Romances of the self: single women, neoliberalism and the nationalist imaginary in Indian chick lit

Charmaine Austin Carvalho

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Romances of the Self: Single Women, Neoliberalism and the Nationalist Imaginary in Indian Chick Lit

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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July 2018
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

I have read the University’s current research ethics guidelines, and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures in accordance with the University’s Committee on the Use of Human & Animal Subjects in Teaching and Research (HASC). I have attempted to identify all the risks related to this research that may arise in conducting this research, obtained the relevant ethical and/or safety approval (where applicable), and acknowledged my obligations and the rights of the participants.

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-2000s, novels written by Indian women featuring a single woman’s adventures in work and romance joined a transnational genre of writing called “chick lit” epitomized by novels such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Fielding 1996) and *Sex and the City* (Bushnell 1997). While chick lit has garnered some scholarly attention (Ferriss and Young 2006; Gill 2007; Harzewski 2011), studies remain largely focused on Anglo-American writing even while acknowledging the genre’s global spread. There has been no in-depth analysis of chick lit written by Indian women in India, and it is this lacuna that this study seeks to fill.

The emergence of chick lit in India roughly a decade after economic liberalization makes the novels a useful lens through which to observe the formation of a new feminine neoliberal subjectivity – “the Indian singleton”. I argue that the discourse of singleness in Indian chick lit novels is deployed not so much to solve the problem of being unmarried, but to resolve the tension between the demands of “Indian tradition” on urban, middle-class, young women and their desire for a selfhood inflected by transnational, neoliberal discourses of autonomy. By shifting my analytical focus away from the protagonist and her romantic partner to the mother-daughter relationship in the novels, I show how “tradition” and “modernity” are crystallized through discourses of food, fashion and the body. While “tradition” and “modernity” are conceptualized in these narratives as a binary, the protagonists seem to be attempting to articulate a selfhood that merges the two poles without having to pick a side. I draw on postcolonial, poststructuralist and feminist theory to argue that in their refusal to conform to ideas of Indian selfhood wherein individualism is circumscribed by community, the single women in Indian chick lit present, if not entirely represent, the idea of synthesis.
This dissertation grew out of my intense enjoyment of chick lit novels, my disgruntlement at their critical reception and my own unease as a feminist in the pleasure I took from reading romance novels. It also had its genesis in my own brief experience as a single woman of marriageable age in India, the more protracted experiences of my friends as they navigated the single life in post-liberalization India, our enthusiasm for novels that finally seemed to reflect our experience and my inability to find the answers I was seeking about the genre in particular and romance reading in general in the existing literature. Although my initial broad questions focused on the possibility of a feminist turn in the novels, and this remained a preoccupation till the end, reading and rereading the novels together with feminist and critical theory unearthed new questions and suggested directions different to the ones I had initially set out with.

On this journey of discovery that challenged me in ways I never expected, I owe a debt of gratitude to those who have stood by me, guided me and cheered me on at various junctures. First, I must thank my supervisor, Prof. Eva Man, for her diligence in reading my work, her prompt responses to my many questions, and her sage guidance on how to balance being a mother with postgraduate studies. I am grateful to my fellow students at the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, who at different stages offered a listening ear, words of advice, inspiration and laughter. I thank all the staff of the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing for being ever-ready to offer help and guidance when it was requested.

I discovered feminism early in life although I did not use the F-word then. I have my father Austin to thank for encouraging me to ask all sorts of uncomfortable questions which fanned the spirit of my rebellion. I was raised in a sisterhood and it is from women that I have primarily drawn both strength and solace: my mother, Carol, who proved wrong Luce Irigaray’s contention that young women can never talk to their mothers, my sister, Karina, who from as far back as I can remember set the highest example of what solidarity means, and to my friends – Ameya, Ayesha and Seema – for holding me up in my darkest hours.

I embarked on this project as a wife and a mother of two young children and counted on the support of my family in Hong Kong. To my husband, Vasco, thank you for putting up with me over these three years of disappearance into books, and to Nathan and Mia, the best children a mother could wish for, I hope you will one day understand why mummy is always reading. To my helpers, Imelda and Julie, who are our partners in parenting, I could not have done it without you.

Finally, I thank the women who paved the path before me, the writers and feminists who I turn to when the world seems to make no sense and when I need to understand why it is that women are still often seen and not heard. I walk in your footsteps, always grateful and inspired.
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Introduction: The Dawn of Chick Lit

In the mid-2000s, a new woman began to appear on Indian bookshelves. Single, sassy and urbane, she struggled to kickstart her career while navigating the upheavals in her romantic life and fending off pressure from her mother to “settle down. A decade or so after Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary (1996) became a global sensation, the genre that had come to be known as chick lit arrived in India.

The appearance of chick lit coincided with or was made possible by the publishing boom in India in the mid-2000s. The first chick lit novels featuring Indian protagonists came from Indian writers living abroad such as Nisha Minhas’s Chapati or Chips? (2002) and Kavita Daswani’s For Matrimonial Purposes (2003) in which impending marriage was the trigger for an exploration of cultural conflict. However, as the publishing industry in India entered a period of growth, Indian women began to write novels that infused the frame narrative of Western chick lit with a decidedly Indian flavour. Rupa Gulab, author of Girl Alone (2005), described these novelistic efforts as being akin to “the McAloo Tikki Burger. You like the burger concept and you like it more, if the flavours you grew up with are packed inside” (Kumar 2006). The novels included themes such as the pressure for young women to marry within the arranged marriage system, the clash between “tradition” and “modernity” and the struggles new female entrants to the workforce face.

As in the West, chick lit as a genre has grown into a revenue stream for publishers in India. When Indian publisher Rupa and Co. tried to launch a romance series set in India in 2004, the venture failed (Parameswaran 2002), but a few years later, the launch of Indian chick lit has garnered greater success. Rajashree’s Trust Me sold over 50,000 copies and Advaita Kala’s Almost Single did a 20,000 copies print run in its first year in a market in which a print run of 5,000 was considered impressive (Raaj 2008). A decade later, Anuja Chauhan, arguably India’s bestselling and most widely recognized chick lit author, received,
according to her agent, a six-figure dollar advance for her fourth novel and the promise of a 100,000 copies print run when she chose to switch publishers (Mazumdar 2015). While the definition of a bestseller varies, Joshi notes that “the previous ‘Hindu’ print run of 500 copies has now been replaced by 30,000 to 1 million-plus first printings” for commercial fiction writers such as Chetan Bhagat and Anuja Chauhan (2015, 314). After a decade, the proliferation of Indian chick lit novels seems to have slowed and been overtaken by “lad lit” with a male protagonist written and sometimes self-published by young men as well as by novelistic retellings of Indian myths. Despite these changes in publishing trends, Indian bookstores continue to stock a number of Indian chick lit novels; they are now a taken for granted part of the publishing scene.

Indian chick lit novels are written by and for urban upper-middle-class Indian women who are fluent in English. This demographic tended to read novels in English imported from overseas, particularly the serial romances published by Mills & Boon and female-centric bestsellers by authors such as Sidney Sheldon and Danielle Steele. Parameswaran found that young urban middle and upper-middle-class English-speaking women who were avid readers of serial romances were uninterested in locally produced romances because they wanted a specific “fantasy world of love and courtship that was embedded within particular class and race structures” (2002, 840). The take-up of Indian chick lit novels by women in the country a few years later, then, marks a shift whereby publishers managed to craft a formula that appealed to local readers or to tap a new segment within the broader category of female readers.

One of the participants in Parameswaran’s study, a young woman from Hyderabad, said of her enjoyment of Mills & Boon novels: “The heroine has a great life. She lives alone, drives her own car, buys what she wants, travels everywhere, and answers to no one. I want to do that before I have to grow up” (2002, 841). A few years down the line, some Indian
women were living this reality and Indian chick lit was reflecting it, indicated in the comment of a young woman from New Delhi in a *Washington Post* article on chick lit in India: “I like such books because they resemble my life and the conversations I have with my friends and parents. We have the baggage of culture imposed on us. We have to be a good daughter, be chaste, marry at the right age, be a good wife and a good daughter-in-law. But all we want is to have fun like everybody else” (Lakshmi 2007).

The rise of chick lit in India a decade after the liberalization of the Indian economy, featuring a single-in-the-city female protagonist who echoes many of the concerns of her Western counterpart, offers a lens through which to view the intersection of the neoliberal economy, political nationalism and gender. The new feminine subjectivity crafted in Indian chick lit and seemingly enthusiastically embraced by a section of the reading population offers a glimpse into a transnational economy of desire linking women across borders and yet maintaining a local specificity. This chapter will lay the context for the exploration of the emergence, adoption and possible impact of this new subjectivity by tracing its roots and presenting the critical and scholarly reception to the genre thus far.

**The Rise of Chick Lit**

It has been widely acknowledged that the chick lit novel, which lightheartedly charts the romantic and career travails of young women in their twenties and thirties, opened up a space for publishers struggling to adapt their traditional romance fare to contemporary female audiences (Gill 2007; Harzewki 2011; Mabry 2013). The strategy proved to be a winner, evident in the commercial success of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* which sold 5 million copies in 30 languages with the film adaptation grossing more than $160 million worldwide (Gill 2007). Bestselling chick lit authors in the West include Sophie Kinsella with her “shopaholic” series, Marion Keyes, whose women-centered novels predated *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Jennifer Weiner, who has become a spokesperson-of-sorts of the genre, and Lauren Wiesenberger
whose debut *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) earned her a $250,000 advance followed by an advance of over $1 million for her second novel (Kolhatkar 2010). Gill observes: “More telling than any of these economic indicators, however, was the veritable explosion of discourses about Bridget Jones. She became an icon, a recognizable emblem of a particular kind of femininity, a constructed point of identification for all women” (2007, 227).

At the turn of the millennium, publishers began to create imprints solely dedicated to chick lit and bookstores were flooded with novels bearing the characteristic pink covers with a stiletto heel, a lipstick or a trendy young woman carrying shopping bags. Chick lit rapidly spread to television and film with similar visions of feminine subjectivity and storytelling emerging across the world. The American cultural counterpart to *Bridget Jones’s Diary* was Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1997). The latter novel garnered less visibility than the TV series produced by HBO, which through its slick marriage of female empowerment and consumerism stimulated the explosion of chick lit culture. Whelehan notes that the novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the HBO TV series *Sex and the City* TV (1998-2004), and the Fox network TV series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) mark “the most eminent singleton triumvirate while representing the cross-fertilization of popular culture from newspaper column, to novel, to popular television” (2005, 207). It is notable that the rise of chick lit in the West coincided with “a new timetable for college-educated women” (Harzewksi 2011, 73) whereby women were delaying marriage in favour of education and professional development. Moreover, the explosion of chick lit titles between 2002 and 2006 could be tied to their ability to distract from the grimness of world news, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 crisis (ibid., 191). The chick lit protagonists’ preoccupation with money and finding a man who is financially secure reflected a latent anxiety in young women: Marion Botsford Fraser found that the greatest fear of single women, exceeding the fear of bad relationships or remaining single, was having no money (2001, 238).
The genre soon produced sub-genres such as “labour lit”, “nanny lit”, “farm lit”, “recessionista lit” in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and even a group of books instructing authors how to write a commercially successful chick lit novel. In addition, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its ilk inspired transnational variants. *Allitsatok meg Terezanyut!* (Stop Mammatheresa) (2002) by Zsusza Racz in Hungary sold some 130,000 copies and sparked a cultural debate on the personage of the singleton or “szingli”, which Nora Séllei contends was not just a linguistic innovation but a cultural one, not a “cultural translation of *Bridget Jones* but a transformation” (2006, 175). In China and Indonesia, chick lit novels traced the journeys of single women, often implicated in economies of consumption (Chen 2009; Dewi 2011). Wenche Ommundsen points out that chick lit novels such as Saudi writer Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), Chinese writer Annie Wang’s *The People’s Republic of Desire* (2006) and indigenous Australian writer Anita Heiss’s *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007) and *Avoiding Mr Right* “explore the complex pressures and temptations arising in the clash between the norms of a global (largely Western) consumer culture and those of the alternative modernities in which authors and protagonists negotiate their daily lives” (2011, 107). The common thread among many of the countries in which chick lit emerged and flourished is a recently liberalized economy whereby new subjectivities for women became possible. For example, Séllei (2006) notes that the figure of the “szingli” in Hungary would not have been possible before economic liberalization because it was impossible for young women to move to cities, find work and live alone in the communist era. In the Indian context, this process of subjectification is further complicated by postcolonial nationalism which will be further explored in Chapter 1.

Nearly two decades after the first chick lit books appeared, the death of the genre is frequently touted, and yet the genre remains resilient. An article in *The Telegraph* in 2011 noted that despite a reported 20 per cent drop in sales that year, and annual announcements of
its imminent demise, chick lit titles sold around 100,000 copies each, more copies than the entire Booker shortlist altogether (Moyes 2011). Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (2006) observe that the discourse surrounding chick lit has been polarized, attracting on the one hand “the unquestioning adoration of fans” and on the other “the unmitigated disdain of critics”, and they call for a more considered response to the genre. This study will seek to provide a more open-minded evaluation of the genre from a feminist perspective, while shifting the focus of the discussion to chick lit at the so-called margins.

**Defining Chick Lit**

The first entry that appears on a Dictionary.com search for the term “chick lit” is a rather sweeping definition: “Literature that appeals especially to women, usually having a romantic or sentimental theme” (“Chick-Lit” 2015). The Oxford English Dictionary which included “chick lit” as an entry in 2002 defines it as “literature by, for, or about women; esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of young professional women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences” and notes that the term is occasionally “depreciative” (“Chick Lit: Oxford English Dictionary” 2015). Collins English Dictionary comes closer to pinning down the essence of the chick lit, defining it as “a genre of fiction concentrating on young working women and their emotional lives” (“Chick Lit’: Collins English Dictionary” 2015). However, in an ABC News article, Heather Cabot (2003) comes closest to capturing the genre’s characteristic features, defining chick lit as books that “feature everyday women in their 20s and 30s navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships”. The main features of the genre are a protagonist in her twenties or thirties, usually single, who is starting her career and also dealing with the pressure of finding love. The lighthearted tone of the novels and the everyday character of the protagonist are aspects that distinguish chick lit from other bestselling romances. Finally, chick lit is “women’s fiction”, both created by and for women.
At the formal level, the novels feature first-person or third-person narration that emphasizes a female perspective (Mabry 2006; Whelehen 2005) and a realist attention to the everyday life of the protagonist (Ferris and Young 2006; Whelehan 2005). The flawed heroine at the centre of the text also adds to its realism (Wells 2006). The novels make use of a variety of literary forms from the epistolary to the stream-of-consciousness to the interior monologue and satire. Broadly, they partake of the comedy of manners tradition which they blend with the bildungsroman to chart a lighthearted coming-of-age narrative (Harzewski 2011). Much of Indian chick lit tends to be semi-autobiographical, partaking of a confessional drive within the broader genre as well as one that dates back to women’s early engagement with novel writing in India.

The genealogy of the term “chick lit” showcases an ambiguity that characterized the genre’s later identification with the contested terrain of postfeminism. Harzewski (2011) traces the origins of the term “chick lit” to a dismissive tag for Elaine Showalter’s Female Literary Tradition course at Princeton University. Later, the term was employed by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell in their anthology Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction (1995), which featured avant-garde fiction writing by women, a far cry from the genre in its current form. “When we titled our anthology Chick-Lit, it was not to reduce the contributing authors into shopping-and-dieting airheads. It was a way of saying, ‘Careful, if you think you know us’,” writes Mazza (2006, 27). However, the reduction the anthology’s editors sought to avoid manifested itself when the term chick lit was applied to far less rebellious texts by James Walcott (1996) in his article in The New Yorker entitled “Hear Me Purr: Maureen Dowd and the Rise of Postfeminist Chick-Lit”. The gist of Wolcott’s description of chick lit, which he used to deride women’s journalism of the 1990s, carried over into the adoption by the media of the term for the genre of women’s writing that was arguably inaugurated by Bridget Jones’s Diary. Ironically, in a notorious op-ed, Dowd herself expresses her alarm on
discovering that “chick lit was no longer a niche. It had staged a coup of the literature shelves” (Dowd 2007).

The term “chick lit” has not gone uncontested by its authors. Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan objects to it on the grounds that “no other genre is so shamelessly and blatantly held up by its ovaries and thrust at us: look, here is what you want to read, it’s for girls, you’ll like it.” She suggests “commercial fiction” be used as a descriptor for the genre and advocates the de-pinkification of the novels dealing with the concerns of young women (Madhavan 2015). Another chick lit author, Maureen Johnson, started a viral Twitter movement called “coverflip” when she asked people to imagine what the covers of classic literary works by men might look like had they been written for women. “I’ve never seen ‘chick lit’ used in a positive critical light,” Johnson says. “It’s invariably something seen as lesser than literature. It’s wrong. The label gets slapped on things pretty indiscriminately. The only common factor is that the books are by and for women.” (Johnson 2013). On the other hand, bestselling author Sophie Kinsella is more tolerant of the term, saying in an interview: “I always thought chick lit meant third-person contemporary funny novels, dealing with issues of the day. I mean, it’s not the ideal term; when I’m asked to describe what I do, I say I write romantic comedies, because that’s what I feel they are. But I’m quite pragmatic” (Aitkenhead 2012).

Criticism of the condescension inherent in the term “chick lit” ties into the broader discussion of women’s writing and its devaluation (Harzewski 2011; Wells 2006). Symptomatic of the tension between chick lit and its highbrow novelistic counterparts, there have been a series of exchanges between chick lit author Jennifer Wiener and literary star Jonathan Franzen on the social media site Twitter. Wiener coined the term “Franzenfreude” to refer to her frustration at the critical acclaim showered on middle-aged white male
novelists, while women writers and female-centric popular genres are ignored even when dealing similar themes (Neary 2011).

“Romantic comedies”, “women’s commercial fiction” or simply “commercial fiction” are alternative terms that have been proposed for chick lit. “Romantic comedy” more closely reflects two of the major ingredients of the novel – the romantic plot and the lightness of tone that characterizes the writing. However, the term “chick lit” is more specific, referring only to romantic comedies written by women with a female protagonist. While the broader category of “romantic comedy” which includes writing by male authors or featuring male protagonists often tends to sit next to chick lit on the shelves of bookstores, the emphases and writing style of the female-centric novels are different, and for the purpose of this dissertation require a different designation. “Chick lit” is widely used in the publishing sector and the media, and scholarly work today has also adopted the term. It has genre conventions that are recognizable by its readers; hence, the proliferation of fan clubs dedicated to the genre. For self-professed fans of chick lit, while the initial impetus behind the label might have been derisory, they embrace it as designating a space for women. Kirsty Greenwood, founding editor of women’s fiction fansite Novelicious.com, writes: “The term has stuck and will continue to stick, no matter how many people whinge about it. Authors shouldn’t be offended about being part of a genre that outsells any other, should be proud that their fans are intelligent, funny, discerning women who know the difference between good and bad writing, and feel blessed that their writing is adorned with the prettiest covers in the business” (Greenwood 2015). Because of the mainstream adoption of the term, both in the popular press and in academia, and importantly, because the term has been embraced by fans and by some authors who refuse to see it as a slur, I have chosen to use the term “chick lit” in this dissertation.
A number of terms have been coined for the genre in its Indian avatar: “masala Lit”, “desi lit”, “ladki lit” and “Indi lit”, for example. These terms, however, smack of an exoticization that does the genre disservice and they fail to convey that the books revolve around a female protagonist, which the word “chick”, regardless of its negative connotations, makes explicit. There are most likely commonalities between chick lit written and set in India and chick lit produced in its neighbouring countries in South Asia and hence “desi” or “masala” might be appropriate; however, this study will focus only on chick lit written by authors residing in India and published by Indian publishers so as to reflect their specific socio-cultural characteristics. Chick lit written by diasporic Indian writers will be excluded from this study as the themes and concerns are different, as also the lived experience the authors draw on. “Indian chick lit” will be the term I will use to refer to the novels analysed in this study.

**Chick Lit and Postfeminism**

Most scholarly analyses of chick lit employ the frame of postfeminism, a somewhat contentious concept with roughly two schools of thought proposing differing understandings of the same term. The first group, represented by the work of scholars such as Gill (2007), Tasker and Negra (2007) and McRobbie (2009) uses the term postfeminism to refer to a move in contemporary popular culture to invoke and then repudiate feminism. Tasker and Negra propose that “postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer” (2007 1) and McRobbie (2009) cites Bridget Jones as the poster girl of postfeminism. Gill highlights a “number of recurring and relatively stable themes, tropes and constructions” that constitute a “postfeminist sensibility” through gender representations in the media in the early twenty-first century:

“These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring
and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.” (2007, 255)

In this sense, a number of Western chick lit texts could be termed postfeminist, but whether the genre in its global iterations can be branded so remains to be seen.

The other group, perhaps best represented by Ann Brooks (1997), likens the relationship between postfeminism and feminism to that between postmodernism and modernism – a force that troubles the foundationalist assumptions of the previous era (Genz and Brabon, 2009). Postfeminism, Brooks argues, represents a “conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference” via feminism’s intersection with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism (1997, 4). Harzewski, in writing the first monograph on the genre Chick Lit and Postfeminism (2011), suggests that classifying chick lit as synonymous with “me-feminism” would be simplistic, but she acknowledges that chick lit “adopts an a la carte tendency that selectively appropriates aspects of feminism into a primarily consumerist model” (2011, 10). Here, Harzewski prefers the term “me-feminism” to refer to the phenomenon others have referred to as “postfeminism”. Stating her aim of examining “chick lit as an implicit commentary on feminism’s gains and deficiencies”, Harzewski notes that this strategy is itself “a postfeminist theoretical practice” whereby “postfeminist theory attempts to make sense of feminism’s legacy and blind spots to identify an epistemological shift, to mark a new theoretical juncture, or to arrive at a blueprint for the future” (ibid., 150). In this sense, Harzewski adopts Brooks’s (1997) conception of postfeminism for her analysis.

In fact, postfeminism in Brooks’s guise comes very close to what has sometimes been called “third wave feminism” which asserts “that feminism continues to be an active and important force in contemporary society but is one that often materializes in identities and
practices not immediately associated with previously established forms of feminism… Indeed third-wave writers view the uncertainty that contemporary social change has brought to an analysis of gender relations as an opportunity to move beyond a post-feminist impasse to engage in the creation of a revitalized feminist project” (Budgeon 2011, 16). It must be noted that the development of the women’s movement in India does not conform to the Western construction of waves. In this sense, any definition of “postfeminism” that posits it as stage that follows feminism would not find easy applicability to the Indian context that acknowledges a range of feminisms. However, postfeminism as a sensibility whereby feminism is taken into account has been pervasive in India (although not referred as such by Indian scholars) evident in the discussions of the New Indian Woman by Sunder Rajan (1993) and others. Because analyses of chick lit typically use the definition of “postfeminism” as “feminism taken into account and commoditized”, I believe that this definition is more relevant to the study of chick lit. It is helpful that Gill (2007) has clearly identified the strands of the postfeminist sensibility. While some or even many texts may show evidence of postfeminist discourse in this sense, I would also like to make distinctions across the spectrum of texts to show how some novels, while not straightforwardly feminist, offer spaces for the possibility of resistance and subversion. In this sense, my analytic stance is similar to Ann Brooks’s (1997) version of “postfeminism”, as signalling an engagement with difference and an open mind towards popular culture.

Ultimately, though, I would prefer to sidestep the term “postfeminism” altogether in my analysis. Butler and Desai critique studies of chick lit that centre postfeminism for presuming “chick lit to be a homogeneously white normative genre to be read primarily for its relationship to feminism and femininity, to the exclusion of other forms of social difference” (2008, 2). My analysis of Indian chick lit texts has shown that while feminism does appear as a spectre haunting the twenty-first century Indian womanhood, disavowal of
feminism is not central to the novels. Rather by situating chick lit in the Indian context, the genre’s engagement with more pressing dilemmas for Indian women can be revealed. Finally, Pamela Thoma warns that “categorizations of chick lit and definitions of postfeminism as seamlessly neoliberal may disregard how subgenres rewrite chick lit and the polysemic nature of cultural texts” (2014, 2). She argues for the need to “consider how texts allow for visions of individual agency and collective change within the constraints of contemporary consumer citizenship” (ibid., 5). Following Thoma’s argument that the conclusions drawn about Anglo-American chick lit cannot be seamlessly mapped onto chick lit’s “others”, this study will closely analyse Indian chick lit novels in their cultural specificity in addition to how they reflect transnational themes and connections to postfeminism globally.

