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New Women in Selected Indian Chick Lit Novels: From Stereotypical Roles towards Modernity

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Abstract: *Women in India have had a challenging time developing in a male subjugated society, class and caste systems. But within time, women have become educated, emancipated and independent. In the era of globalization and change, Women are no longer confined to the walls of a house. They have become cognizant of the need to be modern and new woman. The image of woman in literature in recent decades as presented by Indian English writers is different from that past. The journey of women smashing the stereotypical roles and stepping ahead towards modernity and 'new woman' has been depicted by several Chick Lit writers in their writings. Being a Subgenre of Chick Lit, Indian Chick Lit is a genre of fiction written for and advertised to young women, particularly solitary and employed women in their twenties and thirties. This new genre has appeared as a different tendency especially for the young independent employed women who are struggling hard to find a space for themselves in the twenty first century. This paper highlights the journey of women from stereotypical roles towards modernity. It elucidates how the protagonists in Indian Chick Lit novels smash the stereotypes of self-sacrificing and self-effacing roles of women discussing the novels *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal and *Salaam, Paris* by Kavita Daswani. These leading characters of selected Indian chick lit novels are at great pains to get themselves free from the stereotypical and traditional roles.*

Keywords: #Chick Lit #Indian Chick Lit #New woman #New Feminism #Feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Tennyson, a representative poet of Victorian age, apparently holding the stereotypical and traditional roles assigned to men and women in the *Princess* (1847), expressed his views of women's rights and duties. Women have always been happened to be the worst victims as the social norms and moral codes had been so outlined as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. The prejudices and assumptions about women were questioned by the movement called Feminism. In her book *A Vindication to the Rights of Women*, which is addressed to women in the sense that it concerns their rights and education, a feminist critic Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women should not be restricted to domestic work alone, as they need to get proper education as men. One of the primordial and formative trepidations of feminism declared by Ramamoorthy in *My Life is My Own: A study of Shashi Deshpande's women* is

"A woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the "other". She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation"(36).

Post Feminism or New Feminism acknowledges that the foremost dogmatic fights have been accomplished by its precursors. The women of this new age are born into a world which is empowering. In this new era of change, women are no longer dependent and confined to the walls of a house. They have become cognizant of the prerequisite to be modern and new woman. They are moving out of their towns and cities to work and study. They have gained more exposure to dealing with the different facets of life including choosing their profession and their life partners. Financial independence has specified women many choices which the earlier women never had. In the midst of such radical transformation, the position of women in society has shown great enhancement. Women have more choices and alternatives today both in their personal and professional lives than in any other age. However, a study of women has been a significant area of concern to be worked upon. In Indian English Literature, we have an array of Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Bharathi Mukerjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, etc who have represented the situation of women in their writings. Chick Lit, the emergent genre for women, has been disdained as tales of consumerism and consumption by the opponents. It presents the journey of women smashing the stereotypical roles and stepping ahead towards modernity and 'new woman' has also been depicted. The protagonists as presented in Chick Lit are resilient, adventurous and brainy. They are audacious to breakdown the male defined stereotypical roles to achieve their goals. Chick Lit has developed as an apparatus of new feminism guiding the women to the pathway of individuality and emancipation.

‘Chick’ is an American jargon for a young woman and ‘Lit’ is a diminutive form of the word literature. In simple words, it is a literature for women, about women and by women. The term “Chick Lit” first appeared in the English speaking communities through the students of Princeton University who used it as a trivializing tag for Elaine Showalter’s “Female Literary Tradition” Course. Afterwards, American novelist and co-editor Criz Maza and Jaffery Deshell made use of this term in their groundbreaking compendium *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995). Then James Wolcott mockingly used this term in his article *Hear Me Purr: Maureen Dowd and Rise of Postfeminist Chick Lit* (1996) to mock at the girlish style of writing employed by female journalists in the columns of newspapers. The origin of the term Chick Lit can be traced back to Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and Candance Bushness’s *Sex and the City* (1997). The genre is best exemplified by these texts. In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Harzewski denotes, “the term Chick Lit was transformed through Mazza and DeShell’s anthology from a joke about women’s writing to a more serious intervention in contemporary women’s fiction” (45). Elizabeth Merrick summarizes the plotlines of the typical Chick Lit novel in her book *This Is Not Chick Lit* (2006) “the daughter of the romance novel and the stepsister to the fashion magazine. It is about protagonist’s relentless pursuit of Money, a Makeover, and Mr. Right”(8). Chick Lit selects its refrains based on the concepts and complications in the lives of women such as friendship, fashion, beauty, love, marriage, roommates, consumerism, weight control, etc. It deals with all these subjects quite lightheartedly as well as humorously. Besides, the frequent images of pair of heels, a protagonist with a shopping bag, women’s red mouth with pearl necklace on the cover pages of Chick Lit novels clearly suggest what these books deal with.

