition with modernity and free will. While not giving up the chatty, humorous, gossipy, hip style that is the hallmark of chick lit, Chauhan's book makes a serious statement about women's freedom and the choices in a patriarchal and feudal Indian society. Essentially, through the characterization of the Thakur girls, the novelist tries to examine the various modes of survival and negotiation that Indian women in the post-liberal age adopt in order to navigate their personal relationships and their profession. Debjani's success as a reporter demonstrates the unexpected ways in which women manage to succeed in the male-dominated and sexist workplace by displaying a combination of female skills, such as intuition, loyalty, emotional intelligence and collaborative leadership skills. By exercising choice in the matter of love, marriage, and employment, the Thakur girls break the glass ceiling. Chauhan's novel, therefore, may be said to exemplify a neo-liberal feminism that charts out a bold road map for the new age Indian woman by showing how they can mediate and maneuver through the challenges of political economy, consumerist culture, and patriarchal society, and yet keeping intact the essential agentive power.

## ALMOST SINGLE

Indian Chick Lit is the subgenre of Chick Lit, fiction written by women for women, especially single, independent and working. The genre features hip and stylish female protagonists, usually single, living in urban settings, navigating the challenges of balancing demanding careers with handling of personal relationships. The stories are generally centered on the heroine, with the focus on her trials and tribulations of life. The genre often addresses the issues of the modern woman, her relationship with her friends, social circle, romantic relationships, and heart breaks in a light hearted and easy manner. The heroines of chick lit skillfully balance cultural traditions with 21st-century lifestyles, they want to be good daughters, but sometimes face the disapproval of their mothers when they refuse to get married at the right age.

Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* (2007) is a landmark in the ever-expanding scene of Indian Chick Lit. The novel maps the lives of three close friends, Aisha Bhatia, Misha and Anushka. Aisha and Misha are single and Anushka is going through a turbulent divorce. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Aisha. It is the story of coming of age of girls, no longer young, single and happy in their skin, as the title suggests single and happy to be single! Aisha Bhatia is a twenty-nine year old, witty, outspoken, a super-fashionista, like all chick lit girls, single and working as a Guest Relations Manager at the Grand Orchid Hotel in New Delhi. Though she is not very happy with the job, she somehow tolerates it. She has to put in long tedious hours in the job, and that's why whenever she finds time, she spends quality time with her two girlfriends, and together they shop, drink coffee, hold parties and look for love. Sometimes she comes across as quirky singleton, but is refreshingly different from the other female characters in the novel, who are desperately searching for a partner or brooding over a broken relationship. Misha has escaped from a small town and her parents to enjoy an independent life in Delhi. She is on the wrong side of twenty-five and is desperately on the lookout for the perfect NRI husband. In the process of her search she goes through several dating encounters till she finds the perfect match. Anushka Mishra on the other hand, leads a perfect happy married life, or so she thinks, till she catches her husband cheating on her. She is heading for a divorce and is yet to come to terms with her present single status.

Aisha has two other dear friends, Nic and Ric, the fashionable gay couple who provides beauty tips and is hand-in-glove with the girls to snag eligible bachelors. In the very beginning of the novel, Aisha has a witty tongue-in-cheek confession to make, where she states her single status in a self-deprecating manner.

My name is Aisha Bhatia. I am twenty-nine years old and single. But before I get into all that, I have a confession to make: I am rather large (AS, 2)

So she lives in denial, denial of her age, largeness, lack of good looks etc. Aisha feels as long all these don't really concern her unduly, she is fine and will be fine. She talks about her single status in a very easy going manner. The society at large might be concerned about her single



status, especially her mother, but Aisha is not overtly worried about that. Chick lit portrays in a very realistic way the everyday lives of men and women and it appeals to the readers because they can relate to the characters in the novel in all its messy detail. “The typical chick-lit protagonist is, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting reader’s compassion and identification simultaneously.” (Chick Lit., 4).

In a city where old is meeting new, daughters are surprising mothers, and love is breaking all the boundaries, this heartfelt and wickedly funny cross-cultural debut novel introduces a smart young woman searching for independence and matrimony in a culture bound by tradition.

Aisha Bhatia's job as guest relations manager at New Delhi's five-star Grand Orchid Hotel is intermittently fabulous--she certainly knows her wines and cheeses, dines at luxury restaurants and bonds big time with her best friends Mish and Anushka. But despite a life filled with good friends and first-class travel accommodations, the fact is that not many twenty-nine-year-old women in India are single--as Aisha's mother never fails to remind her. Somewhere the biological clock is ticking, though as far as Aisha is concerned it can be cheerfully drowned out by laughter over a champagne brunch. She is not so worried that she is nowhere near marriage, yet when the handsomely chiseled, drop-dead gorgeous and filthy rich NRI Karan Verma arrives from New York, Aisha experiences an unexpected tug of feeling.

As every other modern young girl who wants to live life on their terms, Aisha pours her woes and happiness to her two young buddies, Misha and Anushka. The parents were desperate for the girls to get married and desivivaha.com comes to the rescue of these two maidens, especially Misha’s. It is her desire to meet a non-resident Indian (NRI) and those results in the women registering on a shaadi website:

Did I mention that Misha’s one and only ambition is to net the perfect NRI? It is in pursuit of this goal that she moved from Bhatinda to New Delhi. And now, she’s decided it’s a grand idea to register with desivivaha.com-the One-Stop Site for an NRI to Hold Tight. So, we logged on and spent the next forty-five minutes thinking up glowing adjectives to describe our assets and ambivalent ones to dodge the iffy bits. (AS, 5)

Misha’s one and only ambition is to net the perfect NRI and for that she fudges her pay scale and weight and both officially register on the desivivaha.com. Misha believes that they should take the responsibility of their singlehood status and try hard to remove the Miss and become Mrs. As she says,

There is a whole world of men out there and we have to reach them! (AS, 8)

Aisha observes Misha and her desperation in finding a groom for herself. If anything bothers Aisha at all it is the fact that she reached the age of twenty nine without indulging in a steady relationship. Moreover Mamma Bhatia like all mothers is always worried that her dear one

should not fall in bad company, and quizzes her on the marital status of her men friends. When she calls her first question to Aisha would be if she had met anyone interesting. And heaven forbid a girl reaches an expiry date, and then it's downhill all the way. Aisha's mother is unduly fixated on getting her daughter married and talks about the suitable boys who are marriage material to attract Aisha's attention. Aisha on the hand feels resentful that being independent and socially active can be regarded as a handicap. She also rues the fact that she is in such an age span where kids still call her didi, and very rarely aunty, and so she deduces she has still good many years to go. Her mother's anxiety rubs on her especially when Mamma Bhatia after quizzing Alisha keeps the phone with "Chalo, it's all karma at the end of the day." (AS, 2007, 12) These single young women have to cope up with the pressures that accompany a career, the dating scene, the knowing eyes of society who tell you that time is ticking fast, and mother breathing down the neck. When parents stop matchmaking and start to analyze philosophically, daughters uncannily know that it is time to worry and do something about the single status.

Her mother's philosophical attitude to Aisha's singleton position in life is in stark contrast to all the effort her mother has made until now in looking for a husband for Aisha." (Reading New India, 2013, 45)

Aisha gets in touch with her astrologer to see if there is any signal of a marriage. Shastriji does say that there are 'indications' of marriage. This of course doesn't comfort Aisha because an indication can mean several things. Both Aisha and Misha officially register on [desivivaha.com](http://desivivaha.com) and await the coming of a perfect dulha who they think is just a click away. This website results in a couple of dates for the women but nothing substantial comes out of it. Alisha and Misha's friend Anushka was married to her school and college sweetheart. It was a love story that had all the elements of a proper romance till the marriage ends up in divorce because Anushka catches him red-handed having a fling. The novel though a romantic comedy does make us aware that all marriages don't end in 'forever after'. She in fact laments that she never thought she would end up a divorcee. Like all girls, Anushka grew up with the idea that marriages are made in heaven and never to be broken. All the three suffer from the hangover of being single; with Anushka joining in, it becomes a threesome gang now trying to lead the perfect life.

Aisha gets to meet Karan Verma, handsome and single, a financial analyst, affluent who is an essential character in the novel. They have a rather awkward introduction and after that they meet at a party, at the opening of a new lounge bar called Tao. When Anushka comes to know that her erstwhile spouse, Anuj is also invited she is loathed to go. Nevertheless they make up their minds to go and enjoy the party.

The problem with three single women entering a party unescorted is that everyone, men and women alike, look at you with these cash-register eyes swiftly totaling up your assets. (AS, 50)

The girls are unnerved by the knowing looks and stares, but when one has been single for as long as they have, one gets used to it. People immediately spot them and the trio do become self-conscious but try to cover it up by walking in with aplomb. Aisha meets her very dear friends, Ric and Nic in the party. Much to her chagrin she meets Mr. Verma in the party and is too shocked and embarrassed with the situation. More than dealing with her predicament of a chance meeting with Mr. Verma, Aisha is more concerned about the meeting of Anushka and Anuj at the party. Tonight was the night the two come face to face since their separation and Aisha and Misha were worried for Anushka. Anushka convinces them she is alright and assures Aisha that she is over Anuj and the chapter is closed.

As Lisa A Guerrero rightly said, "It should be noted that, as several scholars argue articulately, marriage is not the ultimate goal, and very often is not the ultimate result in much of chick lit." (Chick Lit, 2006, 88)

However it does occupy a very important place in the minds of the chick protagonists. As she enters the realm of marriage she does try to retain her identity as an individual but is caught in the crossroads between the traditional and the modern. And at the same time they will not be forced into an arranged marriage because the time is running out. There can be no compromise while choosing the right life partner.

They wanted careers, economic stability, and self-determination because those were the things they were taught they had a right to claim. But they also wanted to have husbands and children, to be taken care of, and to be the caretaker, because those were the things they had been socialized to recognize as characterizing real womanhood." (2006, 89)

Time and again Aisha is reminded by Mamma Bhatia that time is running fast and at the rate she is going she can bid goodbye to marriage. She gives heavy duty gyaan to her daughter thinking that might change her attitude about marriage and settling down. Mrs. Bhatia is a strong willed, resourceful and an excellent mother who has the best interests of her daughter in her heart. She though sometimes might seem the pestering type but provides sound advice and support when her troubled daughter needs it.