Methodology and Research Questions

I approach chick lit novels in this study using a cultural studies framework that takes its starting point from the methodology proposed by the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies collective, a group of scholars working in the post-Bandung Third Worldist and post-Cold War intellectual climate who came together in the early 1990s “in an attempt to create knowledge from an Asian perspective” (Niranjana 2015, 2). A key text emerging from the collective was Kuan Hsing Chen’s “Asia as Method”, which drew on Takeuchi Yoshimi’s lecture of the same name, to propose that by “using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives” (Chen 2010, 213). One of the strategies of this methodology is to promote referencing between Asian societies rather than comparisons to the West in which Asia inevitably comes across as lagging (Chen 2010; Niranjana 2015). Although in the case of this study, it is neither possible nor productive to completely eschew references to and comparisons with chick lit in West given the genre’s origins and Ur-texts, the Inter-Asia methodology led me to situate chick lit firmly within the Indian context. In so doing, I found
that the framework of postfeminism which is often employed in analysing Western chick lit novels to be only of tangential use to understanding Indian chick lit.

Instead, I draw on a range of Indian cultural studies theorists and specifically feminist work in the cultural studies arena. Two seminal essays – Partha Chatterjee’s “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” (1990) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s “Real and Imagined Women” (1990) – highlight milestone moments in the genealogy of Indian womanhood within which Indian chick lit can be situated. Further, Ashis Nandy’s analysis of the impact of colonialism on self-formation in India in *The Intimate Enemy* (1983) offered a starting point for my own theorization of what I call a “synthetic self” emerging in Indian chick lit, which I expand on in Chapter 4.

Indian cultural studies from the period I draw on was underpinned by the work of Michel Foucault on power, discourse and subjectification. Decimating the idea of a knowing subject from whom meaning emerges, Foucault (1972) argues that the subject is an effect of discourses of power. The subject of the “singleton” that emerges in Indian chick lit, then, is a discursive construct; my attempt in this study is to analyse the discursive underpinnings of the subjectivity. I see these narratives as presenting an aspirational subjectivity crystalizing what it means to be single, female, Indian, middle class and in one’s twenties living in urban post-liberalization India. However, Foucault has noted that discourse “can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault 1978, 100-1). Thus, in addition to studying the singleton as a “effect of power”, I am interested in the possibilities of resistance that the subjectivity holds out.

I place Indian chick lit within the post-liberalization conjuncture of the 1990s, which I will discuss further in Chapter 1. Broadly, I ask: How can we read the emergence of chick lit at this conjuncture? What kinds of subjectivities are being constructed in Indian chick lit?
What ideological work do these subjectivities perform? As a form of women’s writing, does chick lit have the potential to trouble assumptions about femininity and subvert dominant patriarchal norms or is it entirely a conservative form? In asking these questions, I seek to elucidate the “psycho-social economy that gives rise to the text, and in turn, in the limits of the imaginative self images we inhabit” (Tharu 1990).

**Scope of the Study**

While the period between 2005 and the present saw the publication of several chick lit novels in India, for the purposes of this study I have chosen to focus on five texts. All of these texts typify the genre in some way and gained relative popularity, with their authors receiving coverage in the media.

*Almost Single* (Kala 2007) was a breakthrough Indian chick lit novel, frequently named by readers in discussions of the genre. Although there had been novels with a similar storyline in the market since the publication of Rupa Gulab’s *Girl Alone* (2005) and Swati Kaushal’s *Piece of Cake* (2005), *Almost Single* is often referred to as the first Indian chick lit novel. The novel started with a large print run and has been translated into French and multiple Indian languages. Apart from its commercial success, *Almost Single* represents a trend in the Indian chick lit genre of projecting a certain cosmopolitan sensibility that is inspired by Western chick lit texts, particularly *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). In addition to the romantic plotline, the novel focusses on the protagonist’s social life in the city, laying out a certain habitus that characterizes an aspirational singleton lifestyle.

The other trend in Indian chick lit is exemplified by *Keep the Change* (2010), my second case study. This is a Moll Flanders narrative in which the innocent heroine is gradually “corrupted” but finally “finds herself” through this journey. In what is more clearly a bildungsroman trajectory, the young woman from a small town moves to the city for work and encounters a number of catalysts. There is greater focus here on the protagonist’s career
trajectory, aligning it with such Western chick lit novels as *The Devil Wears Prada* (Wiesberger 2003). For this study, *Keep the Change* was selected for its relative popularity as well as its ability to exemplify certain features of the career novel in Indian chick lit.

Both Kala and Subramanian base their debut novels loosely on their own life experiences. Kala wrote *Almost Single* after working in the hospitality industry and used it to channel both her own frustrations on the job and as a woman of marriageable age (Mitra 2012). Like the protagonist of her novel, Subramanian was born in Chennai; she was raised between Chennai and Delhi, before moving to Mumbai to work for a multinational bank (Krupa 2010). After *Keep the Change*, she wrote *Intermission*, about a young corporate high flier’s mid-life romance. Following the success of their novels, both writers branched out into other careers – Kala went on to write the scripts for television and women-centred films such as *Kahaani* (Ghosh 2012), while Subramanian is a leadership trainer.

My third case study, *You Are Here* (2008), was a much-awaited novel by Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan, the author of a popular blog. Having earned a reputation for her frank discussions of the single life, Madhavan was heralded in the press as India’s answer to Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist of the *Sex and the City* series. While she has gone on to write several more novels, *You Are Here* stands out for both its characterization of the urban single woman, its semi-autobiographical tone and its deviation from some of the genre’s conventions.

Finally, I will analyze two novels by Anuja Chauhan, India’s top selling chick lit author. An acclaimed name in the advertising industry for crafting slogans and catchphrases that were recognized by middle-class households across the country, Chauhan proved equally adept at novel writing and had a runaway hit on her hands with her first novel, *The Zoya Factor* (2008). While many of the earlier Indian chick lit novels tended to rely heavily on Western genre conventions and style, Chauhan can be credited for infusing the genre with a
thoroughly Indian aesthetic through a distinctive writing style that mimicked the everyday speech of Indians, paid keen attention to the absurdities of quotidian life in India, and drew on the magical realism tradition. After the success of *The Zoya Factor*, Chauhan has since written four more novels – *Battle for Bittora* (2010), *Those Pricey Thakkur Girls* (2013), *The House That BJ Built* (2015) and *Baaz* (2017) – each eagerly anticipated and launched with much fanfare. Her fourth manuscript sparked a bidding war that was covered by the media and she finally moved from HarperCollins to Westland with a sizeable advance. I will focus my analysis on Chauhan’s first two novels, *The Zoya Factor* and *Battle for Bittora*, because they most classically follow the chick lit genre.

**Chapter Outline**

This Introduction has sought to define chick lit, track its emergence in the West and to highlight its appearance in India while briefly surveying existing scholarship on the genre and engaging with the discussion of postfeminism that dominates analyses of the genre.

Chapter 1 elucidates the key conceptual framework within which my analysis of Indian chick lit is conducted. I first engage with scholarly work on the self in South Asia and argue that the novels offer a staging of selfhood that is closely related to the historical moment in which they emerge. Not surprisingly, the novel was one of the key domains for this staging, and I trace the emergence of a modern conception of selfhood, gendered female, in early Indian novels. I then situate this self within the post-liberalization conjuncture in which the New Indian Woman emerged as a figure who is implicated in the overlapping and inter-related binaries of tradition/modernity, inner/outer, public/private, home/world and most recently local/global. This discussion lays the ground for the close reading of chick lit in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 examines the discourse of singleness that permeates chick lit and specifically the subjectivity of the singleton in the Indian context. I tease out the discursive
underpinnings of this subjectivity, which is marked by caste, class, and location. I demonstrate that the singleton is not simply a woman without a man, but a performative post-liberalization identity.

Chapter 3 focuses on the definitive mother-daughter relationship that characterizes Indian chick lit. By shifting the lens from heteronormative romance to this relationship, it becomes apparent that the novels are about more than the pursuit of romantic coupledom and that they seek to resolve the tradition/modernity binary in the formation of selfhood.

Chapter 4 delves deeper into the articulation of the tradition/modernity binary in the novels by examining representations of food, fashion and the body in Almost Single, Keep the Change and You Are Here. These representations reveal that while tradition and modernity are conceptualized in these narratives as a binary, the protagonists seem to be wrestling with a way of articulating a selfhood that merges the two poles. I draw on Ashis Nandy’s analysis of the impact of colonialism on selfhood in India and his suggestion that while colonialism forced a “split self”, one which posited masculinity and femininity as two sides of a binary, a more holistic conception was provided by Gandhi who fused the two. I draw on the “synthesis” that Nandy sees in the Gandhian conception of self to propose the idea of a “synthetic self” in Indian chick lit, one that seeks to resolve the tradition/modernity schism.

Chapter 5 turns its attention to Anuja Chauhan’s The Zoya Factor and Battle for Bittora to show how not only do the novels promote the idea of a “synthetic selfhood”, but also effect a larger synthesis at the level of the nation. In this effort, I point out, the discourse of romance has been historically central and thus proves both revolutionary and conventional.

Chapter 6 addresses the genre as a romance narrative in the light of the insights of influential studies of the romance genre by Modleski (1982), Radway (1984) and Snitow (1984) to show how the novels are both similar to and different from their predecessors. I
argue that rather than effecting heterosexual closure, the novels reflect the profound ambivalence of young women towards marriage.

This thesis seeks to ground the analysis of Indian chick lit firmly in the Indian context and to read its relevance to the lives of Indian women today. While Indian writers took their cue from Western texts such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex and the City*, they were equally influenced by the entrenchment of India’s neoliberal reforms and its impact on women. The novels thus are as much a part of the corpus of writing on the New Indian Woman and the early history of the Indian novel as they are of the global genre of chick lit. Just as the earliest Indian novels were the imaginative terrain on which modern Indian selfhood – significantly gendered feminine – was concretized, chick lit, emerging as it does at a historical moment fraught with change, provides a template for a new form of subjectivity.

Rather than their romantic storyline, it is their bildungsroman or coming of age quality that becomes salient in chick lit. The coalescing of this new subjectivity – the singleton – is played out through the conflict between mothers and daughters in the novels, who come to stand in for the apparent poles of tradition and modernity. The novelistic journey is one of achieving a synthesis – in the mode in which Nandy articulates it – of this binary. I propose that the resulting selfhood could be considered “synthetic”, a term that evokes both the hybrid quality of the synthesis as a melange and as a mimicry (Bhabha 1994) as well as an artificiality that is playful and ever-changing. The novels thus hark back to the earliest literary meaning of “romance” as “quest”, journeys in which the protagonist’s outward adventurers result in self-discovery. In telling the stories of single women, the novels, then, chart the path towards a marriage, but one that is a conceptual wedding of two seemingly polarized concepts – tradition and modernity – into a selfhood that is fluid and constantly overtures the binaries within itself, which evades the imperative to settle down. It is in this sense that chick lit presents what Harzewski calls “romances of the self” (2011, 57).
Chapter 1: Post-Liberalization Romances

“This is my story, and of those who occupy this world with me. My name is Aisha Bhatia and I am 29-years-old and single,” says the protagonist of Almost Single by way of introduction (Kala 2007, 2). “No one should tell their story unless they’re absolutely certain they have something to say,” cautions the first line of Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan’s You Are Here. The “something” that the novel goes on to articulate is essentially “herstory”, a meandering stream of the flotsam and jetsam that make up the twenty-something’s life, not exactly “earthshattering”, the protagonist Arshi herself admits in the novel’s second line, but somehow urgent in its telling nevertheless. In recounting their stories, Arshi, Aisha and their sisters in chick lit discursively construct a subjectivity for the young woman of liberalised India. This chapter will contextualize this discursive construction by tracing briefly the genealogy of the self in India and of the feminine subjectivity that emerges in chick lit.

Rehearsing the Self

Following Wimal Dissanayake, I use the term “self” to “denote the imaginary register consisting of identifications, narratives, formulations, and images that serve the notion of the individual” (1996, x). The latter term, as Dissanayake suggests, “refers to the undivided source of consciousness, meanings, and action; it is an illusory whole that gives the appearance of a free and self-determining being”. “Subject” refers to “a disciplinary construct; it is constituted by social and cultural formations, language, and political and institutional discourses, and does not suggest the sense of autonomy, sovereignty, and initiating power that the term ‘individual’ carries with it.” Finally, “agent” “denotes the locus from which an action can be initiated, whether it be one of reconfirmation or resistance, mainly from the interstices between various subject-positions” (ibid.). In my project, there is a slippage of meanings between self and subject; I categorize the novels as “romances” to
capture the fantasizing and fashioning of an autonomous individualism they engage in, a quest for selfhood if you will, but one that is always imbricated, as Foucault has suggested, in discourses of power.

Mookherjee notes that anthropological scholarship has tended to juxtapose the “so-called western, rational, individual, autonomous, self marked by freedom, potential and choice and deemed essential for modernity” with the “presumed collective, static, bounded ‘identity’ of the ‘non-west’ and its inhabitants” (2013, 4). Positions such as Louis Dumont’s (1980) and Sudhir Kakar’s (1982) that conceptualize South Asian individuals as being necessarily part of a larger social hierarchy, seem to question whether South Asians can possess a self in the Western sense (Mookherjee 2013, 5). Others have insisted that Indians do view themselves as active and goal-oriented individuals, though this capacity seems to emerge in adulthood (Mines 1988, 1), be enmeshed in a web of other social relationships, including territorial location (Jalal 4, 10), and take on a more holistic orientation than its Western counterpart (Paranjpe 2002). Thus, Arnold and Blackburn point to a “self-in-society that is more complex and subtle than a mutually exclusive opposition between an all-subsuming collectivity on the one hand, and a rampant individuality on the other” whereby Indians see themselves as individuals who are embedded in networks of family, kinship, caste, religion and gender (2004, 19).

More than two centuries after the colonial encounter, there can be no doubt that the idea of the autonomous individual is part of self-conception in South Asia especially among the middle class (Chakrabarty 1992), but there may be differences in how this self-concept is worked out. Focusing on the anti-colonial struggle, Kapila has shown how in India the idea of self and nation were “inextricably embedded in mutual constitution” though not synonymous with one another (2007, 110). Perhaps the most well-known exegesis on the impact of colonialism on the Indian self-concept is Ashis Nandy’s (1983). I will take up Nandy’s
argument in detail in Chapter 4, but briefly, Nandy argued that the experience of colonialism resulted in “split selves” for both colonizer and colonized, in which one part of the self was repressed. Other scholars have highlighted the impact of colonial modernity on Indian conceptions of selfhood. Chakrabarty has shown that “nationalist thought was premised precisely on the assumed universality of the project of becoming individuals” and that to be an individual in the early nineteenth century meant becoming European, demonstrated in the emergence of “the four basic genres that help express the modern self: the novel, the biography, the autobiography and history” (1992, 8). Thus, the novel form was crucial to the delineation of this modern colonized subject (ibid.; Joshi 2002).

The Self in the Early Indian Novel

The prototype of modern Indian individual selfhood can be traced to British statesman Lord Macaulay’s infamous “Minute on Education” (1835) arguing in favour of English education in India, in which he states that the education provided by the British was intended to groom a class of people who would be “interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”. Priya Joshi observes that Macaulay was advocating education not simply as a literary enterprise but “akin to the large-scale invention of a new social identity for Indians, a culturally dichromatic Cartesian self” (2002, 41). The new identity was reinforced by the English novel which “provided a host of imaginative possibilities to Indian readers: it provided its readers in India with a new language for figuring out the calculus of emerging social relations associated with modernity; and almost simultaneously it also became one of the most powerful vehicles, first of the anticolonial and later of the nationalist struggle” (ibid., 29).

The popularity of the English novel form in India sparked literary imitations, first in Bengali and Marathi and then in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Malayalam from the 1860s onwards.
By the end of the century, the novel was “the most popular form of print-medium entertainment in at least eight major languages of the country (Mukherjee 2000, 8). To rehearse the entire history of the Indian novel would be beyond the scope of this study. However, briefly, the realist novel form was enthusiastically taken up by Indian writers who adapted it, not without struggle, to local languages and sensibilities by drawing on a range of strategies, from the indigenous epic tradition to historical fantasies (Mukherjee 2006). Writers struggled with the need to “create characters in situations of individual choice and their presentation in a mimetic manner without distorting contemporary Indian reality” where such individualism was only fledgling (Mukherjee 1984, 82). Particularly tricky was meeting the genre’s demand for a focus on companionate marriage, a practice not yet widespread locally. Ultimately, companionate or romantic love became the grounds on which a modern Indian subjectivity was worked out, whereby choosing one’s own partner came to signify the installation of an individual subject in a clan-based society.

It is notable that the early Indian novelists, like their eighteenth-century British counterparts, chose to centre their narratives on female protagonists, perhaps because women, being confined to enclosed spaces and with fewer choices, magnified the struggle for individuation in the face of social constraints more acutely (Mukherjee 1984). Nancy Armstrong (1987) has argued in her analysis of the courtship novel in eighteenth-century England that novelists such as Samuel Richardson and Daniel Defoe were able to propose a new model of subjectivity that covertly challenged the aristocracy’s claim to superiority by attributing the new subjectivity to their female protagonists. The employment of female protagonists by writers such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee in Bengali, Chandu Menon in Malayalam, Hadi Ruswa in Urdu and Hari Narayan Apte in Marathi could be read in the light of Armstrong’s analysis as working out a new subjectivity that compelled not just adherence to tradition but also allowed for fantasies of subversion. For example, Chakrabarty (2000)
notes that a number of nineteenth-century novels used the personage of the widow as exemplary of the individual’s subordination to society to dramatize the constitution of a “modern subject” through the struggle between passions and family obligations.

It is notable that Bankimchandra Chatterjee, widely considered India’s pioneering novelist, wrote his first novel, *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) about a woman in an incompatible marriage, in English, before switching to Bengali. Where Bankim faltered in English, Krupa Sattianadhan’s novel *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* serialized in 1887-88, was more successful, using English to elicit “interiority and intimacy” in the autobiographical form she adopted (Joshi 2002, 12). Autobiography was an early genre of women’s writing, and one that scholars have noted women utilized differently from men, setting their lives “under a narrative of changing times, changing manners, and customs, and changing values” (Chatterjee 1993). Although Chakrabarty (1992) has claimed that autobiography did not perform the function of a confessional revelation of interiority that its European counterpart did, Mukherjee notes that autobiography was also where women “occasionally broke through [the] rhetoric of piety and acquiescence to articulate unsanctioned sentiments” (2000, 110).

Confession as a mode was thus woven into the early history of postcolonial women’s writing in India, as were questions of social reform, gender relations and the private/public self, evident in the work of women such as Sattianadhan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal and Toru Dutt who wrote in a variety of languages, from a range of religious and class positions between 1860 and 1918 (Bagchi 2015) and with echoes of the New Woman fiction in Britain (Chatterjee 1993, Joshi 2002). ii

**The Women’s Question**

These women were writing at a time when the “Women’s Question” – the problem of the “barbaric” treatment of women in Indian society which was used to justify colonial rule – was still active. In nineteenth-century India, the Women’s Question became the site of
contestation between the British colonizers and anti-colonial nationalists. Seeking to coalesce
an Indian identity distinct from colonial categorizations of Indians as uncivilized, Indian
social reformers harked back to a golden age of Vedic culture in which women supposedly
had a high status and were revered for their spiritual and intellectual qualities (Chakravarti
1990; Mani 1990; Sangari and Vaid 1990). Thus, normative Indian womanhood came to be
tied to a Vedic/upper-caste ideal. Further, Chatterjee (1990) has shown how the Women’s
Question was ultimately resolved by the end of the nineteenth century via the division of
culture into two spheres: the material/outer/public sphere which encompassed science,
technology, and statecraft that were to be borrowed from the West and the
spiritual/inner/private sphere where an inviolate Indian essence was to be preserved.iii While
men necessarily needed to engage in the former, partly in order to overthrow colonialism,
women were associated with the latter and thus were accorded the role of “the preservers of
culture and the upholders of spirituality” (ibid., 244). Furthermore, the new feminine identity
crystalized around middle-class women who were differentiated from both Western women
and lower-caste and lower-class Indian women (Chakravarti 1990; Chatterjee 1990.)
Similarly, Jalal notes that among Muslim communities in India “the loss of spiritual
meanings and perceived threats to sacred space after the imposition of colonial rule meant
that cultural values had to be considerably redefined” and this redefinition took place in the
context of the Women’s Question (2000, 45). Again, it was middle- and upper-class women
who dominated the conceptions of ideal womanhood. Ashraf Muslim women, traditionally
confined to the zenana and expected to don the burqa on the rare occasions they went out,
were conceived of as “ornaments of their homes” (Jalal 2000, 69) who were to be educated at
home. They were differentiated from prostitutes and lower-class women, who were scorned
in the popular press for their bad influence.

While this conceptualization of material/outer/world/male and spiritual/inner/
home/female persisted in postcolonial India, Mankekar (1999) notes mutations in the discourse on women in the late 1980s and early 1990s manifested in the women-oriented programmes aired on the state-run broadcaster Doordarshan. As the Indian state attempted to modernize, economically, technologically and culturally, Mankekar highlights a recasting of the Women’s Question so that instead of being confined to the inner/private sphere, “the modern Indian woman” was now being enjoined to skilfully straddle both “home” and the “world” in order to facilitate the nation’s entry into the twenty-first century (ibid., 142). Again, the hegemonic idea of Indian womanhood was upper caste and middle class.

**Neoliberalism and the Self**

The opening of the hitherto state-controlled Indian economy since the 1980s and the dissemination of the idea of the agentive, autonomous individual marked the advent of new subjectivities. The impact of neoliberal ideology must be accounted for in analyses of self-construction in India, specifically how neoliberal ideology dovetails with older constructions of Indian female selfhood. Indian chick lit offers a lens for such an investigation.

Some scholars have proposed that detraditionalisation in late modernity has resulted in selfhood that is characterized by reflexivity in which individuals construct their own biographies, a process that opens up possibilities but which is also fraught with risk (Giddens 1994; Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Critics of reflexive theories of selfhood point to the elision of the forces that influence and constrain the reflexive project in these accounts (Budgeon 2003; McRobbie 2009; Rainsborough 2011). The dissemination of neoliberal ideology since the 1980s further complicates the idea of the reflexive, autonomous self (Rose 1996; Budgeon 2003; Dunn 2004).

Neoliberalism is, according to David Harvey, “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong
private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2005, 2). In economic terms, neoliberalism marks a return to the classic tenets of liberalism proposed by economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo by championing free trade and free markets within the context of globalization (Steger and Roy, 9). It is “a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Gill and Scharff 2011, 5), and is closely identified with the policies of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States.

Wendy Brown has argued that neoliberalism “involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action” and “normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (2005, 40). Moreover, scholars have argued that neoliberalism seems to specifically speak to young women who are incited to be flexible, resilient and self-driven (Budgeon 2003; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009), prompting Gill and Scharff to ask: “Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?” (2011, 7).

I suggest that the notion of the self as “singleton” or “single woman in the city” that is depicted in Indian chick lit is a subjectivity that emerged in the aftermath of the historical conjuncture of 1990s which Rupal Oza (2006) has argued was characterized by three overlapping developments – the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and the increasingly visibility and influence of the middle classes.

**Advent of Neoliberalism**

In 1991, faced with a fiscal crisis, the Indian government under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao took steps to accelerate the process of economic liberalization that had been initiated in the 1980s. As the country’s debt approached 50 percent of its GDP and the country turned to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout, the gradual process of
liberalization that had been started became a full-blown race. Structural adjustments to the economy included “the mass process of privatization of land and industries, the selling off of public state enterprises, the entrance of huge amounts of foreign investment, the passing of classist and anti-labor legislation, and the decrease in public subsidies and expenditures” (Chowdhury 2011, 8). In the move away from the developmental agenda of the previous regime under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, liberalization re-envisioned India as a nation of consumers, dominated by the middle class who could now have access to products from abroad (Fernandes 2006; Oza 2006). Consumption in the post-liberalization era is marked by a shift from the basic necessities to lifestyle products, leisure activities, communication and entertainment (Gopal 2011) and differs from the previous decades in the “breadth of consumer goods available, their accessibility to a wider range of consumers, and the more finely nuanced distinctions that they enable” (Dickey 2012, 583-584). A key development was the arrival of satellite television which combined market forces with the power of television (Rajagopal 2001a), fuelling consumerism and constructing and unleashing new desires, some of them transnational and others fiercely local, such as those undergirded by Hindu nationalism discussed below.

