

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue -4 (August 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Love and Marriage in the Post-feminist Time: A Critical Study of *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal

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Article History: Submitted-05/08/2020, Revised-22/08/2020, Accepted-24/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

Abstract:

Chicklit, an emerging genre for women, presents before us the romance of the postfeminist times and it is essentially not a romance of a woman with a man but with herself. The heroines of chicklit are strong, enterprising and intelligent and have the courage to break the male defined behavioural patterns to carve out a path that is self-fulfilling. Chicklit becomes an instrument of new feminism directing the women to the path of self-glory mitigating the psychological complexes like *Cinderella complex* and the fear of ticking biological clock. The aim of this paper is to explore how chicklit illuminates the way for young women to break the traditional mould of the romantic notion of love and marriage and reveal that there is a possibility of other happy endings too by a close reading of the popular novel *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal published by Penguin India in 2004.

Keywords: chicklit, postfeminism, Cinderella complex, new feminism, biological clock.

Cinderella and Miss Havisham are the two most popular characters from the world of fiction. The two characters seem to be diametrically opposite to each other, but they are not. Both the characters had been beautiful women who loved with all their heart - one won while the other lost. One achieved the happily ever after ending while the other was doomed to be alone and waiting eternally. Both the characters have special significance in the lives of the twenty first century women. The image of Cinderella being the most loved fairy tale character for a girl in childhood gets engorged on the female psyche and they start believing that the solution to all their

problems can be found when they would be rescued by their Prince Charming. The psychologists have termed this dependency syndrome in women as *Cinderella Complex*. The *Cinderella complex* was first described by Colette Dowling, who wrote a book on women's fear of independence – an unconscious desire to be taken care of by others. It is based on the idea of femininity portrayed in that story, where a woman is beautiful, graceful, polite, hardworking, independent, and maligned by the females of her society, but she is not capable of changing her situation with her own actions and must be helped by an outside force, usually a male (i.e., the prince). Since they consider finding the right man to be the panacea of all problems, the greatest fear of the young women is to end up like Miss Havisham, a popular Charles Dickens character. She is the most haunting image of a woman who is lonely and unhappy since she was deserted by her love interest on the day of their wedding.

Girls grow up hearing the phrases such as “after a certain age”, “fresh girls” and so on. The repetition of such phrases plays a crucial part in creating a fear psychosis in the minds of the women. So as soon a woman turns twenty-five the invisible clock starts ticking in her mind and she could feel her shelf life reducing day by day. Women are made to believe that like all the material objects which are meant to serve men the women too have a shelf life. The signs of the expiring shelf life being constantly reminded by the beauty products’ advertising are wrinkles, fine lines, cellulite and weight gain. Women are perishables who lose their importance with time because after a certain age they also lose the capacity to procreate along with their beauty. Their nightmare is to spend their lives alone pining and frustrated devoid of any possibility of love and companionship like Miss Havisham.

The new feminism or postfeminism concedes that major political battles have been won by its predecessors. The women of the twenty first century are born into a world which is freer, accommodative and enabling, a world which their mothers had dreamed of building one day and presents an opportunity before women to take charge of their lives. It is time that women disengage from the male gaze. Natasha Walter in her book, *The New Feminism*, quotes from an influential paper “The Woman-Identified Woman” published in 1972, “In the privacy of our own psyches, we must cut those cords to the core.... If we are male identified in our heads, we cannot realise our autonomy as human beings.” (60) The goal of new feminism is self-realisation by overcoming the barriers that are purely psychological which restrain women from realising their full potential.

Chicklit which is the emerging genre for the women has been derided as tales of shopping and drinking for bored women by the critics. The adverse criticism of the writings of women from the so-called high brow litterateurs is not something new and should not discourage a deeper study of the phenomenon which became so popular amongst the young women of our country. Chicklit presents before us the romances of the postfeminist times and it is essentially not a romance of a woman with a man but with herself. The heroines of chicklit are strong, enterprising and intelligent and have the courage to break the male defined behavioural patterns to carve out a path that is self-fulfilling. Chicklit becomes an instrument of new feminism directing the women to the path of self-glory mitigating the psychological complexes like Cinderella complex and the fear of ticking biological clock. The aim of this paper is to explore how chicklit illuminates the way for young women to break the traditional mould of the romantic notion of love and marriage and reveal that there is a possibility of other happy endings too by a close reading of the popular novel *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal published by Penguin India in 2004.