"A generation ago, marriage was the only route to independence from parental control in India. Now women are working, living alone in the cities, hanging out with women friends, drinking, dating and having fun in spite of the enormous social pressure to get married," said Kala, 30, the witty author of "Almost Single."

The novel revolves around the matters of 'acceptability' and this works on various fronts. Sometimes Aisha is not able to fit in societal norms and she challenges it more often than not. One incident is where she sports red Reeboks with the saree, her uniform at the Grand Orchid Hotel where she is working. More than conforming to norms, she prefers comfort because she has to walk through the long corridors in the hotel, and stilettos, the regulation heels which might give her the aches and pains. According to Aisha, her flat Reebok trainers are:

Flat, comfortable, well worn and cleverly disguised by the uneven fall of my saree. (AS, 27)

Not only that she goes against the dress code of the hotel, but her saree which falls in uneven folds also demonstrates her disinterest in conforming to certain societal dictates. Later on in the novel we find Aisha wearing her saree over her jeans. Aisha dislikes wearing the saree, referring to it as the ‘male repellent.’ As she says:

People always wonder why I have not met a nice young man at work place yet. It’s because of the saree- I call it the male repellent. Yes, I know a lot of women look stunning in it. I am not one of those women. On a good day I look like a well draped potato. And there are enough bad days when I end up wearing it over my jeans. It’s a basic design flaw: sarees should come with a stitched-on petticoat. (AS, 182-183)

Aisha and her friends live a life that is sometimes judged as ‘unacceptable’ by the neighbours, especially by Misha’s neighbor, Mrs. Mukherjee. According to Misha, she was the snoopy kind who always spied upon her and was interested in knowing her whereabouts.

In all fairness though, Misha’s nocturnal behavior would keep anybody interested. The trouble is that Mrs. Mukherjee has a very fixed notion of *bhadralok* and Misha just doesn’t cut it. (AS, 81)

Mrs. Mukherjee’s idea of a ‘*bhadralok*’, a Bengali expression meaning a respectable and well – mannered one, belonging to a staid middle-class background, does not cut any ice with Aisha and Misha. They don’t understand how they are different from Mrs. Mukherjee’s definition of a ‘*bhadralok*’. Aisha has a respectable job, earns fairly well, just like Misha who also heads from a respectable middle class family, and is working as an insurance advisor. Misha too like Aisha is financially independent. What they don’t understand is this that Mrs. Mukherjee’s idea of a *bhadralok* of any middle class family has to follow certain behavioral norms, reach home before nightfall and definitely cannot indulge in drinking and partying and keep late hours. So she shows her disapproval very blatantly, especially when Misha reaches home late after a party.

On one occasion, Aisha, Misha, Anushka, Ric and Nic decide to hold a *havan* on the roof of Misha’s block of flats to dispel the after-effect of any past misdeeds. Though the *havan* requires a pundit, they don’t call one. And very soon the *havan* turns into a drinking and discussing get-together in front of the blazing fire. Mrs. Mukherjee gathers the neighbours in protest of the party taking place on the roof. As she arrives to address the neighbours, the group manages to extinguish the fire and remove all alcohol from view, much to the annoyance of Mrs. Mukherjee.

Mrs. Mukherjee’s disappointment was palpable. She hoped to find a flaming orgy, preferably with alcohol, and if possible, some *hashthorn* in. She probably rehearsed her outraged civilian call to *Aaj Tak* about the *asheel* youth of today. (AS, 86)

In a bid to reintegrate with Misha’s neighbours and also making an effort in a traditional way to find a husband, the girls decide to keep the *Karva Chauth* fast. According to the Hindu tradition

this fast is kept for one day by the women from North India, in the month of Kartika. The women fast the whole day praying for the safety and longevity of their husbands. The single women keep the fast praying and seeking benediction to beget a good husband. They buy the things necessary to keep the fast, and in this way Misha also gets a good opportunity to re-instate herself in the eyes of her neighbours. Aisha is not so interested in this tradition, and when she calls her Mamma Bhatia that she is keeping the fast, her mother questions her as to why the drama baazi is necessary since she is not married. Mamma Bhatia feels that since single Punjabi women keep the fast to get a good match, the divorce rate is high too, breaking the match.

Misha wants to be accepted by the people amongst whom she is living, and wants to belong to the 'bhadralok' group. This importance of 'acceptability' is echoed by Aisha when she says:

There's something about these community thingies that makes you want to feel 'decent', a part of the normal and accepted community. (AS, 112)

So there is first time Karwa Chauth-ers, those who were married for a year or so. Aisha saw that their doting husbands were lurking in the background and fasting along with their wives which she found kind of cute. Then are the un-married single status girl Karwa Chauth-ers to which group the girls belonged. There were the giggly enthusiastic girls below the age of twenty-five who reveled in this tradition. The aunties made up another group, full of gaiety and sportsmanship. As Aisha says:

After all, Karwa Chauth is an opportunity to display one's talents as well, with everybody showing off how well they can sing and dance on an empty stomach. (AS, 113)

Aisha noticed that the young hubbies were hanging around their wives who have kept the fast for them. The event was very traditional and touching, but Aisha saw that she couldn't fit in to this event as she had no husband. Misha, on the other hand, is enjoying the event and the tradition. Aisha is happy for Misha and inwardly prays for a husband for her. As she says of Misha,

She is made for this stuff, and if our traditions are to withstand India's sprint towards the western way, women like Misha have to get married. (AS, 115)

Once again, Aisha's question of 'acceptability' is under question. Acceptability from the point of being married or going to be married. This question perplexes her mind:

What is it about single women in our age group? (AS, 117)

Aisha is reminded of her mother's words:

According to my mother, whenever something is not right with me, it's because I live in the big, bad city on my own, and did not get married when I was supposed to. (AS, 98)

Everything in life comes back to marriage. Once the singletons find a man to marry, they disconnect from the rest. Their single friends become a burden who is to be looked down upon

with pity. When Aisha's engagement broke, it became a big news item for family and friends. So when people asked her if she was married, she nonchalantly answered:

Well, I was briefly engaged, but he got away. ( AS,118)

At least that spared her the looks of pity. Female ambition and the desire for autonomy, self-preservation all these take a toss when society demands that a woman should be married in order to gain acceptability in life and society.

The fast comes to an end and they wait for the sighting of the moon to break the fast. Aisha's gets a call from Karan and the moon is sighted as Karan's call ends. Traditionally, the fast is broken with water and something sweet that is given by the husband. As the ladies come together, Ric and Nic turn up with a picnic hamper full of food and they relocate to Misha's roof. Aisha, Misha and Anushka do not follow the Karva Chauth fast the traditional way, rather they gorge on the goodies brought in by their gay friends Ric and Nic. This food is markedly different from the food that was being consumed at the bottom flats by Mrs. Mukherjee and the other ladies. Though the Karva Chauth fast is a religious custom, Aisha's opinion regarding the party the friends are having as:

Not exactly religious fare, but then, we aren't great on religion either. (AS,119)

Aisha takes part in the Karva Chauth because Misha wanted to and she herself rationalizes it as a 'detox' and hanging out with friends, drink alcohol and eat great food. The real significance of the fast, however, is touched upon her with a chance phone call with Karan. As she says she feels shy and stupid at the same time when Karan asks her where she was, and she replied that she was at a Karva Chauth do! As a single woman, Aisha experiences community bonding, especially hanging out with close friends whom she considers family.

As Dawson Varughese says:

This experience of the fast is, however, divergently different from its 'traditional' intent, where the women of the family come together, a husband is present to break the fast and the food is prepared at home, a traditional home-cooked meal, all in a religious context. This display of various female worlds, inhabited by women of different generations and different life experiences is a strong motif in Kala's novel. (2013,50)

The novel though a romantic comedy makes us aware that not all marriages are made in heaven. Anushka, Aisha's friend feels that since she is getting divorced, there is some evil eye 'nazar' on her and that's why things are going wrong for her. She is unable to accept the fact that soon she will be joining the club of 'divorcees'. Like all girls, Anushka too dreamt of a perfect happily ever after married life. As Aisha says:

In India, we are equipped to handle all sorts of crises. Anxiety-busters like astrologers, babas, godmen, god persons and numerologists are our key to good mental health.' ( AS, 133)

These are the men who predict the future and the mothers who have daughters of marriageable age totally depend on predictions as one would hang on for dear life. Aisha too knew that she would have to make a reference to Shastriji regarding Karan. These sooth sayers, or tellers of future create such an aura of wonderful predictions, that mothers fall prey to them. Aisha herself did not believe in them, though she and her friends go to meet 'Roshni Ma' for a cure to remove the dreaded 'nazar' from Anushka's life. This god women predicts that Aisha will get married to an NRI and that too soon. This shocks Aisha and she wonders how can anyone predict such things just by looking at the person.

Aisha also remembers the ritual her mother has asked her to follow, to do puja of the Shivling which will procure her a good mate. The mothers in India are constantly worried once their daughters reach marriagable age. Mrs. Bhatia is also in touch with Swamiji regarding this matter. Aisha, being a modern thinking women does not believe in Swamiji's and their predictions. The Swamiji contacts Aisha on her mother's behest and says that:

Ab chinta band karo. The time has come. Samay ab theek chalega. Ab relax karo. Bahut aashirwaad, beta.

For Aisha it was like the Swamiji was predicting an apocalypse. Aisha is rendered silent with this prediction and feels:

The Hinglish godmen are a boon for our nation, thank god for their easy accessibility. They're like your neighbourhood kirana seth who speaks the English of a department store clerk and the Hindi of a thelawala. A very comforting combination. Plus, of course, he stocks everything from Indian veggies to face bleach. And he does home delivery. (AS, 266)

He is a multi-tasker who diversifies his business activity, in addition to his divine predictions, he is able to deliver household items at your door step.

As Aisha is musing about her relationship with Karan, Misha meets up with her childhood friend, Gurinder who lives in Canada. As is tradition, howsoever a post-modern women might have personal choices as far as a partner is concerned, she has to obey the dictat of her bade papa who is the 'patriarch of the joint family and his word is law'. She dresses up in an:

ultra prim salwar kameez and leaves the cigarettes behind (AS, 269)

She sits in the hotel lobby utterly bored, waiting for Guru to come. And she sees him, she is unable to believe her eyes and finds him to be utterly gorgeous. It's a quick decision for them, and the next day Misha leaves for Bhatinda with Guru to meet his family. Being a new age women, she is also candid even to tell her friend Aisha that they are going to spend a night together to know if they are sexually compatible. The working out of sexual compatibility is set up here as an accepted norm between Aisha and her friends.