Rajagopal suggests that “the onset of liberalization was not a purely economic process, but it involved a shift in perception over time (roughly 1987-93) and a new set of criteria of judgement” replacing the earlier consensus that state intervention was required due to the large population of poor in the country (2001b, 3). Chowdhury shows that media reports on the liberalization process took the form of a “classic capitalist coming-of-age story” wherein “India had finally cast off the shackles of protectionism and nationalism (read: socialism) to embrace a free-wheeling capitalist economy” (2011, 33). A new brand identity, “the New India”, signalled the country’s ascension into the neoliberal global arena, featuring an ideal global citizen, “the New Indian” (ibid., 29). It has been noted that while economic
liberalization had a positive effect on India’s economy at the macro level, the reforms heightened economic inequality and removed the safety net for the masses living in poverty (Corbridge and Harris 2000; Stegar and Roy 2010). However, the narrative of “New India”, Chowdhury argues, elided this schism of benefits and the painful costs to some sections of the population, requiring “an anxious disavowal” of “the old India, characterized by crowds, noise, poverty, socialism, and state-funded projects” although this remains “a specter that cannot be entirely extinguished” (ibid., 41).

Contrary to suggestions that globalization has resulted in the demise of the nation-state, Oza shows that “efforts were made to compensate for the loss of autonomy by establishing India’s independence and cultural difference from the West” (2006, 2). Vanita observes that “the construction of India as ‘not West’” echoes the conception of India in the nineteenth-century nationalist imaginary; indeed, she says, “the negotiation of global capital and state power within third-world nation-states like India often emerges through new nationalisms that instantiate a hierarchical East/West dichotomy” (2003, 63).

Ascent of the Middle Class

Liberalization was seen as catering to the demands and aspirations of India’s middle class (Fernandes 2006; Mankekar 1999; Oza 2006), which had since Independence been a politically influential and ideologically prominent category, even if it was numerically outnumbered by the poor (Varma 2007). The middle class is seen as a desirable class to belong to (Mankekar 1999; Van Wessel 2001) being neither too elite nor too poor, and thus came to be understood as encompassing the common man even though in fact the poor are more numerous (Deshpande 2003). Mankekar notes: “Being middle class was not just about acquiring financial security; it was also about attaining and maintaining respectability, sexual modesty, family honour. Put another way, middle-classness was a moral virtue, a structure of
feeling, the habitation of a safe space that distinguished one from less fortunate (less worthy) Others, and therefore a vantage point on the world” (2003, 114).

The middle class as a category is notoriously difficult to define in India (Deshpande 2003). During liberalization, the Indian middle class was marketed to global corporations as “the third largest nation in the world”, indicating the numerical strength of the class although its actual consuming power proved to be substantially less than the middle class in developed nations (Fernandes 2006, Oza 2006). Estimates for the size of the middle class vary from 200 million to 500 million people (Varma 1999; Desphande 2003; Dickey 2012) and scholars point to the fragmentation of this class, (Deshpande 2003) which could be more accurately referred to as the middle classes (Dickey 2012). Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the size of the middle class burgeoned since liberalization – National Council of Applied Economic Research data showed that the percentage of middle-class households more than doubled from 6.9 percent in 1985 to 15.44 percent in 1999-2000 (Gopal 2011).

Harris says the middle class “includes increasing numbers of highly paid professional people, managers and executives, white collar workers, and intellectuals – and the mass of petty traders and producers, as well – and which is certainly of ever increasing significance though its actual size and precise boundaries are very hard to determine” (2011, 447). Acknowledging the heterogeneity of the middle class in India, Appadurai notes that “its core consists of government servants, middle-rung professionals, owners of medium-sized businesses, and middle-rank corporate employees” (1988, 5-4). This group, he says, is constructing a new ideology and consumption style that traverses ethnic, regional, and caste boundaries. An important marker of middle-classness is fluency in English, a trait that has its origins in the emergence of the middle class from the professional bureaucracy nurtured by the British colonial rulers (Fernandes 2006; Dickey 2012), although increasingly the ranks of
the middle class have been swelled by those who are more comfortable speaking Hindi and/or regional languages (Dwyer 2002).

Thus, the middle class may be more productively demarcated by sociocultural markers and ideological underpinnings rather than economic data. In the context of post-liberalization India, Fernandes proposes:

The rise of the new Indian middle class represents the political construction of a social group that operates as a proponent of economic liberalization. This middle class is not “new” in terms of its structural or social basis. In other words, its “newness” does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population entering the middle class. Rather, its newness refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization. At a structural level, this group largely encompasses English-speaking urban white-collar segments of the middle class who are benefiting from new employment opportunities (particularly in private-sector employment). However, the heart of the construction of this social group rests on the assumption that other segments of the middle class and upwardly mobile working class can potentially join it” (2006, xviii).

It is this configuration of the middle class as the advocates of economic liberalization that I believe is operationalized in chick lit. Inherent in this formulation is an underlying a nationalistic pride in India’s entry onto the global playing field, captured in right-wing Hindu political party Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) “India Shining” campaign which signalled “an overcoming of the postcolonial melancholy that was sometimes evident in the earlier generation, yes, but also a celebration of India’s putative global status, an abandonment of social and political aims, a loss of faith in the state and in Nehruvian secularism, a concomitant celebration of capitalism, as well as an increasing use of Hindu nationalist tropes and themes” (Anjaria 2015, 21). This is the zeitgeist that infuses commercial English fiction by Indian writers such as Chetan Bhagat and the filmic adaptations of these novels which are underpinned by a valorization of “self-actualization, fiscal well-being, romantic love, friendship, nuclear families, social reform” (Joshi 2015, 369). The underlying logic of the Chetan Bhagat novel, Gopal says, is “to imagine a different future where personal betterment
and social progress are intextricably linked” (2015 366). While chick lit’s concerns are somewhat different, the underlying affect remains the same as I will discuss in Chapter 2.

It is important to note that since the middle class numerically comprised largely upper-caste Hindus, it is this identity that has become hegemonic (Oza 2006). While caste and class are distinct but overlapping systems of rankings, studies have shown the two to be correlated (Deshpande 2003). Upper-caste members numerically dominate a number of white collar professions, such as information technology, that flourished under economic liberalization (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007, Vaid 2014). Dickey (2012) notes that ideals widely considered middle class such as “moderation, deliberation, and decency” that were historically associated with the upper castes have been adopted as middle-class values.

*Hindu Nationalism*

Rajagopal has highlighted the “opportunistic alliance” between liberalization and Hindu nationalism (2001b, 3). Mankekar defines “Hindu nationalism” as being “marked by attempts to redefine the identity of the Indian nation, in terms of a monolithic Hindu culture”, which draws “its potency from constructions of an antique past in which Hindus existed as a clearly defined ‘unified’ community; derives its legitimacy from history; and is predicated on discourses of a demonized Other”. Hindu nationalism is culturally essentialist, resting on “inherent” characteristics such as “claims to a heritage of deep spirituality (dependent in turn on physical discipline) and on the premise that ties between individuals must be subordinated to loyalty to the collectivity (the family, community, and nation)” (1999, 178).

It has been pointed out that tacit and sometimes explicit references to a glorious Hindu/Aryan past were strategies drawn upon by anti-colonial nationalists in imagining the nation (Mankekar 1999; Deshpande 2003; Rajagopal 2001b). Given this tradition, Deshpande sees the Nehruvian era as offering a pause in the sacralizing discourse: “The ‘golden age’ of secularism was predicated not on the defeat of communalism, but rather its repression and...
displacement from the national public sphere” (2003, 82). However, due to a number of reasons too complex to elucidate here, since the 1980s, Hindu nationalism has gained force, fuelled by the overlap between the middle class and upper castes (Oza 2006, 24). Incidents such as the Mandal Commission report which expanded the scope of reservations for the lower castes and the Shah Bano case in which the supposedly secular Congress government was perceived to have pandered to the Muslim community (Oza 2006) heightened upper-caste middle-class support for Hindu nationalism.

The televization of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, on Doordarshan played into the framework of Hindu nationalism. The serials suggested themselves as authoritative representations of Indian culture and “seemed to impose a master narrative of a unified Hindu community” (Mankekar 1999, 174). Mankekar has astutely pointed to the gendered imaginings of the nation inherent in the portrayal of Ram Rajya whereby “kingdom and family become metonyms for each other: the essence of Ram Rajya lies in the benevolent rule of the father/king over his children/subjects, and in the obedience of the children/subjects to their father/king” (1999, 205). Three years after the Ramayana was aired, Hindu nationalists stormed and razed the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, which they claimed was erected on the site of a temple commemorating the birth of Ram. While scholars such as Mankekar (1999) and Rajagopal (2001b) stop short of drawing a causal relation between two events, Mankekar notes that “the Ramayan shaped ‘commonsense’ conceptions of Indian culture, belonging, and identity in an unfolding war of position” (1999, 165). Hindu nationalism hardened ideas of masculinity around the idea of a virile, aggressive, Hindu male modelled on the god Ram (Chakravarti 1998; Jain 2001) while goddess iconography was invoked to cast Indian women, who were envisaged as normatively Hindu and upper caste, as either devoted mothers or selfless defenders of the nation (Sarkar, 1995). Reddy argues that “Indian womanhood thus becomes a bodily site upon which discourses of

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Hindu nationalism are produced and reinforced”, while caste, class and regional differences among Indian women are erased (2003, 63).

**Women and the Nationalist Imaginary**

In the aftermath of economic liberalization, the breaching of the nation’s borders by foreign capital, goods and influences such as satellite television sparked anxieties about Indian culture that played out on the bodies of women (Oza 2006). On the one hand, liberalization offered opportunities in education and the workplace that were claimed by urban, educated, middle-class women (Jha and Pujari 1996; Chowdhury 2001; Maslak and Singhal 2008). On the other hand, the perceived loss of sovereignty as a result of the nation’s encounter with globalization, “resulted in the displacement of control onto the national culture and identity”, particularly gender and sexual identities (Oza 2006, 1). This paradox was represented in mass media images of the New Indian Woman who, Sunder Rajan observes, was “‘new’ in the sense both of having evolved and arrived in response to the times, as well as being intrinsically ‘modern’ and ‘liberated’”, possessing “a pan-Indian identity that escapes regional, communal, or linguistic specificities, but not does not become ‘westernized’” (1993, 130). The advertisements for consumer products of the 1990s featuring the New Indian Woman, Sunder Rajan says, provided “a normative model of citizenship that is, significantly, now gendered female” (ibid., 131). Here, a distinction is made between the older married woman who exercises her choice for the greater good of her family and the younger woman “who may enact actual rebellion or even project sexual desire” under the assumption that this freedom will be tamed by her inevitable marriage. Youth thus becomes “a sanctioned space for a last fling of rebellion” (ibid.), a rebellion I will argue is being enacted more elaborately and extensively in chick lit.

In the post-liberalization reworking of gender roles, Oza says, “women carried the responsibility of embodying the nation’s modernity. The emergence of the ‘new liberal
Indian woman’ as the self-assured, independent, rich, fashionable, woman during this time became the mimetic trope of the nation under globalization” even as this woman had to take care not to become “too modern” and thus, remain tethered to tradition (2006, 13). One of the most recognizable embodiments of the New Indian Woman were the Indian beauty queens of the 1990s who dispelled unease regarding the “Westernization” involved in such competitions by reassurances from both the young women themselves and significantly their parents that they remained “traditional” Indian women at heart (Munshi 2001, Reddy 2006; Radhakrishnan 2008).vii

In theorizing the New Indian Woman, Sunder Rajan points out that “the liberation of women is separated from the contemporary women’s movement: by making liberation a matter of individual women’s achievement and choice, the development of the new woman is made to appear as a ‘natural’ outcome of benevolent capitalist socio-economic forces” (1993, 131). Moreover, the New Indian Woman is “rendered safe” by positing her in a continuum that is undergirded by assumptions of current or future marriage (ibid.). Ipshita Chanda argues that the ideological manoeuvres behind advertising in the post-liberalization era “obliterate the political project of feminisms and appropriate certain aspects of the women’s movement agenda into the construction of a new sign system which evolves around the subject position ‘woman’” (1991, 67). These discussions of the New Indian Woman predate analyses of postfeminism by Western feminists and yet appear to point to the appearance of the same phenomenon, a simultaneous invoking and disavowal of feminism.

The New Indian Woman in the Novel

While seemingly liberal but essentially conservative representations of women proliferated in popular media, literary representations of the New Indian Woman displayed some complexity. Lisa Lau shows how the New Indian Women in Shashi Deshpande’s novels are forced to negotiate between the cultural valorization of acceptance of suffering as
a sign of strength and “their own theoretical notions of equality between the sexes, personal fulfillment as important, and individual happiness as a goal” (2006, 164-5). Deshpande’s narratives continue some of the themes in novels by women writers of the 1950s and 1960s who explore the tensions in women’s domestic lives and their struggles for identity in a patriarchal society whether in the elite class (Nayantara Sahgal), in rural settings (Kamala Markandaya) or through a focus on psychological states (Anita Desai) (Narayan and Mee 2009).

In popular culture, the novels of Shobha De and Namita Gokhale charted the journey of self-exploration of urban women in high society and dissatisfied housewives. Gokhale’s Paro (1984), which dealt with the extramarital affairs of the urban elite, was one of the earliest attempts to provide Indian women with an indigenous version of popular romantic fiction. Following Paro were the bestselling novels of Shobha De, a former model and editor of gossip magazines, who took as her subject the lives of urban high society women. Her debut novel Socialite Evenings (1989) loosely mirrored her own experiences through the voice of her protagonist, a middle-class social climber. De’s novels were sharply critiqued for their sexual frankness and consumption-fuelled plots, that provided Indian versions of the popular form known as the bonkbuster (see Appendix 1). Nevertheless, Socialite Evenings sold a record 35,000 copies, and reportedly helped Penguin India stay in business (Kasbekar 2006). De also pioneered the use of Hinglish to mimic the speech of Mumbai residents (Dwyer 2000), honing her skill in this jargon as the editor of a popular film magazine. Dwyer notes that De focuses on “women’s search for meaning in relationships and, unusually for most forms of popular fiction, in their work” (ibid., 202).

Further, Dwyer notes that De, both in her celebrity lifestyle and her writing, “promotes a new kind of modern, bourgeois family, a modern Hindu family for the next millennium” (ibid., 206). Although De’s novels are justifiably compared to the “sex and
shopping novels” of the West (see Appendix 1), Dwyer advocates exploring their complexities beyond seeing them as “the relocation of western popular novels to an Indian situation” (ibid.). This reminder is useful for my own analysis of chick lit which takes its cue from a form developed in the West. Dwyer says De’s work “shows a new dynamic between social and familial conservatism tied in to ideas of self-determination and a quest for fulfilment through relationships. Her texts are also women-oriented, seeing women as a bridge between the public and the private, and the source of change” (ibid., 206). As women-centric novels that depict their protagonists negotiating and embodying a transitional moment, chick lit novels participate in the tradition of New Indian Women narratives, but I will examine whether they conform to the dialectic of those narratives or rather provide a new working out of the tradition/modernity bind.

**Tradition/Modernity**

If the nineteenth century discourse on Indian womanhood was conceptualized in terms of the distinction between the inner/spiritual and outer/material with the former being associated with women, increasingly Indian women’s identity has been framed in terms of “tradition” and “modernity”. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive definition of either of these two terms, but rather to show how a certain configuration of both emerges in Indian chick lit. I demonstrate how modernity is configured in chick lit narratives in relation to tradition, so that the two exist in dialogue with each other.

According to Rudolf and Rudolf:

‘Modernity’ assumes that local ties and parochial perspectives give way to universal commitments and cosmopolitan attitudes; that the truths of utility, calculation, and science take precedence over those of the emotions, the sacred, and the non-rational; that the individual rather than the group be the primary unit of society and politics; that the associations in which men live and work be based on choice not birth; that mastery rather than fatalism orient their attitude toward the material and human environment; that identity be chosen and achieved, not ascribed and affirmed; that work be separated from family, residence, and community in bureaucratic organizations ... (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967, 3-4.)
To this, Deshpande adds: “the revolutionizing of modes of governance with the emergence of democracy, the modern nation-state and its institutional apparatus; the advent of new and intensified notions of time; and, at a somewhat different level, the supplanting of God and Nature by Man and Reason as foundational categories, and the consequent penchant for ‘metanarratives’ (or grand story-lines) of various kinds, most notably those of Progress.” (2003, 28-29).

Geeta Kapur has argued that India’s modernity is always implicated in “the double discourse of the national and the modern” (2000, 288). The subcontinent’s encounter with the modernity was deeply imbricated in the processes of colonization, whereby the British attempted to create “a state” out of the colonized territory in the sub-continent (Chakrabarty 1995; Kaviraj 2010;). However, the actual implementation of the modernist state project in colonial India did not proceed seamlessly. While the early nationalists accepted the need to modernize in some areas, they ultimately articulated a conception of the “modern nation” that differed from the “modular” Western form (Chatterjee 1993, Kaviraj 2005). The impact of colonialism and the anti-colonial conception of “the modern Indian nation” on Indian conceptions of selfhood have been described in the ‘Rehearsing the Self’ section of this chapter.

Scholars have argued that modernity forms the basis of tradition rather than being a development from it and that tradition is not static or unchanging (Niranajana et al 1993; Makdisi 1995; Mani 1998; Grewal and Kaplan 2001). In the colonial period, indologists proposed “an Indian tradition based largely on textual sources, and initially addressed to Europe’s own anxieties about its place the world” (Prasad 2015, 160). Here “tradition” which included “the Sanskritic textual tradition and contemporary practices thought to be deriving from them” was differentiated from an “oral tradition” that included “folk, tribal and other practices that fall outside the purview of both the modern and the Sanskritic traditions” (ibid.,
Indian nationalists extended and worked on this conception of “tradition” in constructing an ideal past (Chakrabarty 1992; Chatterjee 1993; Deshpande 2003; Kaviraj 2010) from which emerged a “national culture” that encompassed “the classical heritage in the arts, traditions of education (the guru-sishya parampara), family structure (the joint family was celebrated as quintessentially Indian) and the deep-rooted customs and practices of village India” (Prasad 2015, 161). Here, “culture” as “Indian tradition” becomes “all ‘the wonder that was’ pitted against which the present inevitably falls short” (Niranjana et al. 1993, 1). While “tradition” and “culture” are often used synonymously, Uberoi (1998) notes that in the 1990s “tradition” has come to have a slightly negative connotation, while “culture” is employed positively as something that must be preserved. Further, as discussed in the section on the New Indian Woman, Indian women have often been the sites on which tradition is anchored. Thus, Sangari and Vaid note that “both tradition and modernity have been, in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies” (1990, 17).

**The Global Indian**

At the turn of the millennium, however, the tradition/modernity binary came to be mapped onto that of the local/global. While studies of globalization have highlighted how the boundaries of the nation-state are being transcended through deterritorializing moves (Appadurai 1996; Habermas 1998), Fernandes argues that “globality is invented through the deployment of nationalistic narratives” and that representations are a crucial site through which the relationship between the national and the global is negotiated (2000, 612). Her analysis of ads on Indian television points to a “nationalizing” of global products and brands, both by obvious recourse to Indian nationalist and popular songs, securing endorsement from Indian celebrities and the sponsorship of sports and cultural events as well as by borrowing narratives that drew on “older, historically specific meaning, that present a fusion between national tradition and global capitalism” (ibid., 615). Here, Indianness becomes the ground
on which the global is confronted so that “it is an aestheticized version of the Indian nation-state rather than a transnational cultural identity which attempts to manage India’s entry into the global economy” (ibid., 618).

The subjectivity that emerged out of this historical conjuncture has been referred to by some as the “new Indian” (Chowdhury 2011), “global Indian” (Vanita 2006; Radhakrishnan 2008) or “global desi” (Cullity 2004), who is “an idealized representation of cosmopolitan Indianness that many urban Indians can relate and aspire to” (Sandhu 2014, 76). A global/local (desi) binary was set up, with the understanding that this could and was being bridged. Thus, foreign satellite channels such as MTV thoroughly indigenized, focusing their programming in Hindi cinematic music and mediating Western music through VJs who projected “desi cool”. The Indian citizen in these configurations is “an irreducible and unashamed cultural hybrid” (Cullity 2004, 420) within which “global and local, cosmopolitan and traditional, modernity and tradition are all inextricably bound together” (ibid., 409). In Indian cinema, the 1990s saw the emergence of the diasporic hero and heroine, who demonstrated that one could live abroad, wear Western clothes and practice conspicuous consumption, but still remain Indian “at heart” (Uheroi 1998; Mankekar 1999). Sharpe (2005) has pointed out that the diasporic hero/heroine mirrored and resolved the middle class’s own anxieties about its Indianness in the face of liberalization.

If Bhabha (1994) has argued for the subversive potential of hybridity via its articulation of the excess of the colonizer’s narrative, Fernandes points to a “fetishization of hybridity” in the current moment, wherein the formation of hybrid cultural forms is deeply imbricated in capital formation within the boundaries of the nation-state. She notes that “hybridity in contemporary India is inextricably connected to the class-based cosmopolitanism of the urban middle classes” (2000, 622). Further, because of the contradictions inherent in globalization – overseas capital, products and culture and their...
advantages, but the instability and vulnerability of exposure to the same – gender is mobilized as a stabilizing force. (ibid., 623). Because the “lure of hybridity in this context holds in it the danger of impurity” a politics of gender emerged that focused on the preservation of Indian women’s purity. The question in Indian chick lit as hybrid literary texts is to what extent they participate in the processes of “nationalizing the global” that Fernandes has articulated, and to what end.

The specific implications of the new global/Indian nexus on Indian women’s self-conception find their articulation in Smitha Radhakrisnan’s (2008) study of IT professionals in Silicon Valley and Bangalore. While Youna Kim (2012) posits “tradition” and “modernity” as forces that seem to pull women in opposite directions, the women Radhakrishnan interviewed did not see “Indian” and “global” values as oppositional but rather as complementary (2008, 12). This echoes Titzmann’s (2011) findings in her study of Indian matrimonial websites in which she notes how women described themselves as “assertive” and “confident” but also emphasized their adherence to traditional values, particularly “respect for elders”.

This simultaneity is what Radhakrishnan terms “global Indianness”, key to which is the notion of “finding a ‘balance’ between individual, family and community responsibilities”, a task that specifically falls upon women both in India and in the diaspora (2008, 11-12). Chowdhury has noted how the Bharatiya Janata Party that is currently in power, has been “enormously skillful in creating magic through strategic calls to modernity as well as tradition” (2015, 51). It is exactly this task of strategically deploying modernity and tradition that seems to fall to women; however, as Kim (2012) has noted, this deployment is not always seamless and is the result of constant anxious negotiation. On the one hand, “with higher educational attainment and assumed empowerment, women in Asia are seeking to plan a life of their own with greater capacity for the reflexive project of the self” (Kim
2012, 10). On the other, traditional expectations of women, she says, make it difficult for them to complete the process of individualization which is endlessly played out at the level of imagination, within women’s imaginative self-reflexivity, compounded by feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about everyday life” (ibid., 14). The resulting selfhood is what she terms precarious, and I argue that it is this precarity that is being worked out in Indian chick lit through the subjectivity of the singleton. As discussed earlier, romance has, from early on, been one of the domains in which this negotiation is represented, both in the novel (Chakrabarty 1992) and later in Indian film in which “the couple has to bring its desire for autonomy into equilibrium with familial mores, community norms, and the imperatives of state” (Gopal 2015, 15). It should not be surprising that Indian women choose the romance genre and the novel form to work out the rather unromantic precarious balance between traditional mores and obligations and the pulls of individualism.