The story begins on the eleventh day post the twenty ninth birthday of the heroine Minal. Minal working in Delhi is a native of Meerut city in U.P. The plot is set into motion when Minal receives a letter from her mother and commits the mistake of opening it. Her mother through the letter wanted to inform her that since Minal was not making any effort on the marriage front herself, she has taken charge of the situation and has placed a matrimonial ad for her in a reputed daily. She finds the copy of the advertisement attached and feels disgusted by it. It served as a wake-up call for her and she contemplated, “My uneventful flight across the twenties was coming to an end, my plane was bearing inexorably in towards the torpid arrivals terminal of the thirties, time to do something and quick....” (3)

The heroine is introduced as an enterprising young woman with a belief system of her own. She had been resisting the madness outside, in the world of moms and friends to influence her. But all the heroines have their breaking points and they finally succumb to the mad rush and become a restless soul – a soul which feels incomplete and which can be satisfied only with the union of a male partner. The catch is that the time for this union is also limited as set by the ticking biological clock. Minal in *Piece of Cake* takes a look at the list of probable grooms for herself, who had responded to her sixty words description by her mom in a daily– Kishore Kumar, Naveen Singh and Yudhishter -- and reels into despair. This is the cue for her to invigorate her search for a

suitable life partner. She was very sure she did not want a Yudhishter but a “Rahul” or “Rohan” who shall bring her flowers and buy her diamonds and take her to overseas vacations. She gets everything she had wished for and a little more. But does it make her happy or satisfied is a question she keeps on pondering upon.

Chicklit not only focuses upon the upper middle-class women but it also represents a particular age group— the age group of 25-35 years which is most sensitive to the social pressure of ticking biological clock and subsequently to the marriage rush. Ensnared in the financial security of their jobs the other great need of the human life -- companionship-- takes primacy. The anxiety of these women, understandably, is while they are intelligent, financially stable and not bad looking they do not have a man in their lives. Though in India the sex ratio is in the favour of men still a man shortage is acutely felt by the women of marriageable age. The reason perhaps being that the expectations of the women have been raised in the minds of women since they do not perceive their husbands as divine or superior to themselves anymore but as intellectual partners. Marriage is no more a power equation but a partnership where both the partners are unique yet equal.

Minal is an MBA and works as Associate Product Manager in an MNC, International Foods. As her job description demands she is innovative and intellectual but what sets her apart from her other team mates is her courage to offer honest opinion even at the risk of losing everything. She never hesitates from speaking her mind aloud because of the fear of displeasing others. She has a strong rebellious streak in her character which makes her wary of the sight of the nodding and approving heads. She is smart and witty and is doing good at her work but as stars shall have it, she gets entangled into a mess that is personal as well as professional.

After reading the threatening letter of her mother she decides to take the marriage business more seriously because she wanted to get married to a man she loves, who is her discovery and not someone selected by her mom in an attempt to redeem her soul. She starts looking around and tumbles upon her neighbour Ali. Ali her neighbour is the romance incarnated the man of her dreams. Ali is a radio jockey, a music enthusiast and is full of life. He is good looking with a smile which makes the opposite sex feel giddy. Ali kept on encroaching upon the parking space of Minal and finally when he meets her encroaches upon her heart's affection also. Their connection is

instant and they start going out together. But soon the bubble bursts for Minal when she discovers that he is just twenty-four while she has crossed twenty-nine. In the meantime, she meets Sunil who seemed to be more mature and secure personality. She shuts the door upon Ali to let Sunil walk in. Sunil is an old acquaintance from Meerut, the hometown of Minal. Sunil belonging to a wealthy family is a doctor, a cancer specialist. Their families have very similar values and had always been on good terms. A well settled man with great future prospects Sunil seems to be the sensible choice for Minal. She keeps on forcing herself to believe in the goodness of this relationship. When she hits a low in her professional life the company of Sunil gives her solace but she was never able to shake off the feeling that something is not right. The two serious relationships – with Ali and with Sunil- teach her a lot about love, life and marriage.

The first dinner date of Minal and Sunil is prophetic in nature. The date was made of the stuff the dreams are made of— beautiful ambience, an aura of romance, soothing music of a live band and a menu full of exotic savouries and drinks. Minal observes, “Here I was at the Mecca of good taste, fine dining and big money, with a charming escort who just happened to be a brilliant surgeon who’d just finished giving a talk to doctors twice his age on some earth-shattering, paradigm-shifting, new piece of cancer research. From a romantic possibilities’ standpoint it couldn’t get much better than this.” (145) But much to her frustration they end up ordering the spinach and eggplant with steamed rice. She marvelled at the dexterity of the hands of Sunil who very cleanly gulped one eggplant after another with chopsticks. She looked on as he cleared his plate and talked on about his work. Their relationship progresses in the same manner. It remains one sided where Minal keeps on accommodating his whims and fancies without any question and pushing back her own desires. He is an egotist who thinks world exists for him - to applaud when he has achieved something and to mourn for him when he has failed. In his universe Minal is the companion who helps him achieve what he aspires to accomplish, catering to his emotional and physical needs without any ambition of her own. Mrs. Dubey, the matriarch of the Apollo doctors, chides Minal, “Oh, you mustn’t work too hard dear; you should leave all that to the men!” (201).