After successfully establishing itself in Britain and America, Chick Lit appeared in India with Swati Kaushal’s *Piece of Cake* (2004). The accomplishment of this novel encouraged a flood of similar books in the book market such as Advaita Kala’s *Almost Single*, Rupa Gulab’s *Girl Alone* and Rajashree’s *Trust Me* etc. Indian Chick Lit has emerged out of the specific social, cultural and economic factors that were rapidly transforming India in the new millennium. Like American and British Chick Lit, Indian Chick Lit also has appearance of its own. The foremost plot revolves around a thirty year girl who is into a desirable job, but feels apprehensive in her life despite of all the avaricious pleasures. Indian Chick Lit is a subgenre produced for and aimed at young, solitary, working women of twenties and thirties. 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. 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 burdens of age-old traditions of the patriarchal society while at the same time maneuvering her career at the work place. These novels depict the significance of male in the lives of women but do not compromise with the worth and esteem of women. Anuja Chauhan, Rupa Gulab, Advaita Kala, Swati Kaushal, Rajashree and Kavita Daswani are some writers who are continuously writing on this particular theme. More importantly, these group of writers seem to represent in their writings the aspirations of millions of women in post liberal India who are gaining access to education and opportunity. These writers have written the stories of the Indian ‘new woman’ and captured the inflections of the innovative Indian woman who are ambitious, assertive and career-driven desiring to live a life of her dreams.

This Research paper attempts to highlight how Chick Lit enriches the way for young women to break the stereotypical patterns and becoming the new woman by a close reading of the prevalent Indian Chick Lit novel *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal and *Salaam, Paris* written by Kavita Daswani. This paper tries to delineate the protagonists denying the stereotypical roles and becoming independent and ‘new woman.’

A renowned Chick Lit writer Kavita Daswani is comparatively a new writer amongst the women writers of the Indian diaspora settled in the USA. Belonging to the diaspora community, her early life was spent in Hong Kong and thereafter she went to Los Angeles. In the beginning of her career she joined South China Morning Post as a Journalist and established an association with Los Angeles Times as well as International Herald Tribune. Her family originally belongs to Mumbai but she grew up in Hong Kong. She is currently settled in Los Angeles with her spouse and two sons. Her female protagonists are young and ambitious, married or yet to be married. Daswani has heroines taking the center seat in her novels. She has authored the best-selling books *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003), *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2005), *Salaam Paris* (2006), *Indie Girl* (2007), *Lovetorn* (2012) and *Bombay Girl* (2013). Daswani’s popular novels have been described as Chick Lit. Her works present the concerns of institutions like marriage, the roles of women in families and growing opportunities for women. The novel *Salaam Paris* unravels the story of Tanaya Shaha who is trained by her family adherents that a girl must accept the traditional roles in the man-dominated society. It depicts a traditional grandfather with traditional values and a modern granddaughter with modern ideals. The conventional culture of her family encourages the females to surrender to the parochial superiority. Tanaya wants to see the world before she settle in domesticity. She flies to Paris alone. In the foreign land, she becomes a successful international model by her hard work and conviction.

In Paris, she refuses to see the boy, and, on the contrary, she prefers to work and stay with single girls who want to make their career in Paris. The title's "*Salaam*" acknowledges tradition, while '*Paris*' represents the epicenter of modernity. In a nutshell, this novel presents the journey of protagonist from traditional and stereotypical roles towards modernity.

Swati Kaushal is an Indian Chick Lit who has authored the five bestselling novels, *Piece of Cake* (2004), *A Girl Like Me* (2008), *Drop Dead* (2012), *Lethal Spice* (2014), and *A Few Good Friends* (2017). Her novel *A Girl Like Me* deals with Anisha Rai, a young Indian girl coping with different people, cultures and peer pressure. While her first novel *Piece of Cake* deals with Minal Sharma, a twenty nine year old protagonist struggling at work, home and her love life. It narrates the story of a woman who balances a demanding marketing job and her search for Mr Right while driving away suitors her mother finds through matrimonial ads. The heroine of *Piece of Cake* is introduced as an enterprising young woman with a belief system of her own. 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.