A useful observation in Radhakrishnan’s (2008) study is how the “global” and “Indian” are delineated: “This individual self is often understood to be ‘global’, while ‘Indianness’ is associated with collectivism and family solidarity. These aspects are sometimes seen as being in conflict with one another, but they are just as often reconciled with one another through an understanding that for Indian women, individuality must be circumscribed by the family.” Thus, when referring to “modernity” and “tradition” in my study of Indian chick lit, I will be referencing the conceptions that emerged in Radhakrishnan’s study. “Modernity” is associated with the “global” which is allied to a notion of “individualism” seen to have come from the West, while “tradition” is linked to a composite Indianness across the sub-continent that prizes the family, community and relational identity but is also upper-caste and middle class in orientation.

In the same way as Dipesh Chakrabarty, while acknowledging that “Europe” and “India” “as figures of the imaginary” are contested terms, chooses to “treat them as though
they were given, reified categories, opposites paired in a structure of domination and sub-
ordination” (1992, 1), I will do the same for “tradition” and “modernity”. I acknowledge their
conceptual slipperiness, but for the purpose of my analysis choose to reify their meanings to
reflect the view concretized in the novels under consideration. In fact, it is the very
crystallization of the ideas of “tradition” and “modernity” that I attend to, but to do so I must
use employ these terms themselves. I chose to use “tradition” and “modernity” rather than
“Indian” and “global” even though there is overlap between the two pairs because I wish to
conjoin my argument to discussions of the binary that predated the liberalization moment.
Although henceforth I will not enclose these terms in quotation marks, I employ them with
references to the specific configurations described above.

While the protagonists of Indian chick lit novels at first glance seem to be in the New
Indian Woman mode of balancing modernity and tradition, I believe that there are some
differences. I would argue that the novels feature a development on the idea of the New
Indian Woman, one where the binaries of tradition/modernity, home/the world, local/global
cannot hold. Rather, what emerges is a much more hybridized identity, wherein tradition and
modernity are strategically deployed, and not always in ways that favour conservative or
patriarchal agendas. Indian chick lit novels allude to this idea of pan-Indian tradition,
particularly one that deputes women as the bearers of tradition and the preservers of family,
but they also resist it. In employing a bildungsroman form, the novels are weighted in favour
of an individualistic narrative, one that then veers towards neoliberal discourse but which
also holds out other possibilities.
Chapter 2: Enter the Indian Singleton

In the opening pages of Keep the Change, the protagonist Damayanthi contemplates her life on the occasion of her twenty-sixth birthday and concludes: “I am so far from finding a man that it looks like I am going to be a frustrated spinster for life” (Subramanian 2010, 4). Far away from the sleepy environs of the Chennai suburb that Damayanthi calls home, Aisha, the Mumbai-based protagonist of Almost Single, comments on the dismissive attitude of society towards single women of a certain age, noting: “Sometimes I think there should be support groups like the AA\(^1\) out there for us” (Kala 2007, 3).

Most Indian chick lit novels begin with the protagonist’s assertion of singleness – being unmarried or unattached to a man – as an essential part of her identity and her ambivalence if not outright angst about this status. In this, the Indian chick lit protagonist allies herself with Bridget Jones, whose opening diary entries in Bridget Jones’s Diary (Fielding 1996), express a similar affect. In Anglo-American chick lit, singleness is a problem to be solved, and chick lit charts the journey of solving it. In Indian chick lit, despite the seemingly mandatory lamentations that often accompany mentions of the single state, by the end of the novels, the protagonists express ambivalence about being coupled and ultimately singleness reveals itself to be a window of opportunity. Being single, then, is more than being with or without a man; a careful reading of the novels reveals that a number of ingredients go into the making of the “singleton”. In this chapter, I tease out the discursive underpinnings of the singleton as an aspirational subjectivity to show how certain class and caste inflections mark this newly normalized femininity.

The Singleton

The obvious marker of “singleton” identity is “being single”, that is, unattached

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\(^1\) AA refers to Alcoholics Anonymous, the self-help group for alcohol addiction
romantically to a partner, usually implied to mean a man. Taylor (2012) points to the hypervisibility of single women in Western popular culture since the 1990s when the first generation after the second wave of the women’s movement came of age. Growing awareness of the potential of these young women as a consumer segment made “single, young, female” a category of focus. There does not seem to be a comparable address to single, young women in India, though at the turn of the millennium advertisements increasingly began to target women as working professionals not simply in their maternal or housewifely role as had been the case in the past (Munshi 2001). Although there is literature on urban working women, academic literature specifically on the single, urban, upper-middle-class woman is scarce, possibly indicating that this is a category of analysis that requires further study, but also that it may be an emerging category that did not exist in the past in India. For example, it is difficult to obtain census figures on urban, young, single women, as “single women” as a demographic category includes unmarried, divorced, widowed and separated women in both urban and rural areas. According to news reports based on census data, the population of unmarried, divorced, widowed, or separated Indian women has grown 40 per cent between 2001 and 2011 and single women constitute 21 per cent of India’s 353 million women above the age of 20. The Times of India reported that “single women in the age-group of 20 to 29 have clocked the sharpest rise – 68 per cent, suggesting that more of them are either separated or divorced or delaying marriage, perhaps to pursue higher education and careers.” The newspaper also reported that the incomes of urban women had doubled in the 2001-2011 decade and that brand managers were designing campaigns around women.

Nevertheless, as the opening quotes of this chapter indicate, middle-class young women come under immense pressure to marry in their early twenties onwards. Thus, in each of the novels under consideration, being unmarried becomes an identity marker for the
protagonist. The opening pages of *Keep the Change* (Subramanian 2010) offer a glimpse into the relentless pressure society imposes on unmarried women in their mid-twenties as Damayanthi’s parents desperately fix her up with (unsuitable) men, display her at social gatherings adorned in traditional clothes and jewellery, and browbeat her into going along with their plans. Subramanian depicts this with a broad satirical brush, endowing Damayanthi with a rebellious voice in her head that critiques the endless rounds of the arranged marriage circuit that she is forced to endure. For example, having been cajoled into attending a wedding dressed in a sari and adorned with a suitable amount of gold, Damayanthi notices two older women appraising her and thinks:

_Vision of myself with a large sticker on my forehead saying ‘Bride Available’, and a cardboard sheet listing my golden virtues around my neck like those people you see proclaiming The End of the World or urging us to Save the Yellow-backed Indian Ocean Shark. I am standing in a corner and assorted Maamis with oily sons are jostling each other to get a good look. Amma is handing out tokens saying, ‘One by one please. No pushing.’* (ibid., 17)

Like Damayanthi, Aisha in *Almost Single* is critical of the arranged marriage circuit that is weighted against women and the pressure on young women to marry. “The older a guy gets, the bigger his dating pool. It works just the reverse for women. We come attached with a ‘best before’ tag, and if – god forbid! – we reach the expiry date while still single, it’s downhill all the way from there” (Kala 2007, 11). Aisha also comments on the surveillance of young women by older women at weddings: “These aunties, unlike some of the uncles, look at you unabashedly, and if in a group, then several pairs of eyes are fixed on you in an amazing synchronization. I assume it must be like facing a firing squad, except this one challenges you to smile at them, which you must do, especially if you are a single gal. You never know whose mummy or massi one of them could turn out to be” (ibid., 212). Nevertheless, these aunties are not the only surveyors of single women; rather, to be a single woman is to be always subject to scrutiny. When Aisha and her friends enter a nightclub

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2 Massi: Mother’s sister
without male escorts, they are the cynosure of all eyes: “Men and women alike, look at you with these cash-register eyes swiftly totalling up your assets. It’s like ‘let’s give the face an eight’, ‘the ass a seven’, ‘the grand total being…’ It’s unnerving if you’re new to the game, but when you’ve been single for as long as we have, you get used to it. Besides, once you are comfortably ensconced in a corner, it’s fun to do it to others” (ibid., 50).

In a society in which marriage and motherhood are viewed as a social and familial duty, women living in Indian cities alone, that is, without the protective presence of their natal families or husbands, are viewed with suspicion (Kakar 1989; Puri 1999). This is apparent in the following exchange between Damayanthi and her mother in Keep the Change:

“Amma, Appa, I am going to Mumbai, not Bosnia. So many girls go abroad alone these days. Why are you making such a big fuss?”

“If you were married, I would have said, ‘Go anywhere,’ and given you my blessings,” Amma sniffed. “Now you have to be even more careful. So far, we carefully safeguarded your reputation, brought you up with good traditional values.”

“Now my value will fall in the marriage market. Everyone will say, ‘That Damayanthi, she lives alone in Mumbai! Sinful, wicked woman!’ I will never get married” (Subramanian 2010, 57).

Similarly, in Almost Single, Aisha’s mother complains that there are “challenges” in finding a match for Aisha because she lives alone. When Aisha demands to know why “being independent and socially active [is perceived] as a social handicap”, her mother coyly remarks “Well, you know boys like fresh girls…” (Kala 2007, 234). Thus, Mamma Bhatia expresses the commonly held assumption that a single woman living alone must be sexually active and thus socially suspect.

Sarah Pinto has observed during a project on women’s mental health care that the psychiatric community’s questions about who a woman’s family is and where she might go after treatment belied “wider assumptions that the unattached woman is a problem to be fixed – fixed in space” so that “the single woman is defined in terms of dislocation, she is also shadowed by notions of broken kinship and associations with madness” (2014, 247). Middle-
class young women on whose respectability some of the onus of the anxious perseverance of family’s class status falls are particularly the subject of supervision before they marry (Mankekar 1999; Puri 1999; Donner 2016). However, as liberalization has offered opportunities in education and the workplace that were claimed by urban, educated, middle-class women (Jha and Pujari, 1996; Maslak and Singhal 2008), the trend of moving away from the parental home to pursue job opportunities is opening up the possibility of “the single life”, a lifestyle explored in Indian chick lit. The novels propose a vision of what a woman living alone in the city and unmoored from the constraints of parental control can do with the possibilities afforded by economic liberalization.

While some critics have highlighted the rise in the number of singles internationally, an ostensible “globalization of singlehood” (Kaufmann 2008), Taylor (2012) notes that the figure of the singleton is imbued with “discursive unease”, sometimes celebrated particularly for commercial purposes but at others reviled as the product of feminist overreach. Despite the proliferation of the singleton identity, “the wedding-industrial complex” continues to be a “recession-proof industry” (Ingraham 1999) with happiness still being seen as contingent on romantic partnership and marriage (Ahmed 2007). Thus, singleness is “routinely excluded from narratives of how happiness can be attained” (Taylor 2012, 25). Instead, the single woman is exhorted to perform the necessary labour required to remedy her single state. Although “choice” figures prominently in postfeminist discourse, Taylor notes that the “choice” to remain single is effaced in favour of the “choice” to be partnered (ibid., 26).

The word “singleton” itself in its current usage was popularized by Bridget Jones’s Diary (Fielding 1999) in which Bridget’s feminist friend Sharon argues for the increasing normalcy of this identity. However, scholars have noted that the novel tends to offer an ambivalent attitude to singleness, celebrating the singleton lifestyle while acknowledging the difficulties of sustaining it amid both societal pressure and the protagonists’ own apparent
desire to be coupled (Taylor 2012). Nevertheless, Harzewksi asserts that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* “can be credited with inspiring a genre in which a single funny woman figures predominantly”, although in the end “the principal joke is on single women” (2011, 67). On the other hand, the TV series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) might be said to have inaugurated a more celebratory configuration of the single state. Gill observes that the protagonists of the show could be seen as portraying the “disruptive power of the unruly female subject – carnivalesque and carnivalized in Bakhtin’s sense”, but that ultimately the series “works to re-establish and reaffirm precisely the boundaries it appears to threaten” (2007, 245). However, Taylor has a more optimistic reading of the series, noting that it exposes the “double standards and exclusionary social practices that privilege the coupled” (2012, 65) and attempts to reconfigure the single identity as legitimate. It must be noted that the “single woman” referred to here is not widowed or divorced, but typically a culturally privileged (white in the West or upper-caste, middle-class in India) woman in her twenties or thirties who is not (yet) married. I specifically refer to *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex and the City* because they were popular among urban, middle-class women in India at the turn of the millennium by which time satellite television had become a staple in Indian middle-class households. Television serials such as *Friends* (1994-2004), *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and particularly *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) provided a vision of a certain lifestyle for young urban professionals and concretized the idea of a singleton identity. Indian films at the time were just starting to grapple with single women, with movies such as Madhur Bhandarkar’s *Fashion* (2008) working as cautionary tales, portraying the pitfalls of being a single woman in the city (Pinto 2014).

I would suggest that chick lit texts were one of the first indigenous textual representations of the singleton lifestyle and that the media attention that resulted from the appearance of these novels attracted more visibility to the lifestyle as a whole. The
publication of the first chick lit novels were noticed by both Indian and Western publications, partly as a result of the popularity of chick lit narratives in the West and an interest in how they would be adapted in India, and partly as a representation of the singleton life in India. A Times of India article, for example, described chick lit authors as “hip, humorous, candid, sassy”, terms that could easily be applied to the novel’s protagonists as well, and went on to introduce Advaita Kala, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan and Anuja Chauhan as “the new breed of female authors whose lighthearted tales of singletons looking for love, job satisfaction and the perfect pair of shoes are dominating Indian bookstores these days” (Raaji 2008). An article in the Washington Post in 2007 cited V.K. Karthika, publisher of HarperCollins as saying, “This is the story of the new Indian woman in the cities. She is single, has a career and is willing to have fun, take risks and find a man her way, and not necessarily her family’s way. It is a woman we have only read about in books from the Western countries and now, suddenly we are finding her on Indian roads” (Lakshmi 2007). The novels and media reports on them and their authors, then, were some of the early public discourses on the figure of the singleton in India.

**Middle-Class Milieu**

Although not always explicitly stated, it is obvious that the protagonists of Indian chick lit belong to the middle class. The parents of all these young women come from professional backgrounds: Zoya’s father is a retired army colonel; Arshi’s father is an academic; Jinni comes from an esteemed political family whose legacy goes back to the anti-colonial struggle. Damayanthi’s father’s occupation is not mentioned but the fact that Damayanthi owes her job in an accounting firm to her father’s connections, indicates that the family’s status. In both Damayanthi’s and Aisha’s case, membership to the middle class is powerfully evoked in their mother’s attitude to their daughters’ marital status. Mankekar has noted that, “since respectability, sexual modesty, and family honour were predicated on the
conduct of women, women’s behaviour was monitored especially intensely” in the middle classes (1999, 114). The comments of the mothers of these two young women situate them firmly within middle-class morality, an aspect which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Another important clue to the middle-class status of the young women is their fluency in English and their use of English to communicate with their parents, although in the latter case, English tends to be mixed with local languages. Gopal argues that post-millennial commercial fiction such as the novels of Chetan Bhagat “imagine ‘Young India’ as undoing the distinction of class, caste, and region that have been entangled with linguistic hierarchies in India. In the process, English is claimed not only as an Indian language but as one that is potentially accessible to the masses” (2015, 361). I would argue that the use of English in chick lit retains its class and caste markers, although it is now unabashedly indigenized. Arshi, in You Are Here, is both excluded because of her inability to switch to Hindi – “They see me as this anglicized chick who doesn’t know the value of ghazals3 – and perhaps I don’t. See, my Hindi has never been stellar. We spoke English at home, my parents and I, and I barely scraped through Hindi (which I studied as a “second language”) in school” (2008, 38) – but also judges people she meets on the basis of their English fluency. Of one acquaintance, she says: “Her voice was soft, her English slightly accented, the kind you’d expect from someone who didn’t speak the language at home. I was already judging her, and she was steadily losing points” (ibid., 64). Speaking English smoothly with the right accent is a signifier of cultural capital, thus Jinni is corrected by the aristocratic Zain: “Don’t say roits, Jin, it’s riots. And my shoes are not Naaik, they’re Naaikee. And it’s not veemin, you idiot, it’s women”’ (Chauhan 2010, 53). In The Zoya Factor, Zoya’s colleague gloats that “there was no wonder that true love had blossomed between me and Zahid Pathan, because he was a

3 Ghazal: A genre of lyric poetry dealing with love, often set to music in India
small town, non-MBA-holding, Sports-Quota type and his English *sucked*; just like mine, apparently” (Chauhan 2008, 123). Rather than being a disadvantage though, Chauhan’s protagonists’ mingling of Hindi and English marks them out as down-to-earth and relatable, and being bilingual is seen as an advantage. Thus, Zoya remarks on the strangeness of monolingual foreigners: “Because, hello, what would they switch to if they started getting pally, or angry, or fell in love?” (ibid., 207). Nevertheless, as novels written in English, describing the worlds of protagonists who communicate fluently in English, albeit an English infused with Indian languages in some cases, and addressed to an English-speaking audience, Indian chick lit is circumscribed within an upper-middle-class, upper-caste milieu.

Although the protagonists do not usually openly make caste claims, in novels dealing with impending marriage, it is not surprising that caste comes up directly or indirectly. Because the middle class is disproportionately upper caste (Oza 2006), the caste status of these women can be deduced from their class status and vice versa. Even when authors try to blur the religious affiliation of the protagonists by using first names from other communities such Aisha in *Almost Single* (Kala 2007) and Zoya in *The Zoya Factor* (Chauhan 2008), the caste identity of the protagonists is easily discernable from their last names – Damayanthi is an Iyer, a prestigious Tamil Brahmin sub-caste, Aisha is a Bhatia and Zoya a Solanki, both from Rajput clans and thus Kshatriya castes, and Jinni is a Pande whose her grandmother prides herself on her Brahmin birth. Only Arshi, with a Mangalorean Catholic father and Hindu mother and whose surname is not provided, escapes clear caste delineation though her habitus indicates her upper-caste status. In this sense, the novels contribute to the mainstreaming of Hindu upper-caste identity, by describing almost without exception the lifestyle of Hindu upper-caste middle-class young women, albeit with regional variations. Shivaramma Padikkal has suggested that “literary production is one of the modes by which the dominant group constructs its reality and history” (1993, 200). Since I have suggested
above that chick lit is definitively an expression of the dominant group’s world view, albeit complicated by its feminine authorship and address, the question would be how this world view is articulated in the novels.

**Consuming Modernity**

As upper-caste, middle-class, English-speaking young women, chick lit’s protagonists conform to Fernandes’s definition of the “new middle class” as the primary advocates of economic liberalization described in Chapter 1. Chakravarty and Gooptu suggest that, in the post-liberalization era, “contemporary India has constructed itself in a way in which the middle-class family forms the core of a community and a nation space of plenty, and consumption provides the primary mode of enfranchisement” (2000, 104). In this context, Lakha notes that it is not simply consumption but “consumption of Western-style consumer goods and chic commodities” that marks middle-class identity (2009, 259). While television sets, two-wheelers and then cars, pressure cookers, and more recently cell phones, might be traditionally have been icons of middle-class consumption, the products and brands mentioned in chick lit are selected to display a cosmopolitanism that marks the protagonists as global citizens.

Western chick lit texts are remarkable for their fetishization of fashion and luxury brands (Van Slooten 2006; Wells 2006; Harzewski 2011), particularly apparent in Sophie Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* novels and HBO’s *Sex and the City* series. The combination of romance with the glorification of commodities should not be surprising, given that both participate in circuits of desire (Illouz 1997). Indian chick lit does not entirely partake of the fetishization of luxury brands per se, but rather as Pamela Thomas has argued, “centralizes informed consumerism and schools readers in what now counts as currencies of value” (2014, 7). In her study of romance reading in India, Parmeswaran (2002) notes that readers preferred novels with details of Western luxury living and consumption and that they
reported that part of the utility of the novels was learning “how to live and enjoy life” compared to their (financially and socially) conservative parents. The shift in attitudes to both a consumption-oriented lifestyle is encapsulated by Damayanthi in *Keep The Change* (Subramanian 2010) who contrasts her own staid existence in Chennai to what she imagines as the life of her British correspondent Victoria who “changes her boyfriend and designer handbags every week and lives a wild bohemian life in London”. Envisioning a glamorous life for Victoria, Damayanthi says:

“I envy you, Vic. I can see you in your short skirt and long boots, on the arm of your latest Hugh Grant lookalike, sashaying into the Ritz Carlton, tossing down a strawberry daiquiri and a snack before heading off to shake your shapely legs at the hottest little club in town. While I was busy trudging through bio textbooks during my adolescence, you were probably conducting real experiments on the subject. I am so far from finding a man that it looks like I am going to be a frustrated spinster for life. (ibid., 4)

Damayanthi’s vision of what a young woman’s life should look like and the elements that go into the making of it are evident: seductive Western dress, access to hotels and clubs, consumption of sophisticated food and entertainment, and most importantly, a handsome man to escort one through this lifestyle. Nevertheless, Damayanthi also represents an older middle-class caution with regard to spending money. Updating her “look” through the acquisition of suitable clothing and accessories is seen as mandatory for entry into “singleton” rather than “spinster” identity, but she exercises this spending with care:

I have spent Rs 950 on a black handbag. You are probably buying a dashing Jane Birkin bag that costs about the same as what I might make in ten years doing bonded labour at SSV&Sons and I guess you will get bored of it within a week. My most extravagant purchase to date was the cheapest in the shop. (ibid., 60)

Interestingly, ethnographic studies among the middle class in smaller towns have revealed a “morally ambivalent” view of consumption (Van Wessel 2004) and an emphasis on careful spending rather than abandonment (Dickey 2012). A distinction may be made here between the “old” and “new middle classes”, the latter defined by Fernandes (2006), as well
as the generation gap. In personifying both (old) middle-class prudence and (new) middle-
class pressure to conform, Damayanthi marks herself out as a transitional figure, who has not
yet fully embraced the singleton lifestyle.

In *The Zoya Factor* (Chauhan 2008), Zoya distinguishes herself not because of her
lack of sophistication with regard to consumption or her financial prudence, but an
appreciation for lower-middle kitsch that marks her as grounded amid the post-liberalization
fascination with the glossy and glamorous. The novel is set in the advertising industry and is
choc-a-bloc with references to consumer products and the mediascape of hoardings, jingles,
and television ads. However, although Zoya prepares for her foreign trip splurging on “a
purple corduroy jacket” because “I’ve noticed that all the cool, well-travelled-looking types
always carry or wear jackets” (ibid., 201) and goes shopping while in Bangladesh, we don’t
see much evidence of actually buying things. Instead of the shopping malls that signify the
spoils of liberalization, Zoya and Nikhil wander around the garish Ajmal Khan Road night
market, passing “carts piled high with rosy red apples, knobby, grey-green water-chestnuts
and bright yellow nimbus⁴” and “carts selling fake Dresden China shepherdesses and
watches” (ibid., 186) before finally purchasing “two plastic fly-swatters-cum-back-scratchers
for the princely sum of ten rupees” (ibid., 187). By indulging in consumption practices of a
more modest kind, Zoya marks herself as a different kind of chick lit protagonist, one that
will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Other chick lit protagonists are much more comfortable shopping, particularly for
clothes that will signal not just their middle-classness but their participation in global fashion
trends. In *Battle for Bittora*, Jinni’s sophistication is indicated not only by her own interest in
“the perfect little ivory crochet top at Bizarre” and “a pair of stretch jeans at Mango which
made my butt look all peachy” (Chauhan 2010, 126) but also her friendship with gay

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⁴ Nimbus: Limes
fashionista Rumi who posts status updates on Facebook such as “Gaiman Tagore Rumi has checked into shopaholic rehab after overindulging disgracefully at the Mango and Bizarre spring sales” (ibid., 126). Aisha in Almost Single embarks on retail therapy trips with her friend Misha who maxes out her credit card in preparation for a date. Partaking of the postfeminist idea that shopping can equal empowerment, Aisha says of her penchant for shoes: “Shoes truly emancipate women. They don’t care what you had for dinner last night, or even for the last five years” (Kala 2007, 40). Lakha has pointed out that while middle-class consumption is geared towards a hankering after “global consumer icons”, this does not represent a “homogenization of culture” (2009, 260). Thus, Aisha is equally discerning of Indian fashion brands, demonstrated in her fondness for the designer Rohit Bal. Purchasing a sari by the designer means she “won’t be able to eat for the next month, but fortunately that fits in fabulously with the new diet I’m about the embark on” (Kala 2007, 114). Indian chick lit articulates some of the changes in consumption among middle-class Indians who now have access to Western consumer goods and lifestyles at home and are comfortable mixing them with local status markers.