Meantime Aisha gets a call from Anushka that she is setting up a garment export business with an old friend she met again at Karan's party and she is leaving for Italy. Aisha feels lonely and is totally confused regarding her single status, though she has a boy friend. She knows that she likes Karan and yet she is unable to make up her mind regarding marriage. Mamma Bhatia is just waiting for her go-ahead sign, but it was not to be according to Aisha. As she ponders:

Everyone is taking his or her measured risks. And here I am, desperately holding on to status quo, only because I don't know what I want and frankly never have. ( AS, 271)

The novel ends with Aisha telling Karan how she feels about him and marriage. She takes the call when she is on a twenty-two hour train journey to Nashik with Lata di, her cousin and Jiju Sachin. As Aisha is musing about the future, surprisingly she finds Lata di tell her good that she waited and is not getting married in a hurry. As Lata says:

Marriage is not all that it's cracked up to be. After a while, it's just two people living under the same roof. And you find yourself accepting things you never thought you could... (AS, 276)

Lata quiet intensity stuns Aisha as she says that because she is single she will actually never be lonely. Because marriage after all is just co-existing, it's good to be single as in single rather than be lonely and alone in marriage. Lata didi confesses that she is actually lonely in her ten year old marriage. It surprised Alisha that Lata didi knew her better than she knew herself. She realizes that she has actually not felt lonely in her single status for the longest time and that is the truth. She bemoans about her single status with her friends only as a habitual banter, more to create a fun atmosphere than actually expressing honest misery. She realizes she is not discontented or lonely, she wants a wedding, eventually, but she is not ready for marriage now. With determined intent, Aisha gets off the train at Bhopal, takes a taxi to the airport and then takes a flight to Mumbai to meet Karan there, as he is in Mumbai for a business trip.

She arrives at Karan's hotel but misses him by 5 minutes. Tired of waiting, she goes to the bar and three Screwdrivers later, goes to the reception claiming to be Karan's wife and is escorted to his room, where she can wait for him. As she finds him, she blurts out:

Karan, please, I know this sounds weird, but can we put off marrying for a bit and like really get to know each other? (AS, 281)

Aisha says she won't mind becoming the oldest bride in India as long as she becomes the bride of the right man. Karan agrees and professes his love for her and says that he believes they are right for each other. The scene ends with Aisha once again challenging orthodoxy, and trying to life on her terms. Giving time to find true love and the right partner especially when you are pressurized from from society to settle down fast. She wants to make life more meaningful and more in line with how she understands life and love in New India. The Almost Singleton's search for the perfect partner or almost the perfect partner is the theme of the novel. Kala is



unapologetic about relating the young urban women's tale wanting the best in love and material pleasure.

## **Conclusion**

Advaita Kala's heroine, Aisha is like most millennial Indian women, on the cusp of being married, almost single but not quite married. She is not presented as an overly ambitious corporate ladder climbing woman on stiletto heels; rather, like other protagonists of desi chick lit writers, she is combines saris with sneakers, and prefers drinking Sula over chardonnay. By contextualizing her heroine in an India caught between the simultaneous pull of tradition and modernity, Advaita Kala positions the Indian chick lit not merely as a sub genre in the tradition of Anglo-American chick lit. In fact, Western reviewers found the book difficult to follow in parts, precisely because Kala in a sort of postcolonial move refuses to submit her narrative to the dictates of the Western genre. There are sections in the book especially where the three women protagonists are chit-chatting, the exchange slips into Hindi with several cultural references made that are not explained nor a glossary provided for the Western reader. Blending English with Hindi, or using the idiom of Hinglish, Indian chick lit writers are unselfconsciously adding a 'curry flavour' to a genre that originated in the US and the UK. What adds to the distinctiveness of the desi genre is the very different set of themes that it handles; themes that are 'typically' Indian. It captures the Indian social reality in all its complexity: arranged marriages, interfering and overbearing parents, expectations of family and relatives, matrimonial columns, match makers and astrologers, and a hundred other things, local and traditional help to brand the writings of desi chick lit writers as different from their Western god mothers. This is a radical move by Kala not only because it completely negates the view that desi chick lit is a merely a cheap imitation of the Anglo-American model, and is, therefore, merely derivative. Far from this view, desi chick lit writers propose different forms of femininity, selfhood and agency as inscribed in their women-centric narratives. Indian chick lit, therefore, thanks to the unique and confident writings of its writers, have created a niche for themselves in the landscape of new literatures emerging from Third World countries. As Sandra Ponzanesi says, "Chick Lit in India has its own flavor, preoccupations and distribution channels. The major concerns remain the issues of tradition and arranged marriages to be combined with new individual lifestyle and new professional careers in cosmopolitan cities such as Delhi and Bombay." (201)

## THE ZOYA FACTOR

Anuja Chauhan's *Zoya Factor*, published in 2008, brought about a new kind of fiction in the Indian popular literary scene. India has always been a cricket obsessed nation. Cricket is not simply a sport but is followed by millions of Indians with the faith and devotion of religion. The players of the Indian national team are hero worshipped and their careers and even personal lives are followed by crazy fans with an ardour that only defines the uniqueness of sub continent culture. Anuja Chauhan hit upon a brilliant idea of combining the Indian's passion for two identity markers – love for cricket and the love of romance. In *Zoya Factor* she combines the familiar tropes of chick lit with the passions of a cricketing nation to turn out a pot-boiler that had Bollywood cinema written all over it. In this novel, she has the life of her female protagonist Zoya unwittingly intertwined with the destiny of the Indian national cricket team. Making sure that the novel would appeal to Indian readers for its cricket quotient, she also spiced up the plot by adding romance between her heroine and the captain of the Indian cricket team. By mixing cricket with romance and by keeping Zoya at the centre of all things that unfold in the story, Anuja Chauhan created a new kind of fiction – Crick Lit. Indeed, she is the first Indian writer, male or female, who introduced to popular Indian fiction the irresistible combination of 'chicks and cricket'. The instant success of the book, and the making of the film based on the story, ensured not only further stardom to Chauhan but also made the genre recognized as a new genre of millennial Indian literature.

Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* takes us on a rollercoaster ride focusing on cricket with a pinch of Bollywood zing. Zoya Singh Solanki is a young woman of twenty-seven working as a 'mid-level client-servicing executive in India's largest ad agency' (Chauhan, 2008, p.3). Her meeting with the Indian Cricket Team changes her life as uncannily she finds herself as their lucky charm. Zoya loves everything about her job, especially the brand she has been put charge of – Zing Cola. One day Zoya gets a call from Sanks and he tells her that she has to shoot the ICC Champion's Trophy in Dhaka as one of her colleague had a sick dad in ICU. Zoya gets irritated with the fact that she has to leave the Shah Rukh Khan photo shoot mid way and rush to Dhaka on orders from the boss.

Zoya was born on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1983, at the exact moment when Kapil Dev's India won the Prudential World Cup, a fact that makes her the lucky charm of the current Indian team, struggling to get out of its rough patch. She also had the chance to breakfast with the team in order to gain a 'No Objection Certificate' for an advertising company. Sanks aka Sankar Menon was pretty sure Zoya knew the team well since she had breakfast with them.

Zoya's father, lieutenant colonel, moved in to Karol Bagh in New Delhi after he retired from the army. Both Zoya and Zoravar, her brother, were looked after by Eppa, their housekeeper. Zoya is a fiercely independent young woman taking care of the servicing department in one of the biggest Cola Company, Zing! Co. agencies of Delhi. Since the time she came here as a summer trainee two years ago, she had madly fallen in love with it.

Zoya reaches Dhaka and she could the airport was crowded with people who had come to see the cricket match. Chauhan writes about the cricket obsession in India:

It's the great Indian Disease, I tell you. Worse than dengue or polio or tuberculosis. They should vaccinate us against it when we're born, I thought gloomily as I queued up behind the long line of Dhaka-bound cricket freaks. One shot at birth, a couple of boosters over the years and you're immune to cricket for life. No heartache, no ulcers, no plunge in productivity during the cricket season and no stupid bets that make you lose money and lead you to commit suicide. ( 24)

Her colleagues are shocked to know that she hasn't heard about the captain of the cricket team, Nikhil Khoda who is considered as the veritable God and King. Chauhan comments on how cricket in India permeates Indian lives, it runs like a disease like polio or dengue against which one should be vaccinated. She likens this obsession of cricket with medical problems associated with stress. Young India is depicted in the novel by concentrating on youthful figures of the advertising agency and the cricket league celebrity.

Zoya finds Nikhil Khoda quite handsome and good looking. She had to do a photo shoot with the players which she was successful in doing. Rather by chance, she gets to breakfast with them and that changes the turn of events. Zoya is asked what should India do in order to win the match that day. Not having the faintest idea, Zoya says:

They should eat a good breakfast, focus hard and just their natural game. (60)

The team always breakfasted together to create a good bond. Zoya reminds them that years ago she had breakfast with them just before their match at Wankhede Stadium in Bombay. That was their first big win, and Zoya chirps in that it must be because she brought them luck. After a few uncomfortable minutes, the coach pitches in saying:

If these blokes win today, it won't be because we played well, or because we had a good strategy or because the other buggers screwed up. It'll be all because we broke bread with born-at-the-auspicious-hour Zoya! (63)

The present match began with the Indian team winning the toss and Khoda decided to field. Of course the Indian team won and jubilation followed the great win. Zoya's own journey in the novel is focussed on her growing awareness that she actually might be responsible for the Indian team's successful games. She agrees that she has no knowledge of cricket, and she reluctantly leaves a Shahrukh Khan photo shoot to join the photo shoot of the cricket team. Her first presence at the breakfast table with the Indian team results in their win. At her second presence with the team at the breakfast table also results in their win. This reinforces the idea that Zoya is being pulled along, with little control over matter of things. As the narrative progresses, more games are won after Zoya's presence at the breakfast table. Both Harry and Shiv, players of the cricket team, play hard to get and play hide and seek with Zoya because they want to test the

theory that her presence at the breakfast table assures them victory. But Nikhil Khoda, the dishy captain was not willing to accept the fact that Zoya who was just three matches old was a lucky charm for them, setting off an enjoyable tussle between luck and talent in one hand, chance and discipline on the other. According to him:

The only reason we're winning is because we've all trained with single-minded determination for the last six months. This team is slowly learning to have faith in itself. I can't have them putting that new-found faith in you instead. (89)

In an interview Nikhil Khoda says:

I don't believe in luck. I feel the only way we achieve anything is by working hard, focusing, and keeping a cool head on our shoulders. Good luck is a short cut. I don't believe in short cuts. Bad luck is an excuse. I don't believe in excuses. (113)

To make matters difficult for Zoya, Nikhil insists on discipline and interrupts her important photo shoot with the players. This forces her to stay back a few more days than anticipated. When the players realize that Zoya was born at the very moment India won their first World Cup in 1983, they are surprised. This idea gathers momentum when her every presence at their breakfast table brings them victory, and when not, it results in defeat. It soon makes headlines that:

Apparently, the two victories (and one defeat) have nothing to do with our almost brand new Captain's leadership abilities. And have everything to do with one sweet lil' thing called Zoya. (103)

Her father and brother both vouch that she is actually the lucky charm, and tell her that whenever she was present at the mohalla and inter-school matches where he played, they won the match. The father tells her that she won him lot of inter-regiment matches too. Zoya couldn't accept the fact that she actually made the team win. Her father told her that she was born the very second the last wicket fell and therein lies her luckiness.

