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Chicklit : Postfeminism or Pseudofeminism?

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Abstract:

Chicklit in India has been around for centuries. But given its limited readership it was never considered a serious genre in Indian literary circle. With the changing Indian demographic chicklit today has become a centre stage of debate. India today is the nation of youth with more than one third of our population composed of people below thirty years of age. A large part of this demographic dividend is composed of young women who are educated and are residing in the metropolitan cities of India. These young women are representative of the socioeconomic transformation that India has witnessed since the opening of economy in the last decade of the twentieth century and constitutes the new middle class in our country. For this new middle class of young urban women the preferred language of communication is English. This has considerably increased the scope and influence of chicklit among young women in India. The heroines of these books provide a new articulation of young feminist ideal : “a combination of female independence and individualism with a confident display of femininity or sexuality” termed as postfeminism by the popular media. The concern that chicklit raises is that while emphasising on the feminine fun and female friendship with a celebration of (mostly pink colored) commodities and the creation of a market demographic of “girlies” and “chicks” postfeminism has become “free market feminism” and an agency to sabotage the gains and social transformation brought on by the feminist movement. This paper shall strive to analyse the backlash theory on postfeminism by focusing on the bestseller *Losing my Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* by Madhuri Banerjee.

Keywords : Chicklit, Demographic Dividend, Postfeminism, Free Market, Backlash Theory

Chicklit is a genre in the writings of women meaning writing by women for the women. The general themes deal with the dilemmas in the life of women regarding marriage, love, work, family, and a search for identity – the issues which a modern working woman has to face on day to day basis. The emergence of chicklit on Indian literary scene in the twenty first century can be seen as a part of the popular commercial fiction boom during the period. This phenomenon emerged as a result of political, social, and economic changes in the country and stands at the cross section of neo liberal policies, increased literacy rate, postcolonial sensibility and population demographics. Chetan Bhagat has pointed out in an interview, "Today we have three generations of English-speaking Indians, and that will continue to grow. With every new generation we are obviously creating a bigger market." Though Chetan Bhagat found it very difficult to get his first book published but following his success many national and international publishers have started dedicated publishing lines for

the commercial fiction. Delhi-based Srishti Publications produces such books for Rs 99 each and has had 30 of its 60 chick-lit books in the national bestseller list.

This bigger market is significantly composed of young women, residing in the metropolitan cities of India, who are educated and working. Chicklit being touted as the self help manual for young women in a confusing world offers an attractive choice of reading to these women who are still struggling to find their place in the changed socio economic scene of the twenty first century. The heroines of these books are generally women ranging in the age group of 25 to 40, working successfully and financially independent trying to resolve the ultimate quest of womanly life – search for true love. And if they are married the quest modifies into a struggle to strike a balance between work and family. There is no wonder that the critics have traced the origin of chicklit to Jane Austen's novels which are generally woven round the theme of single women looking for love.

The chicklit in its present form was inaugurated in India by Penguin India Books in the year 2004 with the publication of Piece of Cake by Swati Kaushal. The success of the book prompted a flood of similar books in the book market such as Rupa Gulab's Girl Alone, Rajashree's Trust Me, Advaita Kala's Almost Single. Hotel exec turned chick lit author Advaita Kala's Almost Single has done a 20,000 print run in a year. "That's quite a feat since even a 5,000 print run is considered above average in India," says V Karthika, editor-in-chief of HarperCollins which published the book. Another chick lit from their stable, Anuja Chauhan's The Zoya Factor, has started with a 20,000 print run. Rupa and Co has had a runaway hit with novelist and filmmaker Rajashree's Trust Me which sold over 50,000 copies.

The writers and the whole genre is said to have flourished in the backdrop of the fact that the women it portrays are the women who have received the benefit of the feminism but refuse to be called as feminist. Post feminism is generally seen as a reaction to the pressures and high expectations that were forced on women by the "bra burning second wave feminism" and called for a return to a more traditional femininity. Like postmodernism postfeminism is also considered as an anti foundationalist movement liberating women more than feminism could. By taking back what feminism has supposedly made them do without, women today have seemingly gained even more freedoms. These may include motherhood, family, romance, fashion, beauty, sexuality, sexiness, fun, pleasure, and men - those facets traditionally defined as feminine. And therefore we find the heroines of these novels roaming again in the pink alleys of gyms, saloons and designer stores in their quest to lead a fulfilling life.

Madhuri Banerjee's debut novel Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas sold over 40,000 copies in the first year of its release and was on the bestseller list for ten weeks. Kaveri, the heroine of the novel is the epitome of the new woman – an "over achiever" at school, plays the piano, learnt animation, studied modern art in her spare time, knows seven languages and works as a freelance interpreter – a woman who is intelligent and financially independent. She has everything that a feminist feels is sufficient for a fulfilling life of a woman. But the protagonist of the novel is not happy since there is a large hole in the

feminine side of her personality. She confesses that she has a love hate relationship with her body and has always been indecisive about clothes. Though she is beautiful with black hair, olive skin and big grey eyes she could never find a suitable boyfriend and at the eve of her thirtieth birthday she is still a virgin. “Unmarried. Single. Alone. A virgin.” That is the angst of her life. Even her maid tells her that she has prayed on her birthday that Kaveri acquires a good husband very soon. And she is reminded by her mother time and again that she is thirty and still unmarried. So the protagonist when we meet her on the eve of her thirtieth birthday decides that the mission of her life from now onwards is to find the One Great Love of her life since for her the idea of losing her virginity is badly intertwined with the idea of love and marriage.