Fernandes (2006) notes that it is not “actual economic consumption” but rather a familiarity with the aesthetics and social status of available commodities and consumption patterns that is salient. Arshi in You Are Here (Madhavan 2008) personifies this easy familiarity; the novel does not make consumption conspicuous, rather her lifestyle – sharing a flat with a friend, working in a dead-end job, drinking, smoking and partying – is narrated as natural and obvious. The “singleton lifestyle” is more explicitly articulated in Almost Single (Kala 2007) which opens with a conversation between the protagonist Aisha and her friend Misha about the events of the night before, which involves references to both smoking and drinking French wine, another expensive commodity. Thus, the lifestyle that is described in this novel is marked by identifiers of conspicuous consumption, which allows Aisha to “dine
at five-star luxury hotels, and stay at five-star hotels during my travels, ... name old and new world wines with great elan, and ... tell my cheeses apart” (ibid., 4). This cultural capital is reinforced by her a job as Guest Relations Manager at the Grand Orchid Hotel, where Aisha is witness to the life of those in the upper classes. Summarizing her life Aisha says, “So, in brief, I tolerate my job, hate my boss, annoy my X, and bond big time with my friends. All this while living under the open sky of urban, second-fastest-economy-in-the-world, India” (ibid.). Here, Aisha openly alludes to the connection between India’s economic growth and her lifestyle. Running through the novel is an obsession with class signifiers – cars, club membership, champagne brunches and the like – and a dismissal of those who are not familiar with this luxury. Aisha and her friends were once new entrants too, except that they are now comfortably ensconced in upper middle-class urbania and aspiring to greater class heights through marriage. These narratives seem to attest to the idea that middle-class identity has to be performed (Dickey 2012; McGuire 2012) a performance closely associated with consumption of certain goods to signify modernity (Mankekar 1999; Chowdhury 2011).

**Family of Friends**

Moreover, the performance of singleton identity is enabled by the presence of a group of like-minded friends. In the Anglo-American context, it has been noted that chick lit celebrates close friendships that function as surrogate urban families (Whelehan 2005; Harzewski 2011; Taylor 2012). Although family ties loom large in Indian chick lit, given that the protagonist of Indian chick lit finds herself solo in the city, she does form close bonds with other young people, though these are not necessarily female. In *Keep the Change*, Damayanthi is schooled in the ways of the world by the suave metrosexual Jimmy while Jinni’s gay friend Rumi plays a similar role in *Battle for Bittora*. In *The Zoya Factor*, in which the protagonist remains among family, her closest friend Monita is also a maternal figure. *Almost Single* and *You Are Here* are the novels that conform most closely to the
Western paradigm of friends as surrogate family. In addition to Misha and Anushka, Aisha’s friends circle includes the gay couple Nic and Ric and the group’s regular outings to brunch at five-star hotels and nightclubs are described. For the protagonist Aisha, “friends are really the family you choose” (Kala 2007, 119), epitomized in a scene in the middle of the novel in which the five friends, including a gay couple, partake of a picnic hamper of international gourmet goodies forming a picture-perfect snapshot of the good urban life. In You Are Here, Madhavan’s depiction of her friendships with her roommate Topsy, her childhood classmate Deeksha and a newly acquired friend Esha is as detailed and intense as her depiction of her love interests. The significance of friends is apparent in that Arshi sees herself through them, a tendency she attributes to being the only child of her parents. In fact, Arshi comes close to elevating friendship to a significance greater than romantic partnership when she asks: “Why do we save our best, most childish, most impetuous live for our lovers? It’s a fabulous way to be, passion-filled and spontaneous, exuberant, sometimes unreasonable, and I’m sure our friends deserve it way more than our lovers” (Madhavan 2008, 215). These friendships form the base of support from which the protagonist conducts her explorations of the single life. Although not all novels centre friendships and friends (and the values they represent) can be overshadowed by or remain in tension with family bonds, friendship does remain an important element in Indian chick lit, providing a supportive backdrop against which the protagonist’s indulgence in the single life can unfold.

Sites of Visibility

A key assumption in chick lit is the protagonist being situated in the cityscape, particularly the metropolises of Delhi and Mumbai, with Bangalore being a popular third location. The centrality of the city and the protagonist’s relationship with it is a key genre convention. In fact, it has been pointed out that in Sex and the City, the city functions as the ultimate suitor, displacing the romantic hero, and that the four women are female flaneurs
Rachel Dwyer has noted that Bombay is no “mere backdrop” in the novels of Shobha De “but features as the city that enables her characters to pursue their dreams and explore the widest range of opportunities” (2000, 203). Brinda Bose has pointed to the ambivalent position the city has occupied in the Indian nationalist imaginary since the country achieved independence from colonial rule, signifying both the promises of modernity and its ills vis à vis tradition (2008). In Hindi cinema, the city “signifies hope for upward mobility but also risk, uncertainty, and fear of failure if there is no family support” (Virdi 2003, 12) and increasingly, in post-1990s films, the rural comes to function as “a signifier for a simpler way of life prior to globalization” (Sharpe 2005, 60). Indian chick lit, like its Western counterpart, celebrates its urban setting, with the benefits rather than the dangers of being single in the city gaining attention. If the mood of the opening pages of the romances Radway studied are “nearly always set by the heroine’s emotional isolation and her profound sense of loss” as a result of her being removed from the comfort zone of her childhood and family (1984, 134-135), we do not get that sense in chick lit. The protagonists largely seem to revel in their location in the city and their separation from their families.

In You Are Here, Arshi’s life is played out against the backdrop of the city of Delhi in its post-liberalization avatar which features what Anjaria (2015, 215) terms “a new ‘global’ urban aesthetics” including malls, multiplexes cinemas and coffee shops. Recalling her ex-boyfriend, Arshi alludes to “the McDonald’s in Vasant Vihar where we landed up playing hooky from work and ate five plates of French fries, or the bar across the road from his old school where we both got very drunk and snuck into the grounds and tried to get into the bio lab” (Madhavan 2008, 14). The space of the city is mapped by places that only upper-middle-class people would have easy access to. Arshi clarifies that she is not a Delhi girl, but a south Delhi girl who never goes to west Delhi, the part of the city where poorer immigrants live. People she meets are slotted according to “where they live, what they do and which school or
college they went to. Which is, I agree, superficial, but say I was at a party and talking to someone who was a software engineer and there was another guy who worked in films, the film guy would be a better choice for me to talk to, because of our media background, see? Or say the person lived in Gurgaon or Noida or some other place much too far for easy commuting” (ibid., 139). Thus, elitism is explained away as common sense.

Certain key sites of visibility mark singleton identity. One of these is the café. For example, *Almost Single* opens with Aisha being awakened by a call from her friend Misha who invites her to go for coffee to Barista, a popular chain of coffee shops that is one of the markers of upper middle-class urban lifestyle. Zoya in *The Zoya Factor* is equally comfortable in the Coffee Shoppe at the Sonargaon, a five-star hotel in Dhaka with its “peculiar blend of Mediterranean and Shantiniketan” (Chauhan 2008, 29) and the more down-to-earth café [“not as hip as it sounds, it’s really a plants nursery that serves coffee and lousy pizza” (ibid., 148)] at Famous Studios in Mumbai. Coffee shop culture made its advent in India only in the 90s and has soon become a staple of urban young people’s lives as places to simply sit and chat are otherwise few. However, to seamlessly occupy this space requires a certain amount of cultural capital and some people have to be schooled in the kinaesthetics of this occupancy (McGuire 2012). Phadke et al (2011) have further pointed out that cafes have become demarcated as private spaces where heterosexual couples can display affection publicly as long as they demonstrate the right class markers. Although cafes are seen as spaces in which women can relax, an incident in 2006 when police in a suburb in Mumbai cracked down on women in the open areas of coffee shops for soliciting indicates that the availability of this space too is conditional (ibid.). For women alone in public, even those demarcated as safe spaces for them, the danger of being misrecognized as sexually available is always lurking. Thus, Elizabeth Jackson highlights the “connection between the necessity
for marriage and the reportedly pervasive problem of sexual harassment in India; in particular, an unmarried woman is perceived as ‘public property’” (2010, 56).

Another space that marks singleton life is the bar or nightclub. It is not just patronage of these establishments in the right attire but one’s comfort in such spaces that matters. Thus, Aisha notes dismissively of a group of girls at a nightclub: “The obvious victims are the new entrants making their debut in the social jungle. They get spotted as soon as they walk into a room, which makes them extremely self-conscious, of course, and very aware of their short skirts and transparent straps” (Kala 2007, 50). Drinking alcohol, smoking and going out clubbing are also part of the lifestyle in You Are Here, which describes a pool party at a private farmhouse, a fashion show and a drug-fuelled visit to a nightclub that ends with one of the girls in hospital. In The Zoya Factor, Zoya and a group of women have a “girls’ night out” at a nightclub where they play a ribald game rating the men in the bar. Although Keep the Change does not feature a nightclub scene, the “haven of hedonism” (Subramanian 2010, 155) is symbolized by Damayanthi’s work trip to Goa, which has functioned in the Indian imagination as a pleasure locale of sorts. Damayanthi fantasizes that she is “wearing a daring bikini top and a black sarong and dancing like a bohemian hippie under the moonlit sky, on the ocean shore. I hold a glass of wine and sway to funky, pulsating music and the sound of the waves. Handsome, well-muscled, bare-bodied man dances with me. He puts his hand through my silken tresses, pulls me closer and …” (ibid., 157). This fantasy does come to pass as she ends up having her first glass of wine while she is on a date with a man she meets at the workshop which leads to her first kiss.

An important aspect of the singleton lifestyle is the ability to live alone, physically away from the supervision of parents and community elders. While the earliest chick lit novels such Rupa Gulab’s Girl Alone (2005) and Rajashree’s Trust Me (2006), had young women living in hostels and “paying guest” accommodation where they were subject to much
more surveillance and control, in the later crop of novels, women largely live in apartments either alone or with other young women of the same age, suggesting a higher income level. This living arrangement also affords a certain degree of freedom to experiment with lifestyle choices. The privilege inherent in access to private space in the city is glossed over in the novels, though Arshi in *You Are Here* alludes to the difficulties young women searching for an apartment in Indian cities face. Even when an apartment is secured, single women are never entirely free from the censure of the wider society, especially when pursuing the singleton life. Arshi wonders “what the neighbourhood now thought of us, strange, scarlet women, who brought boys home, drank a lot and sometimes returned home at three or four in the morning” (Madhavan 2008, 131). The so-called moral police is exemplified in *Almost Single* in the figure of Mrs Mukherjee, the nosy neighbour of Aisha’s friend Misha, who it is suggested would view Aisha and her friends as “alcohol-swigging, wild-dancing, gay-man-loving pyromaniacs” (Kala 2007, 112). Although their location in the city opens up possibilities for chick lit’s Indian protagonists, their negotiation of the cityscape is not seamless. As Phadke et al (2014) have pointed out, even the fabled “Mumbai girl’, touted to be footloose and fancy free, is in fact constrained by a latent anxiety about safety.

One of the strategies chick lit protagonists use to circumvent the dangers of public space is the privacy of their own cars. Like most chick lit protagonists both Aisha and Arshi have their own cars and Jinni is ferried around by a driver for most of the novel, though towards the end, she takes the wheel. An early plot point in *Almost Single* is the tussle of wills over a car during the divorce of Aisha’s friend and her ex-husband. The indigenously produced Maruti is widely considered a marker of middle-class identity with upper-middle-class people now moving to Western car brands. Thus, Misha is impressed by a date who arrives in a Mercedes but after a disastrous evening they are picked up in a beaten-up Maruti van. Even though her date is drunk and aggressive, and Misha makes a show of leaving,
ultimately, she accepts a ride home because dressed in a tight pink minidress, she still needs a male escort and the assumed safety of the privatized space of the car. Cars thus become, like cafes and malls, an example of what Phadke et al call private-public spaces, “privatized spaces that masquerade as public spaces”, which “create a veneer of access for women, preempting any substantial critique of the lack of access to real public space” (2014, 46).

Damayanthi in *Keep the Change* is the rare chick lit heroine who travels by the local train where she observes with interest and interacts with her fellow commuters. Zoya in *The Zoya Factor* is more unusual in that her journeys traverse not just the cityscape but national borders, and she not only uses public transport but also walks the streets. Significantly, when Zoya is called back from a shoot in Mumbai, she arrives home in Delhi at night taking a cab back from the airport herself and in Bangladesh, she commandeers “one of those bumblebee autos with gold ’n’ white conical crowns upon their heads” (Chauhan 2008, 66) to go shopping. More evocative are Zoya’s walks through her neighbourhood, the unfashionable lower-middle-class Karol Bagh Area. On her first date with Nikhil, the captain of the cricket team, they walk to the famous Ajmal Khan Road street market:

“This road – made famous through a million radio ads for saris, jewellery, suiting-shirting and pressure cookers shops that all sign off with a sing-song *Ajmal Khan Road, Karol Bagh, Nai Dilli* – starts off, whisperingly, as a wide boulevard lined with old neem trees. Then, after you cross rows of parked cycle-rickshaws with their drivers slumbering all curled up below the trees, oblivious to, or maybe knocked unconscious by, the susu⁵ smells of a hundred stray dogs that hangs over that particular stretch, the action begins to heat up. You spot peanut-sellers and machine-ka-cold-water carts. And once you cross the first red light, Ajmal Khan Road turns into a bright, spangled gypsy’s ribbon, unrolling blithely before you in a gay street carnival, with vendors selling every conceivable food and toys on carts lit with cheerily hissing hurricane lamps” (ibid.,185).

Zoya returns to this night market herself at a crucial point in the novel, and it is her interaction with a band of kids playing cricket in the street that helps her make an important decision. Her solo wanderings on foot mark her out as different from her peers, a variation in

⁵ Susu: Urine
subjectivity that will be further explored in Chapter 5. Largely, though, the Indian chick lit protagonists cannot be flaneurs in quite the same sense as Harzewski (2011) contends of their Western counterparts – and it is the need for loitering as a political act that Phadke et al advocate for in their influential book Why Loiter (2014).

**Career Travails**

Money, at least a certain amount of it, is what underpins the singleton lifestyle, according young women their rooms in the city and the cars with which to navigate the cityscape. While chick lit as a genre has been linked to Jane Austen’s novels (Ferriss 2006; Wells 2006; Harzewski 2011), unlike their Austenian sisters, chick lit heroines have to work, and in fact, a career provides a handy escape route from the immediate pressure to marry. Thus, when Damayanthi decides that she must do what it takes to escape parental pressure to marry, she brushes up her biodata and embarks on a series of job interviews. Interestingly, she lands the job in the multinational bank First Global by citing the action hero Lara Croft of the *Tombraider* films as her role model because “she is very sure of what she wants, is determined to achieve her goals, faces challenges courageously and is in control of her life” (2010, 57). In a sense, here the goals of neoliberalism and feminism coalesce. The protagonists evade dependent coupledom by seeking to become financially independent, but the terms on which they do so are couched in neoliberal discourse. Nevertheless, there are some complexities here that I wish to point out.

Unlike Western chick lit that seems to largely depict women in media careers, Indian chick lit has greater diversity of career choices and offers deeper insights into women’s negotiations of these career trajectories. In addition to journalism, public relations and advertising, Indian chick lit protagonists have worked in marketing, film production, the hotel industry, banking, politics and even the army. What they have in common with their Western counterparts is that the protagonists are often in junior positions, have an (often male) mentor
at work and usually have a fractious relationship with their boss. This is not surprising given that these are typical experiences of women of that age.

While middle-class and upper-class Indian families support the education of daughters’ and their pursuit of a career (Jha and Pujari, 1996; Maslak and Singhal 2008), tertiary education and the pursuit of a career not only delays marriage but “also reinforces a lifestyle that prioritises the woman as an individual, able to make decisions” (Maslak and Singhal 2008). Fuller and Narasimhan’s study of IT professionals in Chennai indicated that the industry does offer young women a measure of autonomy that comes from having a sizeable income which in turn affords them more respect in their natal and marital families. Radhakrisnan notes that the “gendered ideals of middle-class respectability” have shifted to encompass highly qualified professional women who “feel their professional achievements to be indicative of the progress of India, and also experience the benefit of an added respect for their professional lives, even compared to middle-class housewives, who were the embodiment of respectability for a previous generation” (2008, 16). The benefits of education and employment outside the home however come with complexities. Middle-class women working outside the home find themselves caught between traditional expectations of Indian womanhood and “the new cultural milieu designed by her own aspirations” (Maslak and Singhal, 2008). Radhakrishnan has highlighted similar struggles among women working in the information technology industry in Silicon Valley and Bangalore who view the workplace as “an opportunity to develop the individual self”, defined as “global”, and who yet caution against “the dangers of too much individual drive” (2008, 13).

As chick lit describes the lives of unmarried young women, the question of balancing work and home can be sidestepped. Rather, the novels focus on the frustration of the young women with their jobs and highlight the ethical issues they face. In Almost Single, Aisha’s job at a hotel provides an insider’s look at the life of luxury of India’s privileged as well as
behind-the-scenes footage of the running of a hotel. More importantly, a job in the city can provide an escape, for Misha, “this job in Delhi means an escape from small-town living and gidda⁶ soirees, and not the money or career prospects it offers” (Kala 2007, 85). However, even if the protagonist’s career trajectory remains in the background of the novels, the resolution of a career dilemma can signal the close of the narrative. Thus, while Aisha and Misha find romantic partners, Anushka gets divorced at the start of the novel and finds peace at the end by finding a business partner.

In You Are Here, career angst is part of Arshi’s general despair at the start of the novel – she has what she calls “a shit job as well, with a random PR company” (Madhavan 2008, 3) and although women are well represented in the media industry, she senses that she is going nowhere. However, she evinces a certain disdain for those in corporate professions, as she likes to believe that she is somehow better than those who work purely for profit: “Call it an inverse snobbery thing but I just can’t see the point of people making too much money. I mean, I’m sure they exist for a reason, but I’ve never really understood how they can spend their lives swinging from one corporate job to another, with no other passion than for increasing their income” (ibid., 141). Thus, the chick lit protagonist’s ennui in her career can be taken as a rejection of the promises of neoliberal success, and a quest for more meaningful pursuits, albeit via routes that are largely accessible to the middle and upper classes in India. While only a few scenes in the novel are dedicated to Arshi’s office life, it is significant that it is the resolution of the dilemma about her job that ends the novel, rather than showing Arshi romantically partnered, indicating that the chick lit protagonist’s career is an important part of her identity that calls for narrative resolution even when it is not comprehensively explored.

⁶ Gidda: A folk dance from the state of Punjab
*Keep the Change*, however, falls into a sub-type within the genre that focuses on the career progress of the protagonist as a key aspect in a general coming-of-age narrative. In her first letter to Victoria, Damayanti, disoriented after a large stuffed elephant falls on her head, says “a whole world of possibilities opened up” including being “a best-selling author who has just won the Booker, a stunning supermodel with a string of diamonds and boyfriends, a famous talk show hostess who turned ordinary people into instant celebrities” The opening section thus displays the kind of selves that a young woman would want to be: glamorous, famous, and having achieved career success. At the time, Damayanti worked at a sleepy accounting firm, but her “clarion call” comes in the form of a quiz in *Cosmopolitan* magazine that urges her to “Take Control of Your Life. Choose Your Destiny. Stop Whining and Start Mining the Gold in You” (ibid., 29). This neoliberal slogan spurs her into compiling her first story of the self, a biodata – “a short history of nearly everything in my life, and I could barely manage a paragraph of it” (ibid., 38) – that is polished by a resume consulting company which creates new persona for her. Having embarked on singleton life in the big city, however, Damayanti proceeds to satirize the corporate workplace with its daily grind of pointless emails and Powerpoint presentations, the parochialism behind the global façade and the male-dominated work culture in which she feels herself a misfit.

Chick lit has been criticized for not really attending to career in its storyline save for using it as a backdrop for the romance plot line and for portraying its protagonists as incompetent (Wells 2006; Whelehan 2011; Taylor 2012). I believe that the chick lit protagonist’s struggles in the workplace perform a critique of the neoliberal exhortation to be what Harris has called “can-do girls” who are “notable for their high ambitions with regard to their employment and their commitment to elaborate planning for success in their careers” (2004, 18-19). What the novels show is that the reality of the workplace presents constraints, particularly for young women. The description of the experiences of the young women
starting in their careers could offer readers some important information as well as points of identification on career progress.

Damayanthi is the rare female executive in her office, apart from a secretary, the human resources officer and a woman on maternity leave whose desk she was assigned and of whom she notes: “Instead of being a contented new mother, she seems to be suffering from withdrawal symptoms from being away from her precious workstation for so long” (Subramanian2007, 89). Damayanthi thus senses the competition between women characteristic of the phallogocentric economy in which a mother is easily replaced by another woman. Working on a project as the only female among male colleagues, she observes that each of them follows their own model while “Damayanthi is stuck between models” (ibid., 117). Damayanthi’s narrative can be read not so much as failure to succeed than as a rejection of neoliberal corporate culture. One of the key plotlines in the novel is Damayanthi’s struggle with the intrigues of the corporate world, and her acquiescence in partaking of dishonest practices, though this ultimately gets her nowhere because she is not savvy enough to capitalize on it. It is significant that at the end of the novel, having shown up the seamy underbelly of corporate India, she opts for a more meaningful role in microfinance, working under a female boss.

In Anuja Chauhan’s novels, the professional space in which the protagonists function suffuses the plot. The Zoya Factor gives us an insider’s view of the advertising industry. Zoya, “a mid-level client servicing executive in India’s largest ad agency”, takes her job in the “fascinating, unabashedly shallow world” (Chauhan 2008, 21) seriously. Although her career development is not key to the plot development, the novel itself and Zoya’s identity in particular is infused with the advertising industry. Battle for Bittora, however, makes the unfolding of Jinni’s political career central to the plot. While Jinni starts the novel as a graphics designer frustrated to often find herself designing kitanus (germs) for a toilet-bowl
cleaner, she finds herself deeply involved in the political campaign that her grandmother coerced her into joining. By the end of the novel, Jinni’s success at the hustings becomes as important to the reader as her affair of the heart, and it is the former that is saved for the end as the real climax of the novel. These novels function to different degrees as career bildungromans that describe and critique neoliberal practices and express the protagonist’s hankering for more fulfilling occupations.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to highlight the discursive underpinnings of the subjectivity of the “singleton” – namely, being unmarried, upper-caste, Hindu and middle class. Moreover, I have shown that it is a subjectivity that is performed through engagement in a consumerist lifestyle that characterizes the middle class in the post-liberalization era. Specifically, the singleton distinguishes herself by the ease with which she navigates the city, consumes transnational media and products and is visible in certain sites such as the café, the nightclub and the white-collar workplace. In the case of the latter, I argued that although career exploration is not always central to chick lit, it is almost usually critical of neoliberal corporate culture and expresses the desire for more meaningful jobs.

I intend the above discussion to serve as a frame for the following chapter in which I explore a key problematic that expresses itself in chick lit. At the start of this chapter, I stated that the central problematic in chick lit is not really the quest for a spouse. In the following chapter, I show that the underlying conflict in chick lit is the competing pulls of tradition and modernity. I will argue that it is the resolution of this problematic that is the core of singleton identity in chick lit.
Chapter 3: Flight from the Womb

In the opening section of *Almost Single*, the protagonist Aisha rues that she finds herself “routinely suffering from umbilical cord whiplash” (Kala 2007, 4). Aisha may have escaped her small-town beginnings for what she considers a more liberated life in the city, but her mother keeps tabs on her over the telephone, policing her lifestyle, questioning her values and particularly nagging her about her single status. This chapter seeks to look closely at the mother-daughter relationship in Indian chick lit to demonstrate how rather than simply functioning as romance fiction, the novels attempt to resolve the struggle to balance the demands of Indian tradition with the desire for a selfhood inflected by transnational, neoliberal discourses of autonomy.