Based on the patriarchal family structure, in the past the majority of Indian women were financially and socially dependent on men. Similarly in the selected novels, protagonists are expected to follow the stereotypical rules. They are supposed to settle their minds on the only role as a devoted mothers and suppressed wives but both Taniya and Minal challenge the stereotypical image of Indian woman. Taniya in *Salaam, Paris* is supposed to accept the secondary roles prevalent in the patriarchal society. Tanaya's mother says, "settle your mind on the only role you have in this world: pretty and quiet wife and a devoted mother. Remember that, and you will always be happy"(29). Tanya is supposed to be married to a man who will give her some allowances to buy vegetables and pay for laundry. But Tanaya is rebellious at heart. She is captivated by the world of modeling and glamour. Her charm for the same is evident when she spends her pocket money on secretly buying the magazines and reading them. Similarly in *Piece of Cake* Minal's family members expects her to marry a person, Sunil who expects Minal to make time for him and to adjust her life according to him. Sunil expects Minal to serve him as a traditional wife and adjust her life according to his decisions. But Minal is economically independent and she rejects him as soon as she feels that he wants to control her life. 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? Minal is a highly independent girl who does not fear to be unorthodox or to handle things her own way. She did finally what she should have done sooner- flushed the big diamond engagement ring down the toilet. She wants to choose a guy of her own choice. She says

Sure I want to get married, but a dentist? *Yudishter*? [A man her mother suggests for her] I think I'll find my own man, thank you. A Rahul, or a Rohan, or at the very least a Ravi. Someone who'll bring me flowers and buy me diamonds and laugh and flirt and throw parties and take happy pictures on our overseas vacations with a six-mega-pixel digital camera. No postcolonial hangover, no quixotic desire to reform the world, just a healthy, wholesome, twenty-first century pursuit of wealth and prosperity.(6)

Modernity is connected with the future and development, whereas tradition is related to the past and roots. The protagonists are the new age Indian women who make amazing strides with the march of modernity and continue to be shackled by the prejudices and practices of a feudal patriarchal mindset. The protagonists in the selected novels try hard to break free from the tradition ridden and restrictive chains of a patriarchal and hetero-normative family structure.

In *Chick Lit - On The Edge: The New Women's Fiction Anthology* (1995), Cris Mazza puts it, "I realize there is such a thing as postfeminist writing. It is writing that says women are independent and confident, but not lacking in their share of human weakness and not necessarily self-empowered. Post-feminist writing says we don't have to be superhuman anymore. Just human"(9). For new women, having a career is important and is one the aspects through which they can define themselves. Through the characters of Minal and Tanya, novelists signify the importance of a career in their lives. With access to education, new career opportunities, particularly in the IT and BPO sectors, along with the increasing ease of mobility, the protagonists are affluent, urban, emancipated and enjoying a heady mix of freedom along with purchasing power. They are presented as efficacious in their careers. Both Minal and Priya are ambitious and dedicated towards her work. Breaking the stereotypical roles, females such as Minal are taking the leap and are acquiring a prominent position in the bakery sector as depicted in *Piece of Cake*.

In this novel, whatever benefits or advantages the heroine gets in her workplace is solely on the basis of her merit and worth. Minal is hard working and efficient and achieves confidence when Vik, head of marketing, gives her a challenging new assignment: "... I think you've been doing a good job in cookies. You're enthusiastic, you've got a good grasp of business and you're not afraid to stand up for your convictions" (22) Thus, the protagonists are now empowered and self-sufficient with their skills. They scale the height of achievement and success.

Women are groomed to be idol women even before they reach puberty. Tanaya's grandfather embodies the conventional view that women's primary roles are to be loving wives and caring mothers, whether they choose to or not. P.K. Nayar also denotes in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*: "Feminism's key assumption is that gender role is pre-determined and the woman is trained to fit into those roles. This means that roles like 'daughter' and 'mother' are not natural but *social* because the woman has to be trained to think, talk, act in particular ways that suit the role"(83). Traditional patriarchal hegemony rules prohibit women from being ambitious or thinking about themselves, and women's responsibilities should be domestic and serve their families, according to traditional standards. P.K Nayar quotes Simone De Beauvoir in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, "De Beauvoir proposed that women must take charge of their own choice. Instead of being negative, inferior other, they must become subjects in their own rights. They need not be restricted by or to the roles"(88). Protagonists not being restricted to the traditional role they become the new women with new goals and ambitions to achieve.

Therefore, by denying the grooms chosen by their families, the protagonists choose the partners of their own choices and proclaim their freedom and their position as liberated contemporary women. They exercise autonomy in choosing their partners based on the criteria set up by them. These criteria include being treated equally and having the freedom to make their own decisions regarding whether or not to have a career, financial freedom and social freedom (for instance, what to wear, what to shop and who to associate with), the salient features of Post Feminism which is characterized by values parallel with processes of liberalization focusing on choice with regard to gender, sexuality and family. Suitors with masculine views, who devalue protagonists' professional work and consider them on the basis of their domestic skills and beauty, are rejected in the course of the narratives. The leading women characters of selected Chick Lit Novels are not emotional tear-jerkers who are constantly searching for Mr. Perfect to be their provider and consolers. They are women of substance who struggles hard for their emancipation and establish their place in the society. They exemplify the new age woman in their audacious exploration of their desires and erotic needs, often switching partners and dropping boy friends who do not have the capability to match their intelligences. In a way, the protagonists Minal and Tanya are the real women who are empowered individuals rather than the sufferers of a male-dominated society.

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