Meantime the media attention grows and this impacts Zoya and her understanding of the role she is having to play. Soon the following article was published in The Mid-day with the title NEMESIS IN PIGTAILS?:

Zoya's track record as a lucky charm is turning out to be both consistent and impressive, and is gaining attention in IBCC circles. It is clearly no longer being dismissed as sheer coincidence, as it was earlier.

Even coach Wes Harden admitted that the Zoya Factor was 'pretty damn astonishing'

(141)

Nikhil tells her that soon she would be given an official status wherein she can travel with the team for the World Cup. She is invited by the eccentric president of IBCC (Indian Board of Cricket Control) to accompany the team to the ICC World Cup in Australia. Pursued by International cricket boards and wooed by the cola giants, Zoya could feel the very ground shaken beneath her feet. She struggles to stay grounded in the midst of this.

Zoya feels attracted towards Nikhil and Zoya finds it difficult to gauge his feelings for her. Zoya's presence continued to be lucky for the team.

The Zoya Factor was being debated on every possible channel and forum. Panels full of balding men, of every colour, accent and nationality, held forth on Luck as a Factor in Cricket. (338)

As Zoya lies ill in her bed in the hotel room, fever raging, Swami Lingnath Baba was ushered in to meet her and bless her, so she recovers before the match. Zoya is taken aback by the fact that Swamiji was specially brought in to meet her. She muses how important is the Zoya Factor in this entire game of cricket. Her father too had called her and told her that her presence is needed till the finals. Swamiji addresses her as 'devi' and reaches into the deep pocket to give her medicine and says that:

Your gracious hand should always be hovering in blessing above the heads of our team.  
(360)

Here she is confronted with the thought that she has been given God-like status. The Swamiji blesses her and beseeches her to stay vigilant in her post as the celestial guardian who will lead the team to victory. He adds:

Pressure is building. I see much conflict ahead. Stand strong, Devi! (362)

The Swamiji's plea invokes images of the strong Hindu Goddess Durga whose divinity and feminine power brings victory over evil. This female Shakti is brought upon Zoya and she becomes a devi portraying fearlessness, patience and compassion. An entreaty is made to appeal to that feminine shakti which Zoya herself didn't know she possessed because of the luck factor. The presence of the Swami and his words brings in a wonderment in her which till now she dismissed as superstition and urban myth-making ideas.

Zoya's conviction of the powers that she had made her afraid for her personal life. She makes it a point to ask Swamiji that bringing good luck to the team means leaving only bad luck in her personal life. The baba assures her that balance is what keeps the cosmos in motion.

Troubled and puzzled by the vortex of events Zoya logs into crickindia.com to read and find out what Indians were saying about her presence in Australia with the team. A flurry of comments

both positive and negative face her. Some were raving and ranting about the whole Zoyadevi factor and some actually accepted her for the divine luck.

Arti of Zoya Devi performed daily every morning and evening. (375)

As the narrative progresses, Zoya becomes more philosophical about her role as the lucky charm of the Indian cricket team. Kuka Prasad, MLA, Bhiwandi comes to meet her to request her to contest in the upcoming polls, from Ayodhya, on his party's ticket. People come in hordes to meet her and sing her *jaijaikars*. She is hit by a sudden revelation. If she was indeed a Goddess who brought luck to the Indian cricket team, born at the very moment India won victory at the 1983 finals, then her purpose in life should be to make them win and keep them away from harm. Suddenly all questions and confusions clear from her mind. She attains peace and gives a call to Nikhil. She tells Nikhil that she won't be coming back for the finals and the reason is she wants him and the Indian Team to win all on their own. Nikhil agrees to that but arranges for tight security around Tera Number, her house.

As predicted, hordes of people gherao her house and chant:

Zoya Devi Waapas Jao! Zoya Devi World Cup Lao! (474)

The police had to tear-gas the frenzied mob to disperse it. Soon enough, Nikhil Khoda and his team win the World Cup and all are jubilant and deliriously happy. When Nikhil was asked to share his opinion about their winning, he puts in that the boys have performed brilliantly and that the win was because of fabulous team effort. On being question about the Zoya factor, he quipped:

That maybe it exists. Maybe it doesn't. But Team India doesn't need her. We can win on our own strengths, if we play with dedication and with belief in ourselves, any time we want. (490)

This statement reinforces Zoya's own belief that the team can definitely win without her as their lucky charm. As Swamiji had told her to bring about a balance in life, she does her part by not being there during the finals. She supports the team through her belief and trust that they will do well without her. And that trust forged a deep bond between the two of them. The divinity and benedictions that she was bestowed with, the feminine divine Shakti empowered her to face the societal pressures. Zoya with great conviction in herself and in Nikhil Khoda overcomes the conflicting thoughts that were on the verge of overwhelming her.

## Conclusion

By casting her story of woman's life intertwined with the Indian national cricket team, Anuja Chauhan introduced crick lit as popular literary genre in India. Her novel *The Zoya Factor* has inspired several other Indian writers to bring out stories focusing on the India's obsession with cricket. She has also added a new dimension to the conventional narratives of chick lit. While the

story still revolves around a female protagonist, nevertheless it gains in cultural complexity by adding to the girl's coming of age narrative the politics, glamour and money involved with the game of cricket. Chauhan, therefore, successfully localizes the western form of the chick lit by inscribing to its desi version a new flavor. Moreover, by tracking the life of Zoya with the fortunes of the national cricket team, she gives a new spin to the feminist issues of tradition and modernity and societal expectations by showing how a cricket crazy nation elevated her to the status of a devi and mata. While not giving up on the chatty, humorous, gossipy, hip style that is the hallmark of chick lit, Chauhan manages to churn out a story unique in its Indianness. Godmen, politicians, match fixers, cricket politics are embedded in the story of Zoya who ultimately helps the Indian team to get over their superstitious belief of believing her to be their lucky charm and mascot.

## CHAPTER VI: INDIAN U.S. CHICK LIT OR DIASPORIC INDIAN CHICK LIT

Indian U.S. chick lit or diasporic Indian chick lit is a variant of American chick lit. It explores the careers and personal relationships of diasporic Indian women in the United States. Often, these are third-generation Indian girls who are more American than Indian; and whose only connection with India is by accident of their parents' origin from that place. This variety of chick lit adds a new dimension to the range of cross-cultural experiences that are brought into the ambit of ethnic chick lit, which includes black American, Latino, other than Indian U.S. chick lit. Indian U.S. chick lit takes on for scrutiny the struggle of the heroine for establishing their cultural identity and adjusting to the mainstream American society. The Indian girls in their twenties and early thirties share a dilemma that any diasporic experience brings to people who lead their lives in a foreign country.

The narratives of Indian U.S. chick lits trace the trajectory of the protagonist's life as she tries to strike a balance between the pull of the majoritarian culture of the west and the retention of Indian roots. While the compulsions that explain the central character's beliefs, attitudes and life style are the same, namely, love, marriage, tension at work, obsession with consumerism and beauty products, weight loss and urban stress, the Indian U.S. chick lit heroine also faces the problems of assimilation with an alien culture and identification with the homeland. In several novels, the protagonist is also shown to make trips from America to India adding to the problem of cultural adaptation and adoption.

There is a need to study the emergence of Indian U.S. chick lit both as an offshoot of mainstream American chick lit as well as a distinctive genre having special characteristics. This chapter hopes to plug the gap in critical scholarship on this genre by including it in the general discourse on chick lit, and by examining it from postcolonial and diasporic perspectives. The novels problematize the subjectivity of the female character as she has to grapple with the pressures and tensions of diaspora, exile and homeland. The question of belonging is for the protagonist closely linked with the question of belonging; and, therefore, the heroines' hybrid identity and her movement across transcultural spaces gives to the chick lit a more complex tone. However, one may at the outset declare, that the novelist's predominant mode of handling the subject of diasporic chick lit is one of irony and humour. The genre avoids the serious and sombre approach that Indian diaspora writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, have traditionally adopted in the treatment of lives and lifestyles of people settled abroad.

Critics of chick lit denounce the genre and claim that it perpetuates and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Doris Lessing alleges that the writers of chick lit would be better off writing books based on their lives rather than on "these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight" (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 2). Far from being a "literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women's struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women" (Ferriss and Young 9), these books tell mawkish tales of women whose sole purpose seems to be to find a suitable man in their lives. Feminists,



therefore, consider chick lit as non-serious literature that contributes very little to women's liberation and empowerment.

Despite the strong condemnation by feminists, chick lit finds staunch support among its practitioners, fans and readers. Cris Mazza describes it as post-feminist: "Its writing that says women are independent [and ] confident, but not lacking in their share of human weakness [and] not necessarily self-empowered" (9). The heroines are women who may not subscribe consciously to feminist views, some may even be anti-feminists, but they all are women who have learnt to survive and succeed in a man's world.

The study demonstrates that while Indian U.S. chick lit replicates some of the conventions and stereotypes of mainstream genre, it also displays markers that make it different and unique as a sub genre. In fact, such literature challenges some of the assumptions of the parent genre by taking up issues, themes, and drawing characters that are not a fit with the tropes of the mainstream genre. One obvious point of difference is the very identity of the heroine of Indian U.S. chick lit. Straddling as she does two worlds and two cultures, she is of a hybrid kind that is difficult to define. Her subjectivity slips any essential categorization, and occupies a liminality, an in-betweenness, that is often the trademark of diasporic identity. The Indian U.S. chick must choose between having an Americanized identity and having an Indian identity which indicates that she cannot have both at once.