The discursive underpinnings of the singleton identity highlighted in the last chapter will serve as a frame for this chapter in which I argue that the central problematic in chick lit is only ostensibly the quest for a spouse. Although chick lit is usually understood as underscoring a heteropatriachal economy of desire, I would like to shift the focus from the foregone conclusion of romantic partnership in these novels to the relationship between mothers and daughters which I believe is a core site of contestation. I argue that the discourse of singleness is deployed not so much to solve the problem of singleness through marriage, though this may happen in the end, but to work through questions of identity, and to gesture towards possible ways of living that might evade the fate of the mother. If, as Whelehan notes of the Anglo-American chick lit novel, “romance is framed, with mothers and families looming in the background, representing nothing more than the knowledge that their daughters are reassuringly identical to them in a celebration of continuity and stasis” (2005, 210), Indian chick lit protagonists stand in defiance of their mothers’ patriarchal expectations.
Good Daughters

Marriage and eventually motherhood are viewed as inevitable for Indian women, milestones they are prepared for through adolescence (Kakar 1989; Puri 1999). Among the middle class, marriage is seen as a way of channelling women’s sexuality and ensuring the respectability of the family, which late marriage could threaten (Nabar 1995; Donner 2016). Mankekar notes how in the serials telecast on the state broadcaster Doordarshan in the 1990s, “unmarried women were usually represented as daughters. ‘Good daughters’ always deferred to the authority of the patriarchal family; in contrast, those who transgressed their assigned ‘place’ in the patriarchal family were severely punished by exile, profound emotional anguish, or suicide” (1999, 118). The series reinforced the moral that unmarried women, and particularly their sexuality, had to be “protected” by their families. For young Indian women, marriage marks the start of a challenging phase. Since marriage is almost always patrilocal, it involves unsettling changes for the young woman, such as leaving her parental home and negotiating life with her in-laws, forging a relationship with her husband, bearing household responsibilities and finally, bearing and raising children (Kakar 1989; Puri 1999; Sandhya 2009; Jackson 2010). Indian women are expected to navigate these unsettling times stoically, in imitation of mythological heroines such as Sita³, the devoted wife of the god Ram in the epic Ramayana, Savitri⁴, who followed her husband into the underworld, and the goddess Sati⁵ who immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre.

Among these, Sita is arguably the most popular role model (Kakar 1989; Pauwels 2004; Krishnan 2010), one who has been largely decried by feminists for her submissive stance, although Kishwar (1997) argues that she can function as an empowering model. In general, Sita exemplifies the pativrata, or wife who is devoted to her husband to the extent of worshipping him as a god and who seeks her fulfilment in satisfying his wishes. The hegemony of the Sita ideal was enhanced in the 1990s by the immensely popular televised
version of the epic *Ramayana*, which together with the *Mahabharata*, form “part of the practical and the discursive consciousness of Hindu communities across the South Asian subcontinent” (Mankekar 1999, 169). The televised epics idealized the subservience of the female characters, particularly Sita, (Mankekar 1999; Pauwels 2004), and the complexities of the older textual versions of the epics were elided to justify the perfection of the male Kshatriya heroes (Krishnan 2010). Mankekar notes that “while ideal masculinity was depicted in terms of military and physical strength, ideal femininity was predicted on the containment of women’s energies” which was “exemplified in the *lakshman-rekha*, the boundary Lakshman draws around Sita’s hut to protect her” (1999, 208). The *lakshman-rekha*, usually a self-imposed boundary on personal conduct, is characterized by “containment, sexual modesty, self-control: once a woman transgresses it, it is impossible for her to redeem her honour by ‘stepping back’ into it” (1999, 209). Broadly, the televised epics depicted “women’s honour as located in her sexuality, an honour that is fragile and easily fractured” (Krishnan 2010, 124). Sita was reinvented as the immensely popular characters of Tulsi and Parvati in the soap operas that captivated prime-time Indian audiences at the turn of the millennium (Munshi 2010). Although there are subversive retellings of the Sita myth, and Mankekar (1999) has shown that not all communities perceive Sita as a role model for womanhood, because of the upper-caste, Hindu character of the middle-class in India, it would be fair to say that the Sita myth is widespread and influential.

Veena Das has highlighted the cultural preference for the *sati* “the female ascetic who gains her power through sacrifice and suffering”, rather than *Shakti* “the powerful, ferocious, feminine cosmic principle that reverses the normal relationship between men and women” (1981, 50). While Sita is inarguably the hegemonic ideal, the Savitri story, in which Savitri’s devotion to her husband is usually stressed, could be read somewhat subversively as being about women negotiating their lives alone. This is the reading Bose (2004) points to in
analysing the Behula myth in Bengal, which closely mirrors the Savitri narrative. Bose notes that Savitri regained her husband’s life “not through supplication but by outwitting Yama”, the god of death (2004, 113). Although both Behula and Savitri transgress the societal norms of good womanhood, they redeem themselves because their actions were in the service of their husbands and thus conform to the ultimate requirements of a *pativrata*. These myths are notable for their attempts to “co-ordinate submission and transgression within a single agenda” (Bose 2004, 115).

While the Sita ideal is upheld in Indian chick lit by the protagonists’ mothers, the young women’s own trajectories might be compared to Savitri and Behula. Indian chick lit protagonists undertake a solitary journey although unlike the mythological heroines, they are searching for a husband, not preserving one. The end goal of finding a spouse might then justify their solitary journeys, although it calls for constant policing from society to ensure their virtue remains intact. Moreover, the journey of the chick lit protagonist resists the traditional values epitomized by Sita as their adventures in the city give them the space to envisage other futures. In this sense, the singleton identity of the chick lit protagonists can disrupt the heteropatriarchal economy, a potential that is alluded to in the self-exploration that they engage in. Their exploration of new possibilities, such as dating and forming affective bonds with friends, however, are punctuated by their mothers’ reminders of their duties as good Indian daughters, largely voiced as the exhortation to “settle down” into marriage.

**Mothers and Daughters**

Thus, *Keep the Change* opens with Damayanthi in a pall of gloom on her twenty-sixth birthday, as her parents, particularly her mother, criticize her for being old and unmarried. Having noted that “with the tenacity of a pit bull holding on to a hapless ankle, Amma flushes out completely unsuitable boys from the nooks and crannies of the world and throws
them in my direction” (Subramanian, 3), Damayanthi describes the scene at home when she is asked to subject herself to another dehumanizing “girl-seeing” gathering:

**Cast of characters:**
- Amma, as distraught, dutiful, long-suffering mother, playing the lead.
- Appa, as distraught, dutiful, long-suffering father, playing a supporting role.
- Damayanthi, as wicked, heartless, rebellious daughter, playing the vamp.

“Daamu, what do you have against marriage anyway? We will never force you into doing anything you don’t want. But everybody gets married, you know.” Long-suffering look from Appa.

“It is not marriage, Appa, it’s the process. It’s so degrading, all this seeing business. It’s like being displayed in a shop. It hurts my self-esteem. How can I make my mind after one meeting anyway?”

“I said yes to marrying your father after seeing the photo only, and that was also only a formality. I trusted my parents to make the right decision for me. Everybody gets married like this only.” Amma, with an anguished look on her face. (ibid., 10-11)

The melodramatic tone suggests that such exchanges are replicated across the country in the homes of young women of “marriageable” age. If, as Virdi has noted of the Hindi film, “the family is the perfect locus for melodrama, since it draws upon intense affective relationships shared among its members. By drawing parallels between the family and nation, the same affect becomes transposed on the nation” (2003, 13), Subramanian uses melodrama to generalize the situation of the protagonist, but also undercuts this affect with irony.

Damayanthi’s non-compliance is also depicted through the rebellious “little voice” in her head that sarcastically, if quietly, responds to being objectified as a prospective bride. Take this exchange at a wedding, for example:

Gomati Maami (GM): ‘So this is your daughter’
Little Voice (LV): ‘No, I’m actually her son. I love cross-dressing for special occasions like this.’
Me: Polite smile
Amma: ‘Yes, this is Damayanthi, my only daughter.’ Eager smile.
GM: ‘So what do you do?’
Amma: ‘She has completed her chartered accountancy exams with all-India rank…
LV: ‘I actually scour all the pornography sites on the internet and fantasize about making love to tall, handsome men in public places.’
Me: Polite smile. (Subramanian 2010, 15)
These sarcastic thoughts are kept strictly in Damayanthi’s head; when they do translate into speech, it is never to mothers or older women, but to young men. It is older women who present a formidable force that Damayanthi, despite her objections, is never quite able to openly dissent against.

**Mothers Mythologized**

Apart from Damayanthi’s protestations at her objectification in the girl-seeing arrangements, it is notable that her father takes the more persuasive and passive role while it is her mother who is insistent. The centrality of the mother in enforcing traditional expectations and the relative passivity of the father in chick lit is significant given that the 1990s saw the resurgence of the father as the upholder of patriarchal tradition in a series of blockbuster Hindi films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra 1995) and *Pardes* (Ghai 1997) (Uberoi 1998). These films required “the reconciliation of paternal authority and individual desire” which is achieved not through defiance but through deference (ibid., 323). Sen suggests that in a post-liberalization arena characterized by the proliferation of choices, the father functions to delimit choices by rendering the idea of choice obsolete (2010, 149). Gopal too has pointed to the “recuperation of the family” (2011, 67) in the films of Karan Johar in the late 1990s; however, she highlights “a shift in emphasis from the family as an absolute power” to “the family as a transmitter of values. Its coercion is affective rather than legal or economic” (ibid., 77). Whether the father functions as authority as Sen argues or as affective force as Gopal suggests, chick lit sidesteps the patriarch in favour of the earlier moment in cinema that prioritized the matriarch.

The mythology of mother/land/nation was epitomized in the Mehboob Khan’s film *Mother India* (1957) in which the long-suffering mother figure makes the ultimate sacrifice (of a son) in service to the nation. However, this and other films typically fetishize the mother-son dyad and displace the father who tends to be weak, abusive or absent (Virdi
Virdi reads these films as reflective of the transition from joint families governed by
the father as patriarch to nuclear families in which sons asserted themselves, with the mother
functioning as “the ground of contest and the site of resolution, with an outcome always
determined in favour of the son, the hero. She is the trophy, symbolizing masculine
achievement” (2003, 120). These films draw emotively and imaginatively on the trope of
“Mother India”, whereby the Indian nation was imagined as the figure of a goddess and
virgin mother towards the end of the nineteenth century in the work of Bengali writers and
became a pan-Indian figure around which the public imagination rallied against colonial rule
(Ramaswamy 2001; Bagshi 2010). The mother in the nationalist imagination brought
together “the discourse of the family with its filial aura of affection, the discourse of Hindu
religion invoking devi or the mother goddess in a devotional fervour, and the discourse of the
nation charged with motherland patriotism” (Mukherjee 2006, 617). The conflation of mother
with nation and divine power is evident in cartographic representations of India which
superimposed the body of the mother literally onto the geography for the nation
(Ramaswamy 2001). Pushing forward Partha Chatterjee’s observation that under the new
nationalist patriarchy women were worshiped as “goddess or mothers”, Kamala Visweswaran
(1990) argues that the resolution of the Women’s Question in the nineteenth century by
nationalists involved a “shift” from the metaphor of “wives” to “mothers”. The model of the
new mother envisaged for middle-class colonial India was “a domestic paragon, furnished
with a modern education but still retaining a modicum of religiosity, and presiding over her
neat and disciplined home, and by now, her largely nuclear family” (Ramaswamy 2001, 45).
Thus, chick lit draws on this earlier moment in which the mother was powerfully conflated
with tradition, but unlike early filmic representations, the dyad shifts to mothers and
daughters who are in conflict rather than cahoots. Here, the mother draws both on the force of
tradition as well as emotion to enforce her will, although materially it is really affect that inhibits the protagonists from exercising their agency.

Apart from the mother’s historical association with tradition, the mother-daughter relationship in the novels could be said to be an accurate reflection of the strength of the relationship in Indian culture in general. Kakar notes that Indian children remain undifferentiated from their mothers much longer than in the West and that despite the cultural devaluation of girl children, “a mother’s unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son. In her daughter, the mother can re-experience herself as a cared-for girl” (1989, 60-61), even if, Krishnan observes that celebrations of the mother-daughter bond are absent in the great and little traditions in India, which “enables women and men alike to take a distanced view of the personhood of the daughter” (2010, 141). Puri (1999) observes that the onset of menarche signals a critical period in the young woman’s life in which she is considered most vulnerable. While middle-class urban women are subjected less to traditional taboos connected with ritual purity around the time of menstruation, menarche brings with it an increase in social control that is primarily mediated through mothers. Menarche and the changes to the young woman’s body increase her exposure to sexual aggression, and here too she is more likely to confide in her mother (Puri 1999). It is at this time that the ego-ideal of Sita becomes most apparent, playing, Kakar suggests, “an unconscious role as a defence against the anxiety caused by a young girl’s sexual impulses” (1982, 88-89).

Kakar notes that as the Indian daughter approaches adolescence, she “internalizes the specific ideals of womanhood and monitors her behaviour carefully in order to guarantee her mother’s love and approval, upon which she is more than ever dependent as she makes ready to leave home … the irony of an Indian girl’s coming-of-age is that to be a good woman and a felicitous bride she must be more than ever the perfect daughter” (1982, 63).
In one of the rare mythological depictions of a mother-daughter relationship, the televized epic *Ramayana* featured a lengthy depiction of Sita’s stepmother Sunaina urging her daughter to pray for the perfect husband and describing her as “*mahaan pativrata, tyaag aur seva ka kirtiman*” (a picture of fidelity, sacrifice and service) (Mankekar 1999; Krishnan 2010). Sunaina defines Sita’s duties as a woman exclusively in terms of her role as a loyal and loving wife:

A woman’s foremost duty is towards her husband: you should always remember that for a woman, there is no god greater than her husband. A woman doesn’t have to pray to any god if she fulfils her duty towards her husband. Thus, you should sacrifice all selfish desires and dedicate yourself to worshiping and pleasing your husband. Only a *pativratta*, a woman who devotes herself to her husband in thought, word and deed, can be a true companion to her husband. A woman should also dedicate herself to her in-laws’ happiness. (Mankekar 1999, 212)

That real-life mothers today tend to perform this role of urging their daughters to pay attention to traditional expectations even as they support their educational aspirations is evidenced in Maslak and Singhal’s (2008) study. It is this archetype of the mother as coach-in-tradition that is usually adopted in Indian chick lit.

Luce Irigaray has argued that the conflation of woman to mother/matter reduces “woman” to the place from which the (male) ‘subject’ continues to draw his reserves” (1985, 227), casting woman as the receptacle that facilitates reproduction symbolized by the womb. In Hindu mythology “the supremacy of the male is symbolized as being the seed giver, and the woman as the field. The produce belongs to the man who owns the field” (Krishnaraj 2010, 33). The Sita mythology echoes the theme of matricide and maternal reduction to the earth/matter that Irigaray has alluded to in the Western context. Sita is born from the earth that was being ploughed by her father King Janaka and at the end of the epic *Ramayana* returns to the earth (Kakar 1982: 99). Mary John (1998) has argued convincingly that, unlike Western formulations whereby women are associated with nature and men with culture, women in India have come to be associated with culture. However, even though
Indian women may be cast as the repositories of culture, they remain receptacles rather than active creators. The chick lit protagonist’s ambiguity towards marriage and motherhood then may be seen as the desire to evade the fate of the mother as earth/matter/receptacle of culture.

**Evading Marriage, Mothers and Motherhood**

In *Keep the Change*, Damayanthi is not averse to marriage itself; however, her ideas on what marriage might mean differ from her parents’ as does her image of a suitable man. Describing marriage as “a losing proposition for a girl. You give up freedom, independence and full control of the remote control for a life of subservience under a man who is never worth it and in-laws who never appreciated you” (Subramanian 2006, 6), Damayanthi hopes for more. She has been, according to her mother, “become spoiled by all those English books you have read and all the silly English movies you see” (ibid., 12). Damayanthi’s invocation of romantic heroes such as Mr Darcy seems to confirm her mother’s accusation, but what she and other chick lit heroines are expressing is dissatisfaction with the current marital models around them and the desire for more equitable and companionate relationships. Studies have shown that the expectation of a companionate marriage, even when the marriage is arranged by elders, has become common among the middle class (Puri 1999; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Sandhya 2009; Donner 2016). Moreover, elders too seem to be paying attention to the compatibility of young people when making arrangements for their marriages in large part to ensure the longevity of the marriage, but chick lit protagonists seem to question whether the elders can really achieve this when they don’t seem to completely understand their daughters.

Nicole Wilson notes that “matchmaking in twenty-first-century south India entails a complex analysis of horoscopes, socioeconomic status, social capital, and outward appearance” and that “the desirability of a middle-class Tamil girl was often assessed according to the balance between her knowledge of ‘tradition’ and her hopefully limited exposure to the immodest actions of ‘Western’ women” (2016, 37). Damayanthi describes
the farce of putting on a sari and giving the right answers to potential in-laws, and meeting prospective suitors who appraise her worth, chronicling a series of Mr Wrongs such as the one “who looked like a fat beetle, ogling my chest from under thick black glasses” who insists she give up her job after they get married and start trying right away to produce one boy and one girl because his mother said so. Damayanthi deflects this proposal by telling the young man that her “horoscope is not very positive about children” while thinking “I would rather be kissed by a Dementor than come within a mile of your body” (Subramanian 2010, 27). Her own fantasies reveal her to be a sexually desiring subject with a mind of her own, and she is critical of the expectation that as a wife she serve as a sexual object or cash cow to her husband. Thus, while Donner’s (2016) study shows that young women are careful to exclude sexual desire as a factor in their preference for a “love” marriage, Damayanthi voices her need for a sexually compatible union, even as she confesses to being a virgin.

Studies have found that the distinction between “love” and “arranged” marriages are not clear cut (Puri 1999; Titzman 2011) and Rochona Majumdar (2009) has argued that the polarization of “arranged” and “love” marriages are in fact markers of Indian modernity, that arose out of the formation of the “modern” Indian family at the turn of the twentieth century”. Uberoi (1998) points to the pervasiveness of the “arranged love marriage” in popular Hindi cinema of the 1990s in which a couple meets independently but has their union sanctified by parental approval, which marks the real closure of the text. While some early chick lit texts such as Girl Alone (Gulab 2005) have depicted young women rebelling against men that have been chosen by their mothers but ultimately falling in love with those very men, in the novels under consideration the romantic choice is made independently and unlike Hindi cinema, we rarely see explicit parental approval at the end although it is assumed that this approval will be obtained given that the man in question bears all the right caste and class markers.

In Damayanthi’s register, “arranged” marriages stand in for the qualities of Indian
tradition she finds threatening to her autonomy while “love” marriage is seen as offering the possibility of both companionship and the expression of sexual desire, even as she acknowledges, through the experiences of her friend Sumi, that the world of “love marriage” is not without problems either, because when it is time to wed, the young men and their families expect the women to “adjust”. Wilson has observed that “Tamil cinema and television often portray ‘love marriages’ as predominantly occurring among two particular societal categories – those who are ‘modernized’ and ‘Westernized’ (that is, immodest, unchaste and hence, un-Indian), and those who are lower class and caste” and marks these two social groups as “discourteous towards cultural laws of parental duty and filial devotion” (2016, 46). Damayanthi does not share the normative underpinnings of the discourse Wilson describes given that she hankers after a “love marriage” herself. This reflects Puri’s findings (1997); in her study of readers of Harlequin romances, 98 out of 101 readers preferred a “choice marriage”, based on the idea that these were more likely to yield the marital intimacy that would help soften their transition into the patrilocal and patriarchal conjugal environment. In Parameswaran’s (2002) study, the relationships depicted in Mills & Boon novels were seen by readers as being more equalitarian than those experienced by their mothers; with romance reading itself being seen as a “ritual of modernity” before these women entered the world of tradition signified by marriage. Damayanthi herself is a romance reader; she muses: “Elizabeth found her Darcy, Jane Eyre had her own Mr Rochester, even Lata Mehra found herself a suitable boy. Surely there must be some quota of romance for me. All those Georgette Heyers and Mills and Boons can’t be absolute fiction” (Subramanian 2010, 6-7). However, unlike the readers in Parameswaran’s study, Damayanthi is not ready to easily give up her romantic aspirations, and thus resists her mother’s insistence that she conform.

7 A character in Vikram Seth’s novel A Suitable Boy (1993), an example closer to home.
Modernizing Tradition

While the opening section of *Keep the Change* depicts the rounds of the arranged marriage circuit a young woman is forced to make, *Almost Single* spends more time on Aisha’s shenanigans in the city with her friends: Anushka, who has separated from her husband, Misha who is determinedly seeking a spouse, and Nick and Rick, a gay couple. Aisha’s narrative of the singleton life in the city with her friends is punctuated by calls from her mother reminding her of her single status, comparing her to relatives and friends who recently married and bringing her proposals from prospective spouses, while criticizing her lifestyle. As Donner (2016) has found, globalization has made mothers extremely anxious about the negative influences on their daughters and heightened their supervision of them. The frequent telephone calls from mothers in Indian chick lit could be read in the light of this finding.

While her mother tries to fix her up with suitable men from afar, Aisha is critical of the arranged marriage system and its unfairness towards women. She rebels by telling one older lady who enquired about when she might “give us some good news” that she is pregnant, earning her a furious phone call from her mother. She is scornful of the tendency of young Indian men abroad to search for a bride in India assuming that they are subservient: “Little do they know that New Delhi is in some ways far ahead of New Jersey. I think they assume that the study of ‘good traditional values’ is an elective course offered to women in our schools because it is mentioned unfailingly whenever there is talk of an ‘alliance’” (Kala 2007, 178).

While Aisha and her friends are impatient with the warnings and expectations of tradition represented by Mamma Bhatia, they are not immune to these pressures and traditions. Aisha is conscious that “we come attached with a ‘best before’ tag, and if – god forbid! – we reach the expiry date while still single, it’s downhill all the way from here”
Thus, the friends set up an online dating profile, which are embellished versions of themselves. Their approach is distinctly neoliberal. Misha says: “We have to take being single into our own hands. There is a whole world of men out there and we have to reach them! This is the way to do it! We are too cosmopolitan for the local boys, we have to expand our horizons and harness the benefits of technology…” Thus, the friends set up an online dating profile, which are embellished versions of themselves. Their approach is distinctly neoliberal. Misha says: “We have to take being single into our own hands. There is a whole world of men out there and we have to reach them! This is the way to do it! We are too cosmopolitan for the local boys, we have to expand our horizons and harness the benefits of technology…” (ibid., 8). Moreover, their underlying ethic is not dissimilar to the older generation’s pragmatic approach to arranging unions. Aisha’s friend Misha has a capitalist ethic when it comes to marriage: she moved from the small town of Bhatinda to New Delhi to increase her chances of netting an Indian man living abroad who would provide her with a ticket to transnational mobility. While Aisha is not as frank about her ambitions and her specifications for a future mate are couched in the discourse of compatibility, the discussions between the friends over potential romantic partners reveal that they are interested in upward mobility. In this, then, Aisha and her friends are not so far from the women in Jane Austen’s novels or their own mothers.

Apart from using technology, the young women also rely on more traditional methods of finding a spouse, although these have been updated for the twenty-first century. Thus, despite being “wary of the supernatural stuff” (ibid., 133) that she believes makes Indians particularly vulnerable to superstition, Aisha has her astrologer on speed dial even though “he never commits to anything” (ibid.,13). When one of the friends decides her aura needs cleansing, they decide to perform a havan, a ritual involving lighting a fire which they achieve using copious amounts of alcohol. When more desperate measures are needed, they visit a godwoman who wields a fan of peacock feathers and speaks in tongues but drives a Mitsubishi Lancer. Like the women in question, the spiritual healers and rituals too are a pastiche of traditional and modern.

In the absence of Aisha’s mother, other older women, like Misha’s nosy neighbour Mrs Mukherjee, function as a surrogate voice of tradition who disapprove of the lifestyle of
Aisha and her friends. Having antagonized Mrs Mukherjee with their *havan*, the young women decide to join the community *karva chauth* festival, a North Indian ritual in which wives fast for the longevity of their husbands and which was extended in its Bollywood avatar to young women fasting for good husbands while clad in their finest ethnic outfits. Ironically, it is not Aisha and her girlfriends who win over Mrs Mukherjee, but their gay friend Ric who bonds with her over vegetable choices. Perhaps this is not surprising, since Ric and his partner Nic form the only stable couple in the novel, which is now complete with introduction of “the most controlling element into the relationship – a mother-in-law, even if it is a faux or a wannabe one at that.” (ibid.,129).