The relationship between Sunil and Minal throws light upon how the work of a woman and a man is perceived by the society. Minal always feels a surge of pride whenever Sunil is praised by others for his work. On the contrary, Sunil always feels anguish whenever he thinks about the work of Minal. He does not like her spending too much time on her work and also does not consider

her work to be of any importance. All the discussions of Sunil about Minal's work lead to the final question when is she leaving her job? Even in the circle of Sunil, comprising of the esteemed doctors of Apollo, Minal's job is time and again looked upon as of secondary importance. The expectation is that since Sunil is not able to look after the needs of the family and home because of the challenging nature of his job, it is the duty of Minal to look after the home and thus should have a job that does not keep her too busy. Sunil points out the incompatibility of their jobs, "This job at the branch really isn't sustainable, with your hours and mine clashing the way they do" (195). Dr Kumar suggests the way out of this problem, "Yes, Renu quit after we got married.... She's quite happy now with her teaching job; she has enough time for the home and she's not sitting idle either" (196). Therefore, in the world of Sunil wives are like trophies – bright and shiny – who reflect the glory of their husbands and they do not have an identity of their own.

Minal is a highly independent girl who does not fear to be unorthodox or to handle things her own way. The treatment she metes out to Naveen shows her to be fearless who just could not tolerate any kind of nonsense from the opposite sex. But she keeps on tolerating the unsympathetic attitude of Sunil towards her personal as well as professional needs. Surprisingly she fails to recognise that he is an egotist and a prig. It was perhaps because of her desperation to get married that she keeps on stifling all the negative thoughts that crop up in her mind about Sunil and their relationship. Perhaps it was her mother's repeated warnings that relationships cannot work without compromises. Perhaps her mind was too preoccupied with her work and how to regain her lost position that she let the signs slip by. For instance, when Minal forgets about Sunil's plan for lunch with a prospective business associate and schedules a workshop for her marketing team instead Sunil almost blurts out how little he cares about her job and how it is a hurdle for his own career advancement. Or perhaps, which had been the point of debate in the romances forever, she ignores these signs because he was rich and can offer a good life to her.

It is the breaking point for Sunil when Minal requests Sunil to postpone their wedding date because of her work commitment. Her request completely puzzles Sunil. For him their wedding is not something personal but a social engagement. He chides Minal, "Minal, a wedding is a big deal socially" and it is just beyond his comprehension, "I can't understand why you're working so hard" (205). Minal's answer is as honest and simple as convoluted and confused the question is, "The same reason you work hard" (205). The day Sunil realises that Minal is not going to leave her job

he takes the matter into his hands. So, on a very crucial day when Minal had to present her idea to Vic, her boss and she was desperately waiting for a call from Radha to inform her of a half hour window in the schedule of Vic, Sunil very discreetly steals the phone of Minal. Minal had no idea what had happened and against all odds when Minal gets the chance to present her idea to Vic and it is applauded and approved instantly, she very unsuspectingly reaches the home of Sunil to inform him about her success. She is very tired but she rushes towards the home of Sunil so that she can share her happiness with her soulmate to be. This moment is reminiscent of the time when Sunil had reached her office after performing successfully a very difficult surgery alone. Though Minal herself was swamped with work and was very anxious about the setting up of her meeting with Vic, she pushes aside all her concerns to be a part of the happiness of Sunil. She considers his success as her own, embraces him and then accompanies him to celebrate his big day.

But Minal gets a rude shock on meeting Sunil. Sunil looked distracted while she narrated her story of valour and glory; how she succeeded in grabbing some time out of Vic's busy schedule, dodging Rana and presenting her idea which was hailed by Vic as fantastic. She understands the disinterest of Sunil as it was a very tiring day for him also and decides to leave when she hears the loud blaring sound of the ringtone of her lost mobile phone emanating from the bedroom of Sunil. She had realised a few days back that he was "cold as an icepack". But it took her so long to understand that he was also conniving as a fox. When the veil of civility drops Sunil very candidly words his grievance against Minal, "I'm a doctor, not some salesgirl pretending the world depends on me" (210). He wants her to snap out of being a "salesgirl" and start behaving like the future "Mrs. Sunil Pande". Minal also discovers very soon that it was Sunil who had sabotaged her project of the big launch of the cake by revealing her idea to the rival company bringing her discredit and her subsequent transfer to the dreaded branch office.