Indian U.S. chick lit: A blend of chick lit and diasporic literature

Indian chick lit uniquely combines the characteristics of chick lit and diasporic literature. As chick lit, it exhibits four major conflicts that are highlighted in the narratives of heroines of mainstream chick lit:

- Conflict of love
- Conflict of work
- Conflict of beauty
- Conflict of maturity

The struggle for the Indian heroine is to mould her habits, preferences and behaviour according to the host country's culture. At the same time, she moves forward in an ineluctable manner to achieving an ideal career and the perfect man. Often, the narrative first focuses on the heroine's romance before she agrees to an arranged marriage. The traditional ending of these novels becomes an aesthetic compromise which the novelist brings around to anchor the 'mod' outlook of her heroine to a value system that is supposed to provide emotional and cultural moorings. In addition, the novels also show the dilemma of the heroine as she experiences the tension of adjusting to the culture of the host country and retaining the culture of the mother country. Thus, Indian U.S. chick lit may be said to present a composite picture of the 'reality' faced by third generation Indian/American born girls who must navigate the pulls and pressures of cultural

determinism of a multicultural, and at times, a racial foreign world, and the conservatism of a native homeland that is recollected and experienced more often as myth. The genre also is a light-hearted but not simplistic treatment of complex themes, in which the predominant narrative mode is one of irony and humour.

### **The Village Bride of Beverly Hills: Diasporic Feminist Dissent**

Kavita Daswani is an international journalist covering fashion, beauty, travel, design and celebrities for a range of global publications. A former fashion editor for the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong and Asian correspondent for Women's Wear Daily, both of which she still contributes to, she also currently writes for the Los Angeles Times, Cosmetic News Weekly, JustLuxe.com, Crave and the international editions of Vogue, Conde Nast Traveller and Grazia Italia. She is also a former lifestyle and fashion correspondent for CNN International and CNBC Asia.

In 2003, Kavita published her first novel, 'For Matrimonial Purposes'. That was subsequently followed up with 'The Village Bride of Beverly Hills' and 'Salaam Paris', all through Penguin. In 2007, she published her first Young Adult book, 'Indie Girl' (Simon Pulse). Another teen book, 'Lovetorn"', came out in January 2012 through Harper Collins.

Daswani's popular novels have been described by several reviewers as 'chick lit'. These novels are mostly romantic comedies that focus on Indian women's experiences with love, marriage, work, and familial relationships as first-generation immigrants. Her characters struggle with cultural differences and try to balance Indian and American ways of life (Encyclopaedia of American-Asian Literature).

Daswani's contribution to South Asian-American literature is her lighthearted look at the ability to provide charming narratives of cultural clash and popular feminism in which her female protagonists are able to find a middle ground between two very different sets of cultural expectations.

The Village Bride of Beverly Hills explores what happens to an Indian bride after she comes to the United States following an arranged marriage. Priya is a spunky, young woman who finds that marriage is neither romantic nor loving. Instead she becomes an unpaid cook and maid for her husband and his family in Los Angeles. By a series of coincidences, Priya begins working for a Hollywood entertainment newspaper and discovers that she has a talent as a gossip columnist. She begins interviewing famous movie stars but has to keep her work life secret as its requirements in terms of clothing and lifestyle do not mesh with her role as a traditional Indian wife and daughter-in-law. Predictably, this secret unravels and causes enormous stress on her marriage, and Priya leaves her marriage and returns to her parents' home in India. Eventually, her husband realizes his mistakes and comes to India to court Priya and win her back.

The cover of Daswani's paper back typically carries the motifs of the mainstream chick lit genre. It shows the desi heroine clad in a chic floral print top and trousers, sitting on a couch, speaking on a smart phone and flashing her high heels. Floral motifs in pink colour make the background of the cover with the snazzy title of the book. Daswani's book design itself carries the unique selling proposition of a market product with the heroine's image as a glamorous fashionista. "This is chick lit at its best", writes Sandra Pozanesi, "though the regular ingredients of publishing, fashion and love are not really chosen or fought for but happen almost accidentally and turn the protagonist into an involuntary chick-lit heroine". The analysis of the novel however will examine whether it is a feminist or postfeminist novel.

In *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, in typical Indian style, Priya Sohni, a naïve twenty-four year old girl, has an arranged marriage with handsome stranger Sanjay. From Delhi to L.A., Priya makes an abrupt transition as she begins life anew living in a joint family with her in-laws in America. Despite having never worked before, a trait quite common in Indian daughters, Priya is soon scouring the metropolis for a job at the insistence of her dominating mother-in-law. After several unsuccessful interviews, she finally lands a job as receptionist at a glamorous Hollywood magazine.

Her Indian dresses and lack of sophistication, combined with ingrained British diction and politeness, all make her an object of curiosity and derision at the workplace. Through sheer luck, she goes from receptionist to a highly sought-after reporter, hobnobbing with the who's-who of Hollywood. Even as her career takes off, Priya's family life slowly deteriorates as she is compelled to hide her meteoric success from disapproving in-laws and disappointingly discovers how much of a spineless mama's boy her husband truly is. Predictably, her home life heads downwards as her career star rises. Her in-laws are grimly conventional, old-fashioned, and unpleasant. Her husband, occasionally affectionate in the early days of their marriage, turns out to be self-centered and childish. The end, of course, is pretty much formulaic with Priya returning to India to start her life anew.

From an immigrant's point of view, American society and culture is explored, revealing its plus and minus points, and the author cleverly contrasts them at the same level with their Indian counterparts, favoring neither, instead leaving it up to readers to draw their own conclusions. Central character Priya exemplifies the resultant expected culture clash as she goes from a naïve young bride to an embittered professional. This is also true of the family she's married into, who are a curious mixture of Eastern upbringing and adapted Western way of life.

A person's search for love crosses all boundaries, as is revealed by the unhappy but accomplished Hollywood stars Priya interviews and by Priya herself. Daswani's skill is evident in her simple but stylish and genuine approach to storytelling. However, she does have a tendency to romanticize a situation; this is especially noticeable in Priya's meteoric and unlikely career advancement, and the optimistic ending, while pleasing, isn't convincing.

The Village Bride of Beverly Hills operates on the pleasant conceit that in the cut-throat world of Hollywood journalism, nice girls finish first. And more, even a girl whose writing is like a 3rd-grade essay, who has no investigative talent, and no innate dress sense or social skills for the many star-studded events she attends, can still triumph above other aspiring reporters who have all these talents.

Clearly, this basic flaw requires a leap of the imagination on the part of the reader to have that 'willing suspension of disbelief' and read the plot with credibility. But having said that, Daswani does show a deft handling of the theme of cross cultural conflict with her heroine moving with marriage from Delhi to L.A. The novel falls into the chick-lit genre, where serious topics are covered with a lightweight froth of clothes and men. In this case, the story follows Priya from Delhi, who marries Sanjay Sohni in an arranged marriage and ends up in the Los Angeles area in a joint family home. Among her new housemates are Sanjay's parents and younger sister Malini.

Sanjay's parents encourage her to get a job to add to the family income, but are firm about their requirements: the job should be respectable, she should dress "properly" (by their standards), she should fulfill all her household duties of cooking and cleaning after work. Priya ends up, quite by chance, as a receptionist at a glamorous Hollywood magazine.

And thus begins her meteoric rise to fame and fortune. Movie stars instantly take to her, apparently because of her "convent-educated" accent, politeness, and complete lack of conversation. Hardheaded executives offer her plum jobs sight unseen, despite her lack of writing ability and unmarketable notions about maintaining celebrity privacy.

Priya displays no personality in particular: she is a blank slate waiting to be written upon by all and sundry. She's happy in her dowry salwars or her mother-in-law's old clothes until a stylish friend sneers at them, but revels in style once that comes her way. She has no complaints about her in-law's unreasonable demands of pista milk at 10 pm or weekends spent scrubbing the house. She never thinks of asking why Malini, her unemployed sister-in-law, is not expected to help with housework, while she has to spend all her spare time looking after the entire family and house. Her husband is appalled at the touchy-feely nature of a therapy session ("blow into your heart chakra"??!), but Priya remains unquestioningly convinced of its value. Her arranged marriage appears to be the only feature of her past or present life that interests the people she meets, but she draws no interesting insights from this.

This lack of personality, unfortunately, extends to all the characters -- the parents, the husband, the sister-in-law, the boss, the envious colleague. The luckier characters have one distinguishing trait, such as unpleasantness, but no other signs of humanity.

In Daswani's novel, Priya's arranged marriage is the starting point for an exploration of tangled relationships and dislocated lives. When she moves with her husband and in-laws to L.A. problems start appearing in her married life. While she sets out to fulfil the aspirations of her in-laws to get a job as a journalist reporting on Hollywood events and interviewing celebrities, it is

Sanjay who dislikes her socializing and night life. He keeps blaming Priya for her lack of adjustment, her inadequate social skills and her inability to follow tradition. Unlike mainstream chick lit that often shows the husband having a steamy affair with the secretary or some society doll, here in Indian U.S. chick lit the heroine's adjustment to her arranged match and family is the narrative core of the story.

The cultural difference is brought out into sharp relief by two competing expectations of the new Indian wife. Sanjay and his parents expect Priya to perform the role of a traditional Indian wife and daughter-in-law, but at the same time adopt American customs when they tell her to get a job. Priya's in-laws demand that she do cooking and cleaning of the house, while her husband assumes that she will do all that is expected of a "new biwi" (5). Yet, very soon they put pressure on Priya to look for a job, though that goes against their own conservative attitude of how a woman's place is in the kitchen. Sanjay's mother admonishes Priya: "This is not India. In [the U.S.] everybody works" (1). Priya, thus, is confused about what role and identity to assume in her new surroundings.