Apart from Nic and Ric, who despite an altercation in the middle of the novel remain relatively happy, all the other couples in the novel are unhappy, signifying a deep ambivalence about the institution of marriage itself. Aisha herself has recently had an engagement broken, her friend Anushka is separated, there are references to cheating husbands and finally, Aisha’s conservative cousin is revealed to be in an unhappy marriage with an alcoholic husband. Thus, while the teleology of the novels proceeds towards heterosexual coupledom, a large part of the narrative relates to ambiguous feelings about what marriage bodes.

In both *Keep the Change* and *Almost Single*, mothers embody tradition firstly by invoking the importance of marriage as a prerequisite for young Indian women. They also represent the outdatedness of tradition through the unsuitable men they propose for their daughters and their critique of their daughter’s lifestyle. In Damayanthi’s mother’s case, these include being “a nice, quiet girl, not like those silly modern types” (Subramanian 2010, 22) and not having pre-marital sex, not drinking, and if one is to find a husband oneself, ensuring he is Hindu, Brahmin and thus vegetarian, and Tamil. However, apart from echoing a certain mainstream pan-Indian idea of traditional values, which are really upper-caste,
middle-class Hindu values, the characters of these mothers are not fleshed out at all. The novels then repeat the phallogocentric practice of reducing mothers to unidimensional characters who are either relentlessly self-sacrificing or echoes of patriarchal norms (Hirsch 1989).

**Absent Mothers**

If mothers loom large in *Keep the Change* and *Almost Single*, Anuja Chauhan’s work tends to be characterized by dead, absent or peripheral mothers. In *The Zoya Factor*, Zoya’s mother is dead, in *Battle for Bittora*, Jinni’s mother is away in Canada, in *Those Pricey Thakkur Girls* (2013), Mrs Mamta Thakkur, the girls’ mother, is overshadowed by their father Judge Thakkur, and in the sequel, *The House that BJ Built* (2015), Mrs Thakkur has died as had Binni, the mother of the novel’s protagonist Bonita. Despite this, a “mother function” – to adapt Foucault’s (1998) term “author function” – very much pervades the novels. If, as Foucault has argued in response to Roland Barthes’s proposition that the author is dead, an “author function” continues to pervade literature, so too does a “mother function” persist in Indian chick lit, because the mother, as argued above, stands structurally as the purveyor of traditional norms and cannot easily be slain. In the light of this, the effect of an absent mother in some texts is worth examining.

Although Zoya is technically motherless, she is surrounded by family because her father chose to live in a joint family setting. At home, Zoya is mothered by Eppa “our severe, fifty-plus maid, who’s looked after me and my brother since we were born” (Chauhan 2008, 14). Eppa ladles out food and affection in equal measure, but also represents the socially conservative viewpoint. When we are first introduced to her, Eppa is watching one of the potboiler soap operas that are popular among Indian housewives and insists when the hero’s sister is raped that “she will have to kill herself” as “that is the only way … spoilt girls have
to kill themselves. Or become nun. They can take badla\textsuperscript{8} on him first if they want.” Although Eppa is affectionately portrayed, I believe her status in the novel is similar to Gopal’s observation that non-middle-class characters in the multiplot films of the 2000s serve as the voices of tradition, which are patronizingly tolerated if not subscribed to (2011, 148). The other strong maternal figure in the Solanki home is Zoya’s aunt, Rinku Chachi, whose own children have been sent away to boarding school and who expresses her affection for Zoya and her brother by feeding them her Indo-Western fusion concoctions. A third mother figure is Zoya’s big-breasted colleague Monita who describes Zoya as “my bachcha” [my child] and acts as her mentor. Monita demonstrates modern motherhood in her relationship with her two boys. She has to balance family and being in a position of seniority at work. For example, having sent a deputy to Mumbai to supervise changes to an ad film:

She was full of guilt for not going herself, but she was also full of guilt because her older son, Armaan, the panty-peeker, was going through a weird phase where he wouldn’t leave the house without carefully arranging a dupatta\textsuperscript{9} around his shoulders. This had totally horrified her homophobic husband. And, Aman, the just-turned-two-years-old, had apparently kept her up the whole night, insisting that if he was too big to be allowed a snack at the maternal bosom, he could at least be allowed to keep a firm hold on it all night. (ibid.,163).

Monita is also the one who astutely sees that Zoya is in love with Nikhil, and who, asked to chaperone Zoya on her voyage to Australia with the cricket team, assures her father: “Zoya is just like Armaan and Aman to me” (ibid., 202). Thus, Monita represents the possibility of the mother having a full life and liberal values, even though she remains a romantic at heart.

Nevertheless, the most powerful parental influence in Zoya’s life is her father, who appears to be broadminded, but whose tolerance has its limits. When Zoya kisses a cricketer on the mouth, she is afraid of her father’s reaction: “He’s kept the same standards for Zoravar and me right through school and college. He’s cool with the fact that I’m still not married.

\textsuperscript{8} Badla: revenge

\textsuperscript{9} Dupatta: shawl-like scarf worn with by women with outfits such as the salwar kameez
He’s proud that I’m working. I think he knows that I’ve had boyfriends and stuff, and the policy we’ve been following since I was about seventeen is that he doesn’t ask me about it and I don’t tell him about it” (ibid., 137). “But” Zoya adds “it’s pretty hard to play that game if your daughter’s picture is in the paper, kissing some cricketer on the mouth. If that picture does come out, I will have put my dad in a quite intolerable position. His Standing-in-thee-Society will totally plummet” (ibid.). The liberal attitude to daughters in the novel is ultimately an upper-middle-class one, whereby certain standards of respectability tied to notions (or at least illusions) of chastity have to be preserved.

Zoya’s aunts, Rinku and Anita, pressure her father into taking out a matrimonial ad in the local paper – “Beautiful, fair, convented, Rajput, retired colonel’s daughter, 5.4 feet, 27 years, seeks handsome Kshatriya match, boy must be tall, highly qualified professional, 26-30 years...” – as a result of which she’d “spent some hairy Saturday mornings at the DSOI (the army club) meeting fair, moustached, ghee-fed Raju boys who all looked like they had surma\textsuperscript{10} in their eyes even if they didn’t. Some of them were even nice, but just the thought that they were uncool enough to reply to a matrimonial ad put me off them completely” (ibid., 126). Zoya approaches these assignations with resignation and a lack of seriousness, and admits that she doesn’t “exactly shine on the arranged marriage circuit. I have to tie up my hair, so I look all moon-faced. I have to wear salwar kameezes, which do nothing for my body type. And, of course, I have no accomplishments whatsoever” (ibid.). Like Damayanthi in Keep the Change, Zoya satirizes the arranged marriage process, confessing that she cannot help picturing the men she meets naked and in bed. However, unlike Damayanthi, Zoya does not appear to be under much pressure to actually tie the knot, save for fending off catty remarks from her aunt Anita. If mothers in Indian chick lit serve as voices of tradition, the diffusion of the maternal function in The Zoya Factor and the representation of more diverse

\begin{footnotesize}
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maternal viewpoints – Eppa, the earthy conservative, Rinku Chachi, the fond aunt with wholesome values, Anita Chachi, the gossipy traditionalist, and finally, Monita, the liberal who still makes half-hearted attempts to guard Zoya’s reputation – gives Zoya much more room for manoeuvre than other chick lit protagonists.

Other Mothers

A contrast to these conventional maternal models is Arshi’s mother in You Are Here. Arshi’s parents are divorced which is unusual for the chick lit genre, which tends to preserve the middle-class Indian heterosexual nuclear family so as to contrast it with the protagonist’s lifestyle and aspirations. Instead of conforming to the stereotypes of the bereft leftover wife or vampish divorcee, Arshi’s mother, Abha, rebuilds her life with seeming ease. She acquires a respectable job as a teacher, but far from being schoolmarmish, is popular with the youngsters. Later, she moves to a farmhouse on the outskirts of Delhi where she sets up a school to teach village children: “She’s the saving-the-world type, my mom, and she has fun doing it” (Madhavan 2007, 10). Abha refuses to consider remarriage – “Once is enough for me, Arshi … They breathe all over me, and besides, I don’t want any more children. Why get married?” (ibid., 52) – and is uninterested in her daughter’s marital status. If she is pushy about anything it is education and she urges Arshi to quit her dead-end job and apply to universities abroad. Far from pulling on the apron strings, she severs them and encourages Arshi to fly.

With such a mother figure in place, the narrative in You Are Here broadly takes a different turn from that of the other more typical chick lit novels. Arshi has imbibed the neoliberal agentive impetus to solve the problem of her single state herself, but she seems free from social/maternal pressure in this regard. The traditional expectations on Indian women to marry are displaced onto her roommate Topsy, a Hindu from a conservative family who lives a double life – in Delhi, she is in a relationship with a Muslim man, while when
with her parents back in Meerut, she dons a submissive avatar and patiently fends off their attempts to get her married. One of the crises in the novel is Topsy’s parents’ arrival in Delhi, bringing the “small town” conservative Indian values face to face with her “big city” singleton lifestyle. While the traditional mothers in You Are Here are reduced to harbingers of conservatism and patriarchy, the novel offers a vision of a different mother-daughter duo in Arshi and Abha, significantly, one of the only mothers to be referred to by name. However, Arshi recognizes that she is “not normal”:

To be “normal” was to have a mother who had long hair and was mostly in a sari and called you in from the park as soon as it got dark, and a father who came home from work at a bank or government office and patted you on the head … I wanted to be like the “normal” because it was such a safe way to be. (ibid., 49).

The “normal”, “mainstream” or traditional is invoked as the opposite of what Arshi and her mother are, making them misfits of a privileged kind. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Arshi belongs to a family of academics, which might account for Abha’s non-conventional behaviour.

Battle for Bittora (2010) by Anuja Chauhan represents both “types” of mothers, embodying the traditional mother figure in Pushpa Pande, the protagonist Jinni’s grandmother who she calls Amma, and the modern and liberal mother figure in Jyoti, Jinni’s mother, who she calls Ma. When Pushpa “a little old lady with her hair in a bun and a dainty gold naakphool in her nose” shows up at Jinni’s office to convince her to join her political campaign, it is like the unwelcome intrusion of one world into another. Pushpa is not like the “classy, ‘clean’ lady politicians out there – the kind that wears FabIndia and Dastkar saris and big round bindis, speaks flawless English, hangs out in the Upper House and represents India at UN summits” (Chauhan 2010, 9). Rather, she is part of the real rough and tumble of electoral politics in “the dusty badlands of Pavit Pradesh”, an invented location that seems to refer to Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India. Pushpa speaks in heavily accented
English, is deeply prejudiced against “anybody who isn’t a high-caste citizen of Pavit Pradesh”, invents heroic incidents to aggrandize herself in her biography and is familiar with the bribing, horsetrading and worse required of a successful politician even though she is shown to be kind on occasion and committed to her constituency (ibid., 12). On the other hand, Jinni’s mother Jyoti, fled the coop and angered Pushpa by marrying a college professor instead of making a grand political alliance. After her husband died, Jyoti went abroad and is a “dean at Cohen University, and lives alone on campus, in a lovely house surrounded by apple trees, reading girlie magazines and books about monks who’ve sold their Ferraris” (ibid., 18). Jyoti bears similarities to Arshi’s mother in You Are Here, in choosing the single life and living it as an outsider of sorts.

Interestingly, it is Pushpa whose presence looms over Battle for Bittora, because Jyoti lives in another country and is only available over the telephone, offering calm and wise counsel in opposition to the diktats of her own mother. Neither mother figure, however, is particularly interested in Jinni getting married; in fact, it is Pushpa’s opposition to Jinni’s choice of partner upon which part of the plot turns. If Jinni is questioned about her marital status, it comes from the campaign route by a group of rural women. Rather, Pushpa seeks to inculcate Jinni into a traditional role that is steeped in power, grooming her granddaughter to take on the family’s political legacy.

Before meeting her supporters for the first time, Pushpa forces thick gold earrings into Jinni’s ears with a ribald allegory when she complains of pain: “You are very young and so maybe at first … the stick seems too big for the hole. But don’t worry… if the stick is well lubricated it won’t hurt, and in time the hole will expand nad you will get ujed to it” (96). While Pushpa’s wicked humour enlivens the portrayal of the grandmother, it also heightens the impression that Jinni is being groomed as a bride to be wed, not to one person but the people of her constituency. Thus, as their train nears Bittora for the first time, Gudiya looks
out of the window at the crowd gathered and exclaims, “It’s like a swayamvar outside, madam!” (ibid., 97) referencing the tradition in the epics of princesses choosing their own husbands from the ranks of assembled royal young men. In another incident, when Jinni’s reputation is under threat, she is saved by a serendipity that her grandmother quickly connects with superstition. Caught in a fire at a temple, Jinni manages to escape unscathed because she had just been accidently doused herself in water from a broken tap. Her grandmother frames this event as an “agnipariksha” – Sita’s trial by fire when she was asked to prove her chastity by her husband Ram – to the openmouthed onlookers. Jinni is thus set up as a contemporary Sita, one who will serve her people like a dutiful bride.

The narrative shows up the tradition that Pushpa represents as venal and corrupt, and the narrative tension involves Jinni’s struggles to resolve the pragmatism of her grandmother with the high-mindedness of her deceased grandfather now championed by her mother. This dilemma is signified in the protagonist’s name and the double life she leads. In Mumbai, where she works as a graphic designer, she is known as Jinni and presumably leads the life of the single girl about town. Her colleagues do not know that her grandfather named her Sarojini after the freedom fighter and poet and that her family is deeply connected to Indian politics. Jinni is thus being asked to choose between the modern/urban and the traditional/rural side of her personality, and the narrative charts her journey of resolving this dilemma. Towards the end of the novel, Pushpa dies, and Jinni’s mother makes an appearance, hinting that it is the voice of humanism that has won out. However, this is not entirely the case, because Jinni has been heavily influenced by her grandmother and in the end, her decisions reveal an attempt to reconcile pragmatism, a lust for power and a gritty desire to win with the desire to play fair, do the right thing and serve the people of her constituency.
Conclusion

Here I would like to circle back to the discussion on tradition and modernity in Chapter 1. Modernity is associated with the “global”, which is allied to a notion of individualism seen to have come from the West, while tradition is linked to a composite Indianness across the nation that prizes the family, community and relational identity but is also upper caste and middle class in orientation. I have argued that, for Indian women, the underlying mythological role model is the Sita-Savitri-Sati triumvirate, who personify sacrifice and subservience. Further, this wifely model is overlaid with the expectations of motherhood with its inbuilt connotations of selfless service and nationalistic overtones. The portrayals of mothers and daughters in *Keep the Change* and *Almost Single* position them on opposing sides of a tradition/modernity binary, via their discourse on marriage and daughterly duty. In *The Zoya Factor*, although the protagonist’s mother has died, the “mother function” is still active through a number of surrogates who act on Zoya’s somewhat liberal father particularly in urging him to get her married. The mother-daughter duo in *You Are Here* is more complex but in effect both Arshi and her mother are positioned, particularly in their attitude to good daughterly behaviour and the question of marriage, against more traditional families such as that of Arshi’s flatmate Topsy. In *Battle for Bittora*, the binary is represented in two maternal figures, the traditional grandmother and the liberal mother, and their respective claims form one of the core dilemma of the novels. However, this binary is complicated by positioning tradition as not sacred, timeless and pure but as openly pragmatic and corrupt.

By zooming in on mothers and daughters, I have reframed the discussion surrounding chick lit from a focus on singleness and marriage to the need to balance the claims of tradition and modernity faced by young women in post-liberalization India. The tradition/modernity binary is symbolized in the tension between mothers and daughters in the
novels, and I have shown how it plays out in their interactions over the problem of singleness. The novels configure a monolithic Indian tradition signified by mothers while seemingly crystallizing “the single woman” as the opposite of this tradition. The counterpoint to traditional Indian mothers, their daughters, however, is more complicated. The young women in question do not wholly represent or claim modernity, although it appears so because they claim the right to individualistically choose their own spouses.

In their insistence on their right to choose their own partner via a “love marriage” – or what is sometimes referred to as a “choice marriage” – Indian chick lit protagonists’ ambitions dovetail with one of the key tenets of neoliberalism. At the heart of the postfeminist and neoliberal self is the “choice biography” where an individual’s life is rendered “knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy – however constrained one might actually be” (Gill 2006, 260). While choice implies the freedom to choose, there is also a compulsion to choose. McRobbie observes that “the individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices” (2009, 19).

Women in Indian chick lit are situated within a landscape of expanded choices in a post-liberalization-era, and the choice of husband, including how to choose a husband (assuming it is necessary to choose one), presents itself in these novels as the apparent problem to be solved. Writing on Hindi films, Uberoi has identified “the conflict between individual desire and social norms and expectations in respect of marriage choice” as “the animating logic of South Asian romance” (1998). However, unlike in films, the chick lit protagonist has not identified her chosen man and when she does, she does not have to fight for her family’s consent; it is more the necessity, timing and mode of a choosing a spouse that is the source of conflict. Further, I would suggest that the drama over marriage in chick lit is the grounds for the negotiation of a larger story of the self, or rather that the problem of choosing a spouse stands as symptomatic of other choices to be made in constituting selfhood in the post-
liberalization era. I have suggested in this chapter, it is the broad choice between tradition and modernity that is the core paradigm of the novels, one that is expressed in the conflict between mothers and daughters. In the following chapter, I will elucidate how this binary is expressed across a number of areas in constituting a particular kind of self.
Chapter 4: Feeding and Fashioning the Self

In the previous chapter, I argued that the core dilemma that Indian chick lit novels seek to resolve is the pressure on middle-class women to balance the demands of tradition and modernity, particularly in the post-liberalization era. The tradition/modernity binary, I argued, is personified in the novels in mothers and daughters and latently explored in the discussion of when, how and who to marry. Encoded into the problem of singleness, I noted, are the binaries of the private/public, inner/outer, spiritual/material, traditional/modern, local/global, home/world that have historically been resolved by the insistence on Indian women preserving an inner traditional/spiritual core even when they increasingly bear the outer trappings of modernity. However, in chick lit, I suggested, this binary is not so simplistically delineated. If mothers represent Indian womanhood in maturity, this is an ideal that the chick lit protagonists seem keen on deflecting, inherent in their rejection of what they see as traditional marriages. Rather, the young women seem to be grasping towards different ways of fashioning the self, via choices of tradition and modernity that are not necessarily consistent. If choosing is at the heart of neoliberal postfeminism and the choice of romantic partner is presented as the ultimate choice for young women, the endings of Indian chick lit novels demonstrate the desire for more agency in the choosing process and hint at the possibility of delaying that choice or even choosing not to choose. In this chapter, I will build on this idea of inconsistent choosing, by examining the treatment of food, fashion and the body in three novels – *Keep The Change*, *Almost Single* and *You Are Here*.

**Eating Well**

Other than as a guilty pleasure and as an object of resistance, food has not been the focus of Western chick lit or scholarly analyses of the genre. For example, in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Fielding 1996), food is famously reduced to calories that are to be counted and sparingly consumed. Paying attention to the treatment of food in Indian chick lit, however,
reveals that it functions less as a conduit to expressions of dietary caution, than as a mode of invoking the tradition/modernity binary as well as class and caste consciousness.

Since the “good mother” in South Asia is conceived as the nurturer of children, “feeding the child and provisioning the family are key components of the role of mother and wife” (Srinivas 2012, 360). As women are associated with the home and the reproduction of culture therein (Chatterjee 1993), the production of food has historically been the domain of women and a site for this cultural reproduction (Mannur 2007; Black 2010; Srinivas 2016). Mankekar (2002) notes how diasporic Indian women in the US saw the preparation of Indian food as a means of preserving Indian culture. For them “cooking Indian food was integral to their roles in the family and to their constitution as national and gendered subjects – indeed to their identities as Indian women” (ibid., 84). In all three novels under consideration here, mothers were assumed to be and sometimes explicitly were food providers. This is most evident in *Keep the Change* in which Damayanthi’s mother provided and withheld food depending on her approval or disapproval of her daughter’s behavior. However, even in *You Are Here*, Abha, the non-traditional mother, offered “home cooking” when her daughter visited her.

Mannur proposes the idea of “culinary citizenship”, a form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food” (2007, 13). The question in Indian chick lit would be: what “culinary citizenship” do the young women claim?

*Caste Consciousness*

Given that food habits are a marker of caste purity (Dumont 1980), it is no surprise that food preferences come up in relation to marriage. Appadurai has noted that “food in South Asia can serve two diametrically opposed semiotic functions. It can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or, it can
serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation” (1981, 496). While Appadurai seems to suggest a kind of loosening of taboos in relation to food among the new middle classes, indicated by the proliferation of restaurants which appear to soften caste rules relating to who can eat together, he acknowledges that this does not extend to marriage. Whether there is indeed a loosening of caste rules relating to food consumption remains an open question, but the attention to food habits in connection with choice of spouse in chick lit indicates that the rules of pollution remain in place, even when they are couched in terms of “taste differences”. For example, Aisha is affronted by a call from her mother enquiring about her views on certain food items as a possible suitor is “pucca vegetarian, no garlic and onions even” (Kala 2007, 10). In response, Aisha makes demands of her own and mystifies her mother by insisting that the man be on a high protein and no carb diet, simply to level the playing field.

In *Keep the Change*, food becomes a marker of conventional values, and though it is not explicitly mentioned, caste. Damayanthi is an Iyer, an influential Tamil Brahmin sub-caste. Appadurai has noted that “Tamil Brahmin households are bulwarks of culinary orthodoxy” and usually “scrupulously vegetarian” (1981, 497). Thus, when Damayanthi lands a job in Mumbai, her mother panics about what she will eat and immediately makes plans to send her chutneys and pickles. While Damayanthi shrugs off these admonishments, one of the conflicts with her flatmate Sonya is over food. Sonya discards Damayanthi’s tamarind paste; in retaliation, Damayanthi throws away Sonya’s chicken fillets, saying: “Can you imagine my chocolate ice cream rubbing shoulders or breast with some dead creature? What would Amma say to see my pure Brahmin kitchen turned into an animal graveyard?” (Subramanian 2010, 129). Damayanthi thus uses her mother to voice caste rules about food pollution, which the reader is expected to take humorously. While the chick lit protagonist is assumed to be caste blind, her upper-caste status is clear throughout. Moreover,
Damayanthi’s repeated allusions to her diet of curd, rice and pickles or tamarind paste are reminiscent of the “set of gastroethnic images” that Appadurai notes in regional cookbooks (1988, 16). He suggests that it is this regional ethnic articulation via food that contributes to the creation of an idea of an “Indian cuisine”. Thus, the invocation of food in Keep the Change alludes to caste consciousness and also subsumes this under an articulation of regional cuisines as making up the melting pot of Indian cuisine.

Damayanthi’s food consumption remains largely wedded to her roots. Thus, even as she discovers new gustatory experiences such as the Juicy Tomato, a restaurant that becomes her favourite, it is clear that she is most comfortable with the Tamil Brahmin food of her home, and she fondly remembers her mother’s cooking. A number of studies have pointed out how diasporic communities’ nostalgia is often evoked and satiated through food (Mankekar 2002; Roy 2002; Mannur 2007). Although the chick lit protagonist is not technically diasporic, she is away from her hometown, and Keep the Change plays up the culture shock of a South Indian in the North. Unlike many chick lit protagonists whose food-based longings appear essentially transnational, Damayanthi has not entirely shed the moorings of home and tradition evoked through food.