She did finally what she should have done sooner- flushed the big diamond engagement ring down the toilet. It is epiphanic moment for Minal which released her from all the romantic beliefs regarding marriage. When she for the last time glared at the big diamond of the ring, she could no more find it beautiful but could only feel its harshness. She could not be further bound by it. She had everything she had desired for at the beginning of her search – an eligible bachelor, a classy car, big diamond ring, honeymoon in Switzerland and she let all go without any regret. She did not regret the loss because she had found herself. When we meet her again on December

22, at the end of the novel, she is the woman of her dreams. In the office Christmas party, she is the most sought-after woman who had successfully pulled off such a huge brand promotion campaign, happily absorbing all the applause and the love gaze of the colleague who had been the rock throughout her struggles to reach the position which she deserved.

Marriage for the heroine, as for the twenty first century women is like a mirage, they keep chasing the horizon with inexhaustible energy and dedication because they are raised to believe that their life is incomplete without a man. The heroine regains her insight when the chase ends. While the dust from the chase settles down the heroine starts seeing clearly again. She regains her perception and directs it inwards to ascertain the purpose of life. Once she stops looking at the world with the eyes of her family and friends, she starts making sense of her actions and her life. She reclaims control of her destiny and feels ready to step ahead into uncharted territory. It confuses her initially but making her experiences, her desires and ambitions her guide she carves out a path for self-fulfilment.

Minal is a work enthusiast who has a creative mind which could not remain subdued even in the branch office where she had been transferred against her wishes as a punishment. She was busy making one impossible idea after another work and because of her preoccupied mind, busy schedule and her ill-founded belief in the goodness of Sunil and their match she keeps on ignoring the increasing anxiety level of Sunil regarding her job. The story of Minal is the story of a woman who is ambitious and is dedicated towards her work. Both these qualities are highly appreciated in men but the same qualities become a bane in the life of a woman because being feminine in the patriarchal set up is equated with being homely and domesticated. The metanarrative of these novels is symptomatic of the fact that the women are still in the grasp of the patriarchy. In the nineteenth century women were not financially autonomous and therefore marriage was the only alternative for them for maintaining a livelihood. Therefore, it was imperative for a woman to conform to the beauty standards, look good, be *accomplished*, find a man and get married. In the twenty first century the women are financially independent but we still find them running after men and compelling them to get married. The marriage rush, the ticking clock and the body image issues in the modern women indicate that though the women feel free but they are still manipulated by the wishes of the other gender.

The propagators of the legacy of patriarchy very strangely are not the men but the women. It is the mother who keeps on persuading her daughter to grab a man at the right time. It is the mother who starts planning the wedding of her daughter since the day she is born. The chicklit is a world inhabited by mothers and aunties; and the fathers and the uncles are conspicuous by their absence. We get only a passing reference to the fathers of the heroines. Whenever they are talked about, they are portrayed as good-hearted men who always support their daughters in their endeavours. They do not talk about marriage or men in the lives of their daughters. It is always the mother who is at the centre stage trying to manipulate the lives of their daughters. Though the patriarchs are missing the patriarchy lives on. The mothers, the victims themselves, have become the enforcers of patriarchy. The benign father figures are also symptomatic of the fact that the visible signs of patriarchy have been effaced but the germ lingers on embedded in the deep subconscious level.

The heroines of chicklit seem to be refurbished romantic heroines who are intelligent and independent and yet crave for domesticity and subordination in the form of marriage – the twenty first century “Cinderella”. They suffer from the dichotomous expectations of their families and society wherein people expect them to be independent and yet follow the traditions of society which expects them to be married and be domesticated to a certain extent. Therefore, though the society has accepted the entry of women in public space they have not accepted the exit of women from the domestic arena. The struggle of the women in the present time is to find a way to step out of this dilemma.

The chicklit exposes the inadequacy of the romantic and traditional ideals about love and marriage in the present time and tries to establish a new ideal of female meritocracy which is not based upon marriage. The most common path to social elevation for women has always been considered to be marriage to a man with wealth and social status. But with women themselves working and earning this notion of advancement or ‘settling down’ in life has become anachronistic. The heroines of chicklit face numerous trials and tribulations to realise that the path to success and happiness lies in self-actualisation, the search for oneself and not the search for someone else. Relationship with oneself is the key ingredient of happiness and meaningful relationship with others. Minal while flushing the diamond liberated herself of the fear psychosis of loneliness, independence and ticking clock and consciously rejecting a marriage that would

have been financially sound but mentally stifling thus setting a new parameter of success and happiness.

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