Of course, goaded by her in-laws, Priya soon takes up a journalist's calling and discovers a flair for writing that she herself was unaware of. At the work place, she quickly assimilates the foreign culture and is driven by the tastes, fashion and parties of the celebrity circuit that she covers as her job assignment. When Priya interviews Arabella Tomas, a famous Hollywood star, the latter discloses to her the troubled relationships with men and the facade of fame that she has to put up with. Arabella's confession makes Priya examine her own marriage with Sanjay, and their incompatibility across many things. Her interaction with Arabella, the latter's superficial life, helps Priya to understand that she can never be a 'complete' American citizen as the native – born, that there will always be the outsider's tag attached to her name, and she will always remain a hyphenated subject on a foreign soil. "In America, there is no shame in divorce. In India, there is no shame in living in marital misery. Somehow [she is] going to find [her] place" (174). Priya's introspection indicates that she is painfully conscious of the wide chasm between the two cultures and the demands of trying to meet the expectations of both is an impossible task.

Diasporic writing is regarded as a 'narrative of reconciliation or compromise'. It "captures the two invariables of their experience: exile and homeland" (Nayar 188). Further, "all diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities (188). Like Bharati Mukherjee, even Indian chick lit writers in the U.S., focus on a narrative where the loss of one world (home) does not lead to the gain of another (foreign). Contrasts and comparisons between the two worlds are frequent in such writings. Postcolonial diasporic writing deals predominantly with the themes of nostalgia and memory, of dislocation and re-location. Looking at the past ('origins') and at the future involves a process that Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine* describes as "adventure. Risk, transformation" (qtd. in Nayar 193). The narrative of diasporic postcolonial chick lit produces the process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization in relation to the cross-cultural experience of the characters. The relinquishment of an older culture and the acquisition of a newer one is often a violent one. According to Bhabha, the diasporic subject is a hybrid one,

occupying an interstitial or liminal space. The construction of this identity is often one that results from a combination of two cultures and languages without abandoning either. This is a re-assertion of old solidarities (food, religion, custom, ritual, dress) together with the wearing of multiple identities.

Priya is the prototypical example of Bhabha's diasporic hybrid individual. The novel shows her to be a split-consciousness of being Indian and American. Her hybrid identity is the cause of tension in her family in the U.S. On the one hand, they expect her to go out and work to supplement Sanjay's income and to follow what most women do in America, i.e., work in offices. On the other hand, they insist that she dress up like an Indian to office. Priya is so stressed out on account of these opposite demands, that when on her journalistic assignments, she secretly changes her Indian clothes and slips into western ones. As the critic Sandra Ponzanesi writes, "In the Village Bride of Beverly Hills we see a woman getting acquainted with western fashion in a slow and critical way, trying to find bargains and things that make her look good in inexpensive ways, without branding but by copying style" (192). Daswani thus shows Priya as someone who is a hybrid, one who has the skill and the talent to be highly adaptive.

Of course, her husband and in-laws eventually find out about her job and she is roundly berated for being false to her tradition. Underlying this attitude of her family is the deeply-ingrained association of morality and propriety with clothes. To Priya's in-laws wearing shirt and trousers is somehow attached to a looseness of character, and makes the wearer guilty of moral decrepitude. No sooner do the family come to know of the fact of Priya's dressing, they begin to judge her as a woman who drinks, smokes and sleeps with many partners. Even Sanjay casts aspersions on her character, which brings a strain in their relationship. Fed up of the constant surveillance of her in-laws and the stifling control of her husband, she tells Sanjay, "I am not who you think I am, but have to become who I always wanted to be" (240). It is only in the end that Sanjay and Priya reconcile when he accepts her condition for return to the U.S., that she may adopt the U.S. lifestyle. He pleads with Priya to come back to him, saying, "You can work or not work, I don't care. Please, come home with me" (260). Thus the resolution of the story's complications takes place on the family's acceptance of the heroine's hybridity and her postfeminist attitude.

The careers and jobs of the heroine is an important element of chick-lit. It is often central to the plot. Juliette Wells observes that "not every chick-lit heroine has a career, but all them have jobs" (54). Further, "heroines' professional identities and workday experiences are certainly important to the texture of chick-lit novels" (54). She points out that the heroines of chick lit have a variety of careers. Some heroines have low-level jobs, while others are very successful in high-power positions. And there are even some heroines in chick lit who "have love-hate relationships with work that reward them in some ways and punish them in others" (54).

Indian U.S. chick lit also focuses on the heroine's career. However, there are two important features that add to the cultural dimension of the heroine's work experience in this sub genre. First, there are some Indian heroines who are shown to crack under pressure from their parents to succeed. Most diasporic Indians are second-generation immigrants who are highly successful doctors, software engineers, scientists and academicians. In each of their family histories, it is their professional excellence that enables them to assimilate and be accepted by the foster country. When their children, therefore, grow up the failure to emulate or follow the illustrious footsteps of their own parents can bear enormous pressure and play havoc in their personal life. Such is the case with the Indian heroine of Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, where Devi, a 24 year old woman, is unable to succeed professionally and attempts suicide. Second, there are other Indian heroines who have the drive and the talent to do well in their career, but who have to meet with parental opposition. Their dream of achieving a modern individualism, often riding on the crest of a consumerist driven career, is stymied by the orthodoxy of the family. A case in point is Priya, the heroine of *The Village Bride of Beverly Hill*.

For example, the maturation of Priya as an individual, the realization of her self-worth and self-respect, is attributed to the rather fortuitous discovery of her journalistic ability. Till then, as a newly-wedded woman in a foreign land, Priya's life is completely controlled by her husband and in-laws. In fact, she is virtually under house arrest, and is not allowed to make friends or go out on social visits. She has no freedom and must follow the dictates of her domineering in-laws in what she eats, what she wears and how she behaves. Yet when she joins the magazine firm, *Hollywood Insider*, by stepping as a substitute for an apprentice gone on AWOL, she can hardly believe her luck. She begins her work as a receptionist, but the executives offer her a position as a reporter. By taking on the job, she gets an opportunity to enter into the world of glamour and high society where she can meet celebs from the world of media and entertainment. Priya is a quick and smart learner and soon learns the social graces to hobnob with the rich and beautiful. She also discovers that she has a rare interviewing ability and can get people to open out to her about their private lives. She quickly tastes professional success and is regarded with respect and admiration at the work place. Priya educates herself in the particular interests of prospective celebs that her firm wishes her to interview, invests in the fashionable clothing necessary to make a fine impression at society gatherings, and devises strategies designed to get maximum mileage out of the interview sessions. Priya thus manages to reinvent herself through her job and her professional competency, all the time gaining acceptance as an 'insider' rather than an 'outsider' in the American society.

Thus it is true that Daswani invests considerable narrative time and focus to detail Priya's career. A point of difference that stands out between Daswani's narrative and those of mainstream chick lit is that unlike the former, in the latter the world of work is not just window dressing whose main narrative function is to provide a background prop to the real business of finding love. Priya is already married to Sanjay in India before she enters into the NRI world in the States. It is the effect of her work experience on her domestic relationship that Daswani focuses in her novel.

Yet in showing how Priya eventually is unable to cope with the problems at home on account of the opposition of her in-laws and her husband to her new-found independence, Daswani takes a regressive step in etching out the postfeminist character of Priya. Juliette Wells makes the same observation about a characteristic flaw of chick-lit genre: “That chick lit capitalizes on the enduring popularity of courtship plots among women readers is hardly remarkable. What is noteworthy is that so much of chick lit, while otherwise taking advantage of changes in social mores, essentially sidesteps the opportunity to treat the subject of women’s careers” (55). This oddly conservative attitude of the authors of chick lit is at variance against the position that they are supposed to represent—backlash against feminism, ideology fatigue, and the empowerment of women through career fulfilment.

In each chick lit novel, the maturation of the heroine is the centrepiece of the narrative. Wells has this to say to emphasize this point: “whether a chick-lit heroine is actually incompetent or merely perceived to be so, she inevitably learns to appreciate herself for who she is...” (52). The maturation of the heroine takes place at two levels: personal and professional. At the personal level, for example, Priya gradually comes to understand the falsity of her identity, one that is imposed by her Indian in-laws, and the other that she is forced to wear because of the alien culture. This realization of this double nature comes to a crisis when she falls out with her husband, Sanjay, and then decides to leave him, her job and the country to return to India. In the Indian U.S. chick lit the cultural preoccupation with woman’s virtue is a trope that is of prime importance and that sets it apart from the mainstream chick lit.

In many Indian U.S. chick lit, the female protagonist is spiritually lost in the diaspora. William Safran asserts that “members of diaspora communities are by turns mistreated by the host country as ‘strangers within the gates’ or welcomed or exploited for the sake of the domestic and diplomatic interests of the host country” (92).

Judith Butler is a prominent theorist of queer, feminist and gender studies. Her work mainly focuses on how people’s identities are constituted and the theorizations of gendered and sexual identity are regarded her most important contribution to these fields. According to Butler, the distinction between sex and gender is culturally constructed. Hence, gender is neither the result of sex nor seemingly fixed as sex. There is no reason to assume that gender is either feminine or masculine. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the result that man and masculinity may just as easily signify a female body as a woman and feminine a male body. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler goes further to discuss the construction of the body. She claims that it is not enough to argue that there is no pre-discursive ‘sex’ or to claim that sex is already gendered and already constructed. Instead, she focuses on what the constraints are by which bodies are materialized as ‘sexed’, which bodies come to matter and why. According to Butler, the category of ‘sex’ is from the start normative. ‘Sex’, then, not only functions as a norm, but as part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. It has a productive power, to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate- the bodies it controls. In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal materialized



through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and archive this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms (Butler 1993:2).

To explain how gender roles are produced, Butler uses the terms performativity and performance:

The heterosexual matrix is present in both novels and there is male hegemony which is the norm and the girls live by it although on different terms. Even though there are many types of sexualities present, the novels' main focus is on heterosexual relations. The bodies of the protagonists are objectified and they have to accept a female ideal to be able to be accepted into the community. Both girls reiterate the ideals, norms and expectations with regard to what is accepted for girls in terms of femininity.

The idea of 'home' is a powerful trope incorporated in diasporic fiction in general, and in diasporic chick lit, in particular. The female protagonists have to constantly manoeuvre their identity in the making by shifting allegiances and forging alliances in the adopted country. Nostalgia, remembrance and the past exert a powerful psychological pull on the displaced and dislocated characters. Located in a foreign country, the protagonists find themselves increasingly confused about where they belong even as they try to move with the process of acculturation. The dilemma of being an outsider has to be tackled by the expatriate Indian in material as well as metaphysical ways. After all, 'identity' of the individual is intrinsically rooted with the idea of 'home'. The problem of 'home' and 'belonging' that Indian characters face in diasporic Chick Lit is exacerbated by the inhospitable environment. The Indians in the story are often shown to be victims of racist abuse and sometimes violence. William Safran asserts that "members of diaspora communities are by turns mistreated by the host country as 'strangers within the gates' or welcomed or exploited for the sake of the domestic and diplomatic interests of the host country" (92).