In her quest to lose her virginity and consequently find the One Great Love of her life Kaveri decides to take the help of her best friend Aditi. Aditi has completely different ideas about love, sex and marriage. She is a hedonist who unlike Kaveri does not look up to men for company or as an “intellectual partner”. “She believed that men were only supposed to be used.” (Bannerjee12) She gladly takes over the part of guiding Kaveri in her quest. Aditi focuses the lens of her experience at Kaveri and finds her unattractive to the male gaze despite being beautiful.

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

This return to the feminine charms and the definition of womanhood through the appreciation of male gaze presented by the postfeminists as widening of choices for women. The women of the twenty first century need not make the sacrifice of either home or work to be happy when they can have it all. Sherri Inness in her book *Tough Girls* (1999) opines that the identity of a New Tough Woman comprises of four characteristics - body, attitude, actions and authority.

But this return to feminine traditionalism begs the question is it really a widening of choices for women or a marketing scheme of consumerism. Household goods and beauty products are still seen as objects associated with married life – order, security and everlasting love. Media are using femininity as a means to market products and women are feeding into it under the guise of deserved indulgence, which is now a right we have under postfeminism. Kaveri is an intellectual who questions the very basis of marriages in India :

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

funny, or 'at least' he is rich? Why do women compromise on the biggest thing of all? The men!" (Bannerjee 42)

But ironically she lands up her first boyfriend "the Greek God" and accomplishes the mission of her life in the exotic locale of Goa with the help of new haircut and revealing dresses picked up by Aditi for her. Despite the wisdom she exhibits in the above quoted lines in this relationship she makes the greatest compromise of her life, she enters into a relationship with a married man hoping that he would divorce his wife in due time and would marry her. The relationship which started as a casual encounter developed into a live-in relationship bringing in all the elements of domesticity which the feminists a century ago had tried so hard to purge off the womanly life especially the element of surrender and the exhilaration of giving up control. Kaveri's relief is a nightmare for the feminists.

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

The woman who at the outset of the novel wanted her husband to be an intellectual partner, an equal, had succumbed to the chimera of domesticity willingly submitting to the control of her partner and even secretly enjoying it. According to the backlash theorists like Faludi and Naomi Wolf herein lies the undoing of all the hard work on the part of the second wave feminists.

The Indian chicklit may be full of such instances where the aspirations and emotions of the protagonist may seem retrograde from the feminist point of view. But such instances arise from the fact that the second wave feminists have handed down to the twenty first century women a legacy of women who are single but have not yet decided whether they are happy to be single. Postfeminism by widening the choices for women through its have it all attitude has plunged the women today further into self doubt and increased their anxiety about the choices they have to make to maintain their individuality in the society as well to achieve happiness in their life. Kaveri very lucidly states the dilemma in the beginning of the novel: "Because no matter how much you achieved in life, a day would come when you would feel all alone in this world." (Bannerjee 16)

But this is not the end of the story. While purging herself of the memories of Arjun Kaveri feels tired and heads over to her favourite stress busting destination Coffee De. On her way she is besieged by rains and while running for cover she experiences an epiphanic moment.

"So I stood right there and took the rain in. It soaked my clothes and made my hair drip. But it made me feel alive again. A part of me came back. And I knew that I would have to let every thought of Arjun D' Souza come in, for me to push him out." (Bannerjee 143)

To fight her blues she decides to step out of her comfort zone and experiment with new things in her life. She participates in a reality show, starts a venture as travel planner and finally decides to do the scariest getting a tattoo before shifting to New York for an internship.

“And then I revealed myself to a total stranger. I told her who I was. Something no one ever knew and something I had kept hidden for a long time. I told her I was a woman who believed in Love. Not with one man. But with the concept that it existed, and that it was strong and powerful. I was a woman who believed in travelling the world and experiencing Love in its myriad ways. What I wanted from my life was a fusion of art, languages, men and the independence that defined Love.” (Bannerjee 212)

Her journey from 30 to 32 teaches her not to be scared anymore of loneliness and not to worry about marriage the generally accepted antidote to loneliness. After finding her one great love she realises she does not need it to be happy in life. So finally when her love returns to her at her own terms she finds herself telling him:

“You have always taken charge and presumed what we should do. And I’ve let you because it felt nice to have someone lead the way. But I’ve thought about what I’ve wanted to do and have been doing it for so long now that I can’t have someone else lead the way.” (Bannerjee 220)

So we find our heroine in New York at the day of her final ordeal before her one great love steeped in the knowledge that she is beautiful and also that she is looking good in white coat from Macy’s and black plunging “Herve leger” dress. But what is more laudable is her self knowledge that finally makes her outgrow her fear of loneliness. She is amused at the irony that when her love was back on her own terms she didn’t want him. She did not need him anymore- emotionally, physically, financially and spiritually.

The new woman of the twenty first Indian chicklit is independent who believes in love but not domesticity, wants to look good but for herself and she knows how to sin without remorse. She lets lose herself in the pink alleys only to emerge out more self confident. The new feminism is neither a relapse to female traditionalism nor a submission to the marketing scheme of consumerism but a redefinition of feminism which does not assert the primacy of one role of woman over the other. On the other hand it rejuvenates the aspects of womanhood which were suppressed by the earlier feminists in their quest to win gender equality and financial independence. The epithet post in postfeminism does not indicate a dissociation from the past but an attempt to infuse new life into the concept of feminism which had somewhat lost its relevance in the face of fast changing socio economic changes across the world.

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