In Daswani's *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, Priya who comes to the States after her marriage to an NRI finds herself completely out of sorts. Priya wants to go home to India because "everything hurts, and [she] just want[s] to be with [her] parents" (249). She finds everything different in the fashionable community of Beverly Hills – the values, attitudes, and behaviour of Americans. She finds it difficult to adjust to the expectations and the life style of members of the Indian community. Although she does find a job and even succeeds in becoming a reporter for *Hollywood Insider* she cannot forget that "no woman in [her] family [...] ever worked" (251). This feeling of alienation and cultural maladjustment wrecks Priya emotionally. The failure of her marriage with Sanjay is partly because of the incompatibility of their different backgrounds. Priya's Aunt Vimla in fact blames her for breaking the marriage because as she tells Priya's mother-in-law "maybe [Priya] became too American [in Beverly Hills]" (251).

As a diasporic India, however, the notion of 'home' becomes doubly complicated when Priya returns 'home' to India. Her work experience in the US gets her a well-paid job with a film magazine. Nevertheless, she quickly realizes that despite her professional accomplishment, the 'home' she returns to is not the 'home' she had left. This is because Daswani suggests that for the diasporic Indian, 'home' is always a place of 'longing' and not 'belonging'. Caught in the flux of two distinct and radically different cultures, the diasporic individual finds oneself always in 'exile'. Her identity is always a shifting, unsettled and hybrid one.

A characteristic feature of Indian chick lit is the happy ending to the stories. The narratives chart out the trajectory of the heroine from India to the US, the problems of cultural and social adjustment, the shifting relationships with family, friends and employers; however, the narratives conclude with the resolution of all problems and the heroine looking forward to a promising future. In the *Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, Sanjay follows Priya to India to tell being her back. He tells her that he has already moved out of his parents' house and now has an apartment where they can make a fresh start. He also tells her that he no longer cares whether she works as a reporter. It is noteworthy here to point out that Priya's return to India is not a passage of failure and defeat, but one of seeking fresh pathways of balance, agency and selfhood. In India, she finds comfort in her reunion with her family, and also begins to appreciate her 'feminist' sister. Sandra Ponzanesi aptly says: "It is hard to remember all the plot twists, the many characters and the plot development, but it all boils down to a woman trying to develop herself in a new country, and to manage her career, in this case an unwanted career kept secret from her family because it is considered immoral for someone with her kind of upbringing" (212). The novel ends on an optimistic note, with both Priya and Sanjay wiser and mature from their experiences. Indeed it may be read as a 'bildungsroman', that is, a novel of growth and maturation of Priya who not only is able to find her own identity, but also bring about a change in Sanjay for the better.

## **Conclusion**

Indian diasporic Chick Lit, therefore, may be considered as an discrete and independent sub genre of Chick Lit. In the hands of its major practitioners in the US such as Daswani and Singh, this body of writings that has emerged from the early 1990s onwards shares some of the generic qualities of mainstream Chick Lit. At the same time, because it concerns with the life and culture of Indian women in their twenties and thirties from the diasporic community, it also reflects some characteristics that make the writings separate and distinctive. With the emergence of Indian chick literature, there is now a new type of novel for scholars to study. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth assert that "ethnic writers reflect the general desire of their communities to be considered full and equal participants in the fabric of American life"

The protagonists of Indian diasporic chick lit struggle to cope with the tug and pull of two different cultures: on the one hand, the traditional ties, customs and rituals of an India 'back home' continue to shape the pattern of their life within the family and to some extent exert an

unshakable influence on the nature of personal relationships; on the other hand, in a predominantly white American society the diasporic Indian family continue to encounter racism and discrimination in different forms, both direct and indirect. Ponzanesi observes that in these novels,

... while Indian heroines desire to belong to the US, they can never become full and equal participants. The Indian heroine in the diaspora is neither Indian nor Us identity. Distanced from her homeland, she comes to reside in a sort of hybrid space that marks the complexity of diasporic life. It is, therefore, important for Indian chick lit to address the criticism from mainstream chick lit from a specifically postcolonial and diasporic perspective. The heroines of Indian chick lit show resistance to certain aspects of US culture such as consumerism, marriage and work in the traditional sense. (213)

We can conclude that the Indian female protagonist in Indian diasporic Chick Lit in America encounters psychological and cultural conflict on three fronts. First it is the family and the conflict of the heroine within its hegemonic structure. The conflict locates the heroine within the matrix of patriarchy and masculinity. Despite being an Indian family in a foreign country, it continues to subjugate the women in the family by forcing them to obey and oblige the so called cherished values of Indianness. The women protagonists try hard to break free from the tradition-ridden and restrictive chains of a patriarchal and heteronormative family structure, but they seldom succeed completely. Even when they attain a certain degree of selfhood by going out to work and party with their friends, they must submit to the power and sometimes violence of the deeply entrenched structures of patriarchal Indian society. Second it is the professional field and work place of the heroines. The protagonist of Daswani's *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* evolves in the story as an independent woman by finding professional fulfilment. Her stint as a reporter first in California and then in India gives to her a measure of success as well as financial independence. The growth and maturation of female protagonists in different ways is of a piece with the genre of Chick lit. Finally, in their personal lives, Priya comes across as a woman who employs different coping mechanism and survival strategies against the overarching power structures of patriarchy, heteronormativity, conservatism and sexism.

From the above examination of the sub genre of Chick Lit, namely, Indian U.S. Chick Lit or Diasporic Indian Chick Lit, we may conclude that this writing has evolved over a period of three decades in America. Its major practitioners belong to the Asian community who has carved a niche for themselves within the realm of diasporic Asian or South Asian fiction. Their writings are based on their own experiences of living in a foreign country and deal with issues of modern woman hood from a feminist point of view. The diasporic chick lit writers frequently adopt a humorous writing style and tend to focus on the protagonist's love angle as much as on her relationship with family and friends.

## CHAPTER V: Inferences and Observations on Chick Lit as a Popular Literary Genre

The growth and evolution of Chick Lit in India since the new millennium has coincided with the transformation of India into a global power with IT power and market liberalism, the emergence of the middle class, and the shopping mall culture. It has also kept pace with a plethora of new writings that has altered the landscape of the Indian literary scenes. Along with the emergence of several new writings like metro reads, crick lit, fantasy fiction, graphic novel, crime writing, Indian chick lit too has become one of the most popular reads in Indian fiction. Writers like Advaita Kala, Rajashree, Anuja Chauhan, Geeta Sunder, and Swati Kaushal have explored a new terrain by focusing on women as female protagonists who are shown to face, challenge, contest, and resist the still prevailing masculine and patriarchal norms of society. These writers who are mostly in their early 30s have created a genuine niche for their writings adding to their humorous and light-hearted tales a 'love' or 'romance' angle. Sunaina Kumar wrote in the Indian Express, "Ten years after the publication of Bridget Jones's Diary, the genre of fiction most recognisable for its pink cover art of stilettos, martini glasses and lipsticks, is now being colourfully infused with bindis, saris, and bangles".

Like their authors, the women protagonists of the stories are urban, educated, hip and often professionally successful women who are out there to break the glass ceiling. The narratives portray them as confident, independent, free-thinking women who embody the dreams and aspirations of the millennial Indian woman. The tales of their personal and professional lives are intertwined with those of their families, cities, work places, and of course, the men in their lives. The male characters in the novels – father, brother, husband, lover, boy friend – play a supporting role. They are made secondary to the emotional, intellectual, and professional growth of the woman protagonists. While the focus is on the need for love and romance, for the heroines of this new genre of popular read, marriage is not the be-all and end-all of their lives. Even in those narratives like Rajashree's *Trust Me*, where finding Mr. Right is the ultimate purpose of the heroine, the heroines demand parity with men, and refuse to be intimidated either by social customs or by family expectations. Nor do they kowtow to the wishes of the men in their life.

Indian chick lit heroines are not sentimental weepies who are constantly looking out for a man to be their provider and comforter. They are women of substance, who with their brains and beauty, boldly stride ahead to make their mark in the world. They epitomize the new age woman in their bold exploration of their desires and sexual needs, often switching partners and dropping boy friends who do not have the ability to match their wits. In a country where marriage is supposed to be the true destiny, and matches for women are arranged by family in consultation with astrologers and matching horoscopes, the cheeky chick lit heroines of the fiction of Advaita Kala, Anuja Chauhan, and Swati Kaushal, share a chutzpah and daring-do that destroys many myths and taboos about women in society. Indeed, Indian chick lit perfectly fit the definition given by popular culture critic Heather Cabot to these books featuring "everyday women in their

20s and 30s navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships".

The stories are set in metropolitan cities where the burgeoning middle class and its consumerist life styles influence the ebb and flow of the women who are at the centre of the narratives. On par with the heroines, the writing style is irreverent, witty, and humorous. 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.

The novels are packaged and marketed with glossy covers featuring women in fashionable clothes, wearing the latest accessories. Handbags, stiletto shoes, fancy mobiles and cars make the covers of these books swathed in pink colour. Often displayed in best selling sections in bookstores in shopping malls and airports, they draw a readership too that is young, fashionable and vivacious, in the age group of 18-30. Clearly, Indian chick lit has become one of the most visible markers of popular culture in the new millennium.

The "girls-having-fun" genre has attracted considerable following in India not only from readers but also from the film industry. Anuja Chauhan has signed film production deals based on an adaptation of Zoya Factor. Her book along with Kala's *Almost Single* has had a huge impact on the writing industry that has resulted in the growth of a second wave of Indian chick lit writers like Nishat Fatima, Tisha Khosla, Rupa Gulab, and several others.

The question that the project posed in the introduction was: "Is Indian Chick Lit postfeminist writing?" The critical examination of both Indian Chick Lit and its subgenre Indian Diasporic Chick Lit provides an answer to the question in the affirmative. The fiction of Advaita Kala, Anuja Chauhan, Sonia Singh, and Kavita Daswani should not be labelled simply as 'fluff or pulp fiction'. Their writings are in sync with the emergence of the Third Wave of feminism because they are replete with characters who impress the readers as strong-minded individuals, confident and assertive, and whose professional ambition reflects the dreams and aspirations of the new age women in India. It is unfair to label Indian chick lit as tawdry, fluffy and retrograde because their authors have never pretended to write 'serious' literary novels. They have created racy plots, sharp characters, realistic setting in their novels that represent the fast changing social and cultural scenario of a 'post Shining India'. Despite the formulaic narratives, the writers of Indian chick lit give us delightfully realistic vignettes of the many contesting narratives of nation,

ideology, politics and identity. By placing their heroines within the social matrix of caste, class, and gender, these writers provide a scathing criticism of the continuing prevalence of exploitation and discrimination of women. Their heroines are shown to fight a daily battle both at home and at the work place against the crippling powers of patriarchy and heteronormativity. The open expression of their sexuality and their willingness to express their innermost desires makes them not 'bold' in a stereotypical sexist way, but to prove what Alice Walker, the black feminist writer said: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender".

An interesting dimension of the heroines of Indian chick lit is that they rarely declare themselves to be 'feminist'. Their attitude and approach to life and work is not the sloganeering of a preachy-screetchy feminist activist; in fact, they show proper respect for those family values and tradition that are meaningful and fulfilling. It is this dimension that gives to Indian chick lit its uniqueness, and differentiating it from the western genre.

Another fascinating aspect peculiar to Indian chick lit is the ability of its writers to blend the narrative styles of several genres. Writers like Advaita Kala and Anuja Chauhan have wonderfully combined the Harlequin romance fable and Mills and Boon love story with other home-grown kinds of writings. Thus, Zoya Factor ingeniously captures the two things that make Indian hearts beat – cricket and romance. The result of this mash-up of chick lit with 'crick lit', the novel shot to fame and popularity with Indian readers. After all, nothing could be a better page-turner than a story in which the fortunes of the Indian cricket team are fortuitously connected with the brewing romance between a lucky mascot and the team captain. Religion, superstition and love are mixed to cook up a tale that scored an instant hit with a nation for whom the game of cricket is no less a religion. Indian women writers, therefore, have been highly innovative in bringing together elements of crime fiction, detective fiction, fantasy genre with chick lit to make engrossing narratives.

The study has also proposed Indian diasporic chick lit to be considered as a sub genre of ethnic chick lit. As the section in the study on this kind of writing demonstrates, both in the US and the UK, expatriate Indian women writers have turned their own multicultural experience into fictional narratives. Through the voice of their women protagonists, the writers have articulated the special and specific problems and issues that India women in a foreign land face. The narratives predominantly chart the journey of Indian protagonists as they seek to establish their identities and seek self-realization. Questions of 'home' and 'belonging' are enmeshed with the problems of adjustment and assimilation that the heroines face in a cross-cultural contact zone. At one level, the novels tackle head-on the problems of that Indian women face in a place and a culture not of their own. The narratives often throw light on the many ways in which racism and xenophobic attitudes of white people explodes the myth of America being a melange of cultures.

The Indian protagonists are shown in the novels to work as highly capable and accomplished workers employed in the hospitality, tourism industry as well as in the media. However, the white bosses are often shown to be either condescending or downright insulting in their

behaviour towards their Indian women employees, despite their qualification and professional competence. There are also examples of ‘inverse racism’ that we come across sometimes in the stories of Indian diasporic chick lit. In *A Good Indian Wife*, the Stanford-educated Indian anaesthesiologist, Neel Sarah, who is married to a beautiful but less educated American blonde feels that her whiteness somehow compensates for the difference in their qualification.

The major conflict that Indian diasporic chick lit investigates is the many modes of survival and negotiation that their female protagonists have to adopt to strike a balance between the opposing pull of a desi past and a modern present. Such issues are often embedded in situations where the female protagonist has to make choices – whether of love, marriage, work, or even having children. The critical issues of women’s freedom and will are complicated by the contested nature of Indian women in the US. On the one hand, their fictional representation highlight the discrete and challenging ways in which the protagonists have to steer their professional lives working under mostly white men and women bosses. On the other hand, they also must navigate and strike a balance between Indian tradition and Western modernity. Priya in Daswani’s *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, is forced to go out to work by Sanjay’s mother who tells her, “This is not India. In the US everybody works”. Priya feels conflicted between her duties as a traditional Indian wife and as a US Indian wife. She is caught in this struggle to find her right place between demanding in-laws at home and the need to prove her worth with *Hollywood Insider*, the entertainment magazine. Despite the liberating space she discovers outside the home and her success there, she has to keep the real nature of her work a secret from her in-laws because they do not consider fashion and film reporting to be respectable. So she tells them that she does the work of an office secretary. In *Goddess for Hire*, although Maya does not work, but when she is kidnapped she turns her newly discovered divine powers to effective use by vanquishing the evil men. Thanks to her avatar as Kali, the fearsome Indian Goddess, she wins new respect and admiration from the white people in her neighbourhood.

The critical examination of Daswani’s and Singh’s novels reveals the complex intersections of chick lit narratives with postcolonialism and postfeminism. As Jennifer Barber comments:

Indian chick lit deserves postcolonial scholar’s recognition. Indian chick lit’s importance lies in its presentation of Indian heroines’ cultural struggle in the diaspora in America. This Indian sub-genre typifies not only the experience of tens of millions of women in the postcolonial developing world.

The genres of Indian chick lit, both home-grown and diasporic, have established themselves as distinctive modes of literary writings in the realm of Indian English fiction. They have created a niche in the publishing industry and cater to a sizeable community of readers who like the authors share a horizontal comradeship of class, status, urbanity, and education. Both varieties of chick lit riveting pictures of the changing societies at home and abroad. The new age writers of this millennium show exemplary imaginative skills to manoeuvre the contesting narratives of the legacies of hardcore traditions and family expectations on the one hand, and the liberatory

success of globalization and transnational migration. Through the creation of feisty, vivacious, strong-willed and independent thinking protagonists, Indian chick lit revisits and challenges the many gender roles that may be liberal and postfeminist, but also propose different forms of femininity, selfhood and agency. While the novels do celebrate the manner in which the female protagonists challenge and contest the stifling hold of patriarchy, masculinity, and conservatism, their success is not an unqualified one. The stories also show that the search for happiness and self-realization for women lies not by completely cutting themselves from tradition. To conclude, Indian chick lit proposes a postfeminism that is forward looking as well as pragmatic. It invests its popular narratives with a feminism that is neither an uncritical acceptance of the processes of globalization and market consumerism, nor a severance of tradition. Although it follows some of the conventions of the chick lit in the west, Indian chick lit has evolved into a distinctive genre with its own identity, reputation and place in the world of writing and reading. What it proposes is a model of postfeminism that may be said to be a revisitation of the status quo but not a complete dismantling of it.



## Bibliography

- Agarwal, Nilanshu Kumar, editor. *Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss*. Roman Books, 2012.
- Appadurai, Arjun and Mack, Arien, editors. *India's World: The Politics of Creativity in a Globalized Society*. Rain Tree, 2012.
- Bilimoria, Purushottama and Al-Kassim, Dina, editors. *Postcolonial Reason and Its Critique: Deliberations on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Thoughts*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Chauhan, Anuja. *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*. HarperCollins, 2013.
- Chauhan, Anuja. *The Zoya Factor*. Harper Collins, 2008.
- Clark, Timothy. *Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Dini, Rachele. *Simone De Beauvoir's The Second Sex*. Routledge, 2017.
- Edgar, Andrew, and Sedgwick, Peter, editors. *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 1999.
- Egan, Gabriel. *Green Shakespeare: From ecopolitics to ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2006.
- Fay, Stephen. *Homi K. Bhabha's The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2017.
- Ferriss, Suzanne and Mallory Young (eds). *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Routledge Publications, 2006.
- Gardiner, Eileen and Musto, Ronald G. *The Digital Humanities: A Primer for Students and Scholars*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Gupta, Nilanjana, editor. *Cultural Studies*. Worldview, 2014.
- Harzewski, Stephanie. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- Huggan, Graham and Tiffin, Helen. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals , Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
- Kala, Advaita. *Almost Single*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.
- Keniston, Ann, and Quinn, Jeanne Follansbee, editors. *Literature After 9/11*. Routledge, 2008.
- Kurian, Anna. *Shakespeare*. Orient BlackSwan, 2016.
- Lahiri, Himadri. *Diaspora Theory And Transnationalism*. Orient BlackSwan, 2019.
- Liao, Pei-Chen. *'Post'- 9/11 South Asian Diasporic Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

- Merchant, Carolyn, editor. *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*. Humanity Books, 2008.
- McCann, Carole R, and Kim, Seung-kyung, editors. *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. Routledge, 2012.
- Mukherjee, Sipra. *Modern English Literature. 1890-1960*. Orient BlackSwan, 2016.
- Nityanandam, Indira. *The Fictional World Of Kiran Desai*. Creative Books, 2010.
- Norris, Nanette, editor. *Words For A Small Planet: Ecocritical Views*. Lexington Books, 2013.
- Padia, Chandrakala, editor. *Women in Dharmasastras: A phenomenological and Critical Analysis*. Rawat, 2009.
- Parul, Avishek. *Postmodern Literatures*. Orient BlackSwan, 2018.
- Riach, Graham K. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak?* Routledge, 2017.
- Sarkar, Sumita and Srivastava, Manjari, editors. *Globalization And Gender*. Rawat , 2011.
- Seymour, Laura. *Roland Barthes's The Death Of The Author*. Routledge, 2017.
- Sharma, K L. *Culture, Stratification and Development*. Rawat, 2011.
- Sharma, Vijay, K, and Tondon, Neeru, editors. *Kiran Desai And Her Fictional World*. Atlantic, 2011.
- Smart, John. *Modernism and After: English Literature 1910-1939*. Cambridge, 2009.
- Smith-Laing, Tim. *Jacques Derrida's Structure, Sign and Play In The Discourse Of The Human Sciences*. Routledge, 2017.
- Smith-Laing, Tim. *Michel Foucault's What Is An Author?* Routledge, 2018.
- Soja, Edward W. *Postmodern Geographies : The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Verso, 1989.
- Tasker, Yvonne, and Negra, Diane, editors. *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Vakoch, Douglas A, editor. *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature*. Lexington Books, 2012.
- Versluys, Kristiaan. *Out Of The Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Woodward, Kath. *The Short Guide to Gender*. Rawat, 2012.