_Gustatory Cosmopolitanism_

In general, though, rather than conforming to the reproduction of national culture through food, the women use food to mark their modernity and cosmopolitanism. Appadurai has highlighted the proliferation of cookbooks chronicling regional cuisines in postcolonial India as the sign of the emergence of the construction of a “particular sort of polyglot culture” among the middle class (1988, 5). Appadurai reads into the appearance of cookbooks a culinary cosmopolitanism that involves the crossing of caste, ethnic and language boundaries. In post-liberalization India, this has broadened to include transnational cuisines, evidenced in the proliferation of restaurants offering a range of cuisines in big cities.
Further, while some have argued that cookbooks documenting Indian cuisine by stalwarts such as Madhur Jaffrey reify national borders and homogenize national identity in their address to a foreign audience despite avowals to the contrary (Roy 2002; Mannur 2007), Black (2010) aligns Jaffrey’s cookbooks to a cosmopolitanism that, following Appiah (2006), she defines as “a mode of attachment beyond the local that implies both an openness and a sense of attentiveness toward different ways of life. In this respect, cosmopolitanism entails more than a casually touristic approach to culinary difference” (Black 2010, 2). Food, Black argues, can “help to imagine a form of cosmopolitanism rooted in intimate sensory pleasures rather than in more conventional abstractions of affiliation and duty” (ibid.). Similarly, in response to allegations of “food colonialism” (Heldke 1992) and “culinary imperialism” (Goldman 1992), Narayan (1995) proposes that “gustatory relish for the food of ‘Others’ may help contribute to an appreciation of their presence in the national community, despite ignorance about the cultural contexts of their foods – these pleasures of the palate providing more powerful bonds than knowledge.” A further question would be whether the cosmopolitanism in Indian chick lit facilitates this kind of cross-cultural engagement.

For example, Aisha and her friends in Almost Single profess a love of chicken tikka, a North Indian specialty that is now one of the most well recognized Indian foods globally, but they seek it in the exclusive Metropolitan Club and Sunday brunch at a five-star hotel where one has to make a reservation a week in advance to get a table. At the latter gathering, when food is mentioned though, it is not chicken tikka, but Caesar salad and wine, and the company, which comprises a socialite and her designer friend, a group of Germans and a loud celebration over champagne. “Chicken tikka” is referenced to signify the friends’ connection to their roots even as they partake of international lifestyles and food. This rooted cosmopolitanism is epitomized in a scene in which the friends break the traditional karva chauth fast, a ritual in which women fast for the longevity of their husbands, with a picnic on
Misha’s terrace. *Karva chauth* has been critiqued for its patriarchal overtones, and in the novel, it is Aisha’s mother who steps out of character for once and objects to it. Her skepticism is dismissed and the young women participate in a neighborhood gathering but break the fast in private with hamper of international gourmet goodies – “Moet and Chandon, Boursin cheese, shepherd’s pie, garlic bread, a tossed salad and brownies, not to mention linen serviettes and real silverware” (Kala 2007, 119). The fast and the ensuing feast are used to demonstrate how young people are malleably adopting traditions and remaking them by merging them with cosmopolitan tastes. While Srinivas asserts that “as cosmopolitanism increases, a hyper caste-based local Indian identity asserts itself in consumption located affectively in gastro-nostalgia” (2012, 367), the longing in *Almost Single* is for food from distant lands, a veritable pot luck of international cuisine as a signifier of sophistication.

Because the picnic in *Almost Single* is about consumption and not cooking, an aspect stressed by Black in her argument for the potential for culinary cosmopolitanism, it is arguable how far this practice goes in “generating experiences that do not inevitably reify the idea of a fixed culinary Other who can be easily consumed” (2010, 21). Rather, one might read the consumption of diverse cuisines in chick lit as examples of what Harindranath, referring to Indian cooking shows, has called “gastro-mobility that traverses localities, regions and nations, an instance of promiscuous consumption that has come to epitomise a type of cosmopolitan style and a self-conscious creation of distinction by a cultural and economic elite for whom international travel is commonplace and whose palates have acquired the taste of multiple cuisines” (2013, 151). Harindranath also points out that this practice in some ways subverts the process of “culinary imperialism” through the “consumption of Western foods with as little concern for or interest in their cultural contexts. Consumption of the Other is predominantly about the enhancement and display of cosmopolitan cultural sophistication and economic privilege” (ibid., 152). While Narayan
(1995) suggests that in order to avoid lapsing into “culinary imperialism”, Western consumers of “ethnic foods” might “need to cultivate more reflective attention to the complexities involved in the production and consumption of the ‘ethnic foods’ they eat”, the Indians consuming Western food in Almost Single do not reciprocate this gesture. They hark back to the foreign goods fetishism associated with the middle class (Oza 2006), whereby their consumption of foods from first-world nations marks their sophistication. Thus, while they in some ways reverse culinary imperialism in their somewhat callous approach to consuming culture through food (Harindranath 2013), their transnational eating does not display the engaged cosmopolitanism that Narayan (1995) and Black (2003) argue for. What is notable is how they consume foods from different locales to signal their sophistication, but pair this transnational selection with the performance of traditional Indian rituals. What is signaled here is more than simply picking one over the other but a fusion.

Deflecting Domesticity

All three protagonists are marked by an inability or disinterest in cooking, usually seen as the province of Indian women. If Appadurai notes that the appearance of regional cookbooks addressed to middle-class women sought to turn the tiring process of “honing indigenous culinary skills … and the exploration of new culinary regions” into a “pleasant adventure rather than a tiring grind” (1988, 8), the young women in Indian chick lit are not buying it. Rather, they seem attuned to traditional evaluations of food transactions whereby cooking indicates a subordinate position and is therefore associated with women in the home and men’s “priority in being served food, the positions which they physically occupy, and their disengagement from the cooking process” (Appadurai 1981, 498) indicates their superiority.

While some have argued that food preparation is not simply a service but can also be a source of power (Devasahayam 2005; Daya 2010), chick lit protagonists sidestep this duty
as a chore. Damayanthi’s mother blames herself for letting her daughter read instead of teaching her to cook, and when Damayanthi moves to Mumbai, she orders a *dabba*, the city’s famous tiffin delivery service, instead of cooking herself. Thus, if “in traditional Tamil Brahmin society, not only is the new bride expected to play a meek, subordinate, and labor-intensive role in her husband’s house, but she is specifically the instrument of her mother-in-law’s desires, especially in the culinary domain” (Appadurai 1981, 500), even Damayanthi, the most conventional of our three protagonists, pays no attention to acquiring the necessary skills to please her future mother-in-law and husband and her mother has to lie to potential in-laws about her ability to make a “very good onion sambhar and potato” (Subramanian 2006, 16). As Aisha in *Almost Single* says, tongue in cheek, “who wants to belo rotis\(^\text{11}\), so totally regressive, when you can get dal\(^\text{12}\) in a can” (Kala 2007, 100). At the beginning of *You Are Here*, Arshi expresses her desire to be a chef and elicits amused skepticism from her flatmate given her lack of culinary skills. In defense, Arshi lists out a recipe for “Potato Pickle Surprise”, displaying of the kind of adhoc cooking that upper-middle-class young people living alone in the city engage in as a survival mechanism. If the data in Srinivas’s (2016) study indicated that women are torn over whether to adopt packaged foods or not, Arshi has no such qualms. The singleton identity then allows and even encourages young women to eschew cooking and adopt easier options.

Arshi and Topsy’s trash reflects this lifestyle: “Domino’s boxes, stacked high, one on top of the other. Or aluminum foil from kebab rolls” and on the rare days that they actually cook, potato peelings in addition to alcohol bottles are ubiquitous (Madhavan 2008, 137). On the other hand, the posh couple’s trash on the ground floor, prompts Arshi to fantasize about “knocking on their door, being invited to sit on a plastic-covered sofa and being fed stir-fried vegetables with bread from the Oberoi Charcuterie instead of the regular Harvest Gold you

\(^\text{11}\) Belo rotis: Roll out Indian flat bread  
\(^\text{12}\) Dal: lentils
got in the nearby grocery store” (ibid., 157). The acquisition of a cosmopolitan taste in food, patronage of restaurants and unwillingness to cook elaborate meals for themselves, marks the single lifestyle, which is contrasted with their mother’s domestic focus.

However, the ability of these women to evade domestic duties is only made possible by the availability of cheap domestic help. When Damayanthi moves to Mumbai, one of her early encounters is with the local *bai*¹³, the picture of brisk efficiency in the face of which Damayanthi says “all I could do was nod in a servile way” and agree to her terms of Rs 900 a month, a salary she knew her mother would be outraged about but that she pays without complaint (Subramanian 2010: 68). In her encounter with the maid, then, Damayanthi sets herself up as the opposite of her mother’s own domineering behavior with the household help. Similarly, in *You Are Here*, Arshi describes her first encounter with the household help as being caught on the back foot. After a first “bad experience”, she and Topsy settle into domestic harmony with their second maid, who is like a shadow presence running their household and freeing them up to eschew the domestic. In both these cases, mention of the women who in fact enable their lifestyles to a great degree is brief and construed as almost an equal partnership without attention to the caste and class inequalities and questions of exploitation that the employee-domestic help relationship is imbricated in.

**Dressing the Part**

If food in Indian chick lit is used to demonstrate the protagonist’s cosmopolitan credentials and upper-caste status and to distinguish her from her mother, dress serves this purpose more directly. Following Chatterjee who points to the debates surrounding the “precise application” of the “home/world, spiritual/ material, feminine/masculine dichotomies” to various aspects of women’s lives, Bhatia notes that women’s clothes continue to be imbricated in controversies that are framed in terms of tradition or modernity

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¹³ Bai: maid
Critics have commented on the centrality of fashion, shopping and consumerism to chick lit as a genre (Van Slooten 2006; Gill 2007; Harzewski 2011). Ferriss and Young note that “fashion has been dismissed by feminists as frivolous, as inculcating women with a debilitating femininity and making them the unwitting dupes of capitalism. But feminist condemnations have coexisted with claims that fashion provides women with a means of expressing identity” (2006, 10). They ask: “Is chick lit ‘buying in’ to a degrading and obsessive consumer culture, or is it ultimately exposing the limitations of a consumerist worldview?” (ibid., 11).

In the Indian context, liberalization resulted in pressure on the middle class to partake of global style trends whereby fashion “becomes a crucial medium of individual expression and the lived experience of modernity – that not only helps them keep up with the Kapoors, but also the Joneses, and the Kardashians” (Sandhu 2015, 61). Liberalization saw a rapid expansion in the Indian fashion sector, with the availability of both Western brands and Indian options, and the burgeoning of a shopping mall culture. In addition to film and television, middle-class Indians have been schooled in their fashion choices by magazines, websites and fashion blogs. The targets of the fashion industry are urban, educated, upper-class Indian women, usually under the age of 35, comprising 30 million consumers who now favour Western clothes for its connotations of being “sexy and fun” whereby “the desire to be dressed in Western clothes can then be read as the desire to be modernized” (Nagrath 2003, 365).

The film Aisha (Ozha 2010), arguably the first Indian chick flick and an avowed imitation of Hollywood’s Clueless (1995), was notable in this regard. The stylistic hedonism of Aisha, or the obsession with brand names and frenetic pursuit of high fashion characteristic of Western chick lit texts such as the Shopaholic series or Sex and the City, however, is not typical of Indian chick lit. Rather, as in the case of food, chick lit protagonists
signal their modernity via the ease with which they wear Western clothing, with skinny jeans, spaghetti straps and stilettos signifying the singleton lifestyle. On the other hand, mothers reference tradition in encouraging their daughters to present themselves as “good Indian women” by wearing Indian clothing. Tarlo notes that “the term ‘traditional’ does not refer to any particular features of a garment but only to the fact that the garment is perceived as something that was worn and accepted by people in the seemingly timeless past”, the scope of that past being undetermined, whereby “the ‘traditional’ is the stuff of the past (real or imagined) that we consider relevant to our present and our future” (1996, 316-7). The dynamic between mothers and daughters over clothes mirrors Sandhu’s observation of the dichotomy represented in Indian fashion magazines which often feature “juxtaposition of past ideals, inner spirituality and collective identity signified through the medium of Indian dress, with ‘modern’ concepts of career goals, financial independence, self-preservation through commodity consumption and the sense of individual identity symbolized through Western dress” (2015, 107).

Sartorial Anxieties

In positing the dilemma over what to wear as a contest between Indian and Western clothing, Indian chick lit harks back to the nineteenth-century dilemma faced by Indian men. Given that Western dress was seen as signifying “all the values which the British boasted: superiority, progress, decency refinement, masculinity and civilization”, if elite Indian men and those from the emerging middle classes “wanted to be modern and participate in this civilization, wearing the correct clothes was surely one means of doing so” (Tarlo 1996, 45). While Indian men of the time experimented with incorporating elements of Western dress into their wardrobes, Indian women largely wore Indian dress, although they adopted Western cloth and were influenced by Western fashions. Nevertheless, women’s dress did not pass without comment; on the contrary, given that women were assigned the role of spiritual
guardians of the “private” sphere (Chatterjee 1993), there was a stream of discourse on the proper attire for women, particularly in literary-cultural productions in Bengal (Bannerji 1995; Loomba 1997; Bhatia 2003) and ultimately, “the modest sari-clad middle-class woman, symbolic of Hindu, Indian national identity became the everyday face of tradition” (Bahl 2005: 101).

In Indian films of the 1960s and 1970s, women wearing Western clothes were associated with negative traits such as sexual promiscuity, smoking and consuming alcohol, personified in the figure of the “vamp” who danced at cabarets, bars and parties and was contrasted with the heroine who wore Indian dress. The transition from Western to Indian clothing in these films was meant to signal “the transition from brash Western modernity to good Indian morals, traditions and spirituality” (Sandhu 81). In the decades preceding economic liberalization, however, the “modern Indian woman” began to be represented in Western clothes although it was assumed that she would maintain her traditional core (Loomba 1997; Sadhu 2015).

**Modern Makeovers**

In Indian chick lit, the transition from vampish woman whose immorality is signified by her Western clothes into “good Indian woman” dressed in a sari is sometimes reversed. *Keep the Change* highlights the self-fashioning imbricated in sartorial transformation in a makeover, one of the most common tropes used in chick lit. Critics have pointed to the makeover as a technology of neoliberalism, in that it emphasizes constant self-surveillance in order to ensure that it is “up to standard” (Press 2011; Raisborough 2011, Tincknell 2011). The outward expression of this surveillance is through body policing, fashion and judicious consumer choices. Gill suggests that “a makeover paradigm constitutes postfeminist media culture. This requires people (predominantly women) to believe first that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way, and second that it is amenable to reinvention or
transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practising appropriately modified consumption habits” (2006, 441). Press observes that in makeover culture “women are promised success, glamour and happiness if only they can get the improvement script right. Prince Charming, plus a well-paid and glamorous career, all will follow if you can only pick out the perfect designer shoes, etc. In sum, the road to glamour is also, it is promised, the road to riches” (2011, 118).

Rather than simply becoming more fashionable as a result of her makeover, however, Damayanthi’s “change” specifically signifies a growing confidence in Western dress that she equates with glamour, confidence and sex appeal. This is in line with the advice of contemporary fashion magazines that Sandhu (2015) notes tend to equate the Western with the youthful and modern. Reflecting on an editorial by Satya Saran, the editor of Femina, a popular women’s magazine and the main organizer of the Miss India pageant, Vanita Reddy highlights how “the beautiful” seems to contain “magical powers that signal the desire for self-transformation.” Reddy suggests that “the beautiful’ functions as what Arvind Rajagopal has called an ‘aspirational space’ of middle-class Indian womanhood where the Indian woman has the time, money and desire to attend to her physical appearance. ‘The beautiful’ exists as a space of social mobility, of ascendancy into a leisure class” (2006, 66)

Shoma Munshi points out that “investment in appearance as a key identity marker, particularly in post-liberalization India, makes representation of one’s looks and bodies a crucial area for (re)defining femininity” (2001, 78). Thus, the post-liberalization era has seen a proliferation of beauty product advertisements, a historically new development reflecting a Rs 3,000 crore (US$ 466.85 million) cosmetics and toiletries market (Munshi 2010, 148). Lazar has noted that beauty product ads “extend feminist notions of social and political emancipation to the domain of personal grooming, where the latter’s achievement becomes the hallmark of full emancipation” (2011, 40). However, these ads are undergirded by an
exhortation to consume with rejection of commercial beauty regimes never offered as an option (2011, 45). While chick lit protagonists take a cue from Jane Austen’s heroines in being “beautiful but not too beautiful”, the protagonists remain anxious about their looks, suggesting that a completely self-accepting woman might come across as unrealistic to contemporary readers (Wells 2006, 59).

In *Keep the Change*, Damayanthi is ambivalent about using cosmetics, influenced both by her mother who “still does not wear lipstick, has never owned a blusher, has never seen mascara and believes in the wonderful cosmetic properties of turmeric and sandalwood paste” and by Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* which inspired her to reject “wicked chemical products that demeaned our self esteem and promoted the evil agenda of multinational companies” (Subramanian 2006: 163). However, gradually, she begins to feel the need for a makeover given that “the genuine natural look” is not appropriate for all occasions (ibid.). By the middle of the book, she preps for date by washing and conditioning her hair and using not one but two face masks which she comments didn’t make much difference, prompting her to wonder: “Who was I turning into? A bimbo, primping and powdering for a man?” (ibid: 223). This critique is typical of chick lit, which Wells argues, on the one hand capitalizes on readers’ anxieties about their looks but on the other hand frankly admits “to the drain of energy and resources demanded by this pursuit” (2006, 61).

Nevertheless, frustrated by her failure to attract a man she is interested in and determined to transform herself into “the Girl Who Must Be Phoned Right Now” (Subramanian 2010, 253), Damayanthi cuts her long hair, undergoes a facial and pedicure, and purchases new clothes. A key moment in the makeover is getting a haircut “not the tepid trim that I have gone in for all these years, but a proper new hairstyle” (ibid.). After a pragmatic assessment of her bone structure and face shape, her “hair, which had been halfway down my back, was now swirling around my shoulders in soft black waves” (ibid.,
The change is drastic enough for one of her colleagues not to recognize her. While another colleague remarks that “these days we are not preserving our tradition and culture. So many girls are wearing western clothes when we have such beautiful Indian attire” (ibid., 261), the general reaction is broadly positive. Her own feelings, however, are ambiguous. When she expresses that she feels inauthentic in her new look and “should oil my hair and change back to my usual self”, her friend Jimmy, recommends she “keep the change” because “it suits you and you are still you, inner beauty and all” (ibid.: 263). Here, the inner/outer dichotomy functions in a mode similar to the one Munshi (2001) noted of the Miss Indias of the 1990s. While Damayanthi has outwardly modernized, her values remain presumably remain unchanged.

While her friend Sumi transformed internally and externally from “a paavam Tam Brahmin girl to a foul-mouthed brassy babe” who “cut her hair really short, pierced an extra hole in each of her ears and wears a small Om tattoo on her back” and who shocked everyone by “loudly saying, ‘Fuck you bastard!’ to a lecher who was ogling her ample boobs” (Subramanian 2010, 36), Damayanthi’s transformation is less radical. Once the novelty of her makeover wears off, Damayanthi alternates between salwar kurtas and long skirts, thus switching between Indian and Western wear but maintaining a more demure look overall. One might assume that Damayanthi remains a “good Indian woman” at heart, but the “little voice” in her head that peppers the novel tells us otherwise. Damayanthi questions and resists the diktats of tradition at every turn, even though she remains disturbed by some modern values, especially those she encounters in the corporate workplace. That Damayanthi’s inner voice cuts through the novels particularly acerbically when she is dressed most traditionally, by her mother in a sari at weddings and to greet prospective grooms, undercuts any simplistic delineation of a Western exterior masking a traditional Indian inner core.

14 Paavam: simple
Sari-Clad Adventures

A cogent reminder that the inner-outer dichotomy might not function seamlessly in chick lit as clearly as is assumed in earlier discussions of the New Indian Woman comes in the metaphor of Aisha in *Almost Single* draping a sari over jeans and pairing this hybrid outfit with sneakers to meet the sartorial requirements of her workplace. It is notable that Aisha works at a hotel catering to international clients but is compelled to wear a sari, reflecting Bahl’s (2005) observation about the revival of the sari in the workplace. If Indian women have been under pressure to aver that while their exterior is Western, they remain “good Indian women” within, Aisha’s garb effects a visual reversal – it is the Indian that remains on the surface, while arguably her inner core is Western. It is notable that clad in this Indo-Western fusion garment, Aisha in the course of retrieving a piece of paper, climbs over a balustrade, does a short sprint, and stares at a naked man who she later falls in love with. Again, Aisha may perform demure Indian womanhood, but it is a performance that like her sari is always unravelling.

If Indian dress is associated with tradition, the outfit that most characterizes this tradition is the sari. Loomba argues that “the sari, like the veil, becomes a super-conductor for debates about gender, clothing and cultural identity” (1997, 279). In fact, the sari, particularly in its current avatar, was not always the quintessential Indian garment, but rather was taken up by reformist families in Bengal in the nineteenth century and then popularized across India. The aim was to differentiate middle-class Bengali women sartorially from prostitutes and labouring women and heighten a sense of pan-Indian identity (Bahl 2005). The extended discussion over the form which the sari would take also telescoped anxieties about female sexuality (Loomba 1997). Moreover, the sari signalled the move into adulthood with its attendant burdens for Indian women (Jones 61).
In *Keep the Change*, Damayanthi is paraded around a wedding dressed in “a dark green, red bordered Kanchivaram sari. Large gold earrings hung from my ears and a glittering necklace edged with small gold coins lay around my neck, indicating to prospective matchmakers that I had a good stock of family jewels. All I needed was a small star on my head and I could have passed for a Christmas tree” (Subramanian 2010, 13-14). When prospective in-laws visit her home to “see” her, her mother coerces her into wearing a “nice maroon sari that will look very good with your complexion” and urges her to tie her hair back into a braid, while Damayanthi protests: “Why can’t he see me in my old nightie with my hair hanging all over my face? This is the real me” (23). Damayanthi’s discomfort in wearing a sari indicates her consciousness of the garment as “a sign both of Indian womanhood and the expectations society places on individual women” (Jones 2004, 62).

Aisha’s mother in *Almost Single* too insists on her wearing a sari when she hears she is going to meet her boyfriend’s mother, and asks about her jewellery, though Aisha rebels and not only goes in jeans but in an inebriated state as well and still manages to keep the older woman’s favour. However, on an earlier occasion, when tasked with picking Karan’s mother up from the airport, Aisha herself donned a sari. The only two other occasions on which Aisha voluntarily wears a sari or any other form of Indian dress are during the *karva chauth* festival and for a wedding. Arshi in *You Are Here* only wears a sari once, also for a wedding. Wearing a sari for these young women is seen as the performance of traditional Indian womanhood, and while they enjoy this performance, the implication is that it is temporary.

Although “the sari’s future remains a popular topic for popular debate and speculation in India” (Sandhu 2015), Bahl (2005) has noted that post-liberalization, the sari is re-emerging as “an erotic wrap for some upper class, trendy women” who are experimenting with draping it in different ways. This ambivalence towards the sari is evident in *Almost
On the one hand, Aisha disparages the sari for epitomizing “the futility of all diets. The way we are meant to drape this article of clothing, no one will ever notice the change in my figure” (Kala 2007, 195). On the other hand, she chooses to spend a significant amount of money buying a “Swarovski iced-chiffon saree by Gudda – Rohit Bal to you plebs” (ibid., 114). Eventually, Aisha discovers the sari can be sexy too as her friend “pins the pleats together with a crystal broach that sits strategically below my belly button. It is, of course, covered with a pallav\(^{15}\), but sparkles seductively through the sheerness of the fabric” (ibid., 207). Saris traditionally formed part of an Indian woman’s dowry and the gifts her in-laws would give her, and would be passed on or lent to younger members of the family (Tarlo 1996; Jones 2004). Aisha’s sari is a gift from her friend, ironically from her wedding trousseau after her divorce, indicating that the ties between women continue, just laterally and not necessarily across generations within the same family. Thus, Aisha’s attitude to the “national garment” (Kala 2007, 207) evolves through the novel into an acceptance of the sari’s potential as an attractive form of attire. Tradition and traditional dress, then, is not rejected outright but embellished or adapted to suit the selves under construction.

In *You Are Here*, it is the performative implications of Indian dress that are highlighted. Arshi lives in jeans and T-shirts and likens wearing a salwar kameez to being in costume: “I sway a bit when I walk, my footsteps fall closer to each other, almost like my feet have been bound. In a salwar-kameez I feel capable of doing domestic things, like pickling a mango, perhaps or putting the right tadka\(^{16}\) in a dal” (Madhavan 2008: 207). For her, this is a novelty she can enjoy once in a while, though for her roommate Topsy, the weight of Indian clothing is more oppressive. When her parents visit, Topsy “pulls out all the salwar-kameezes her mother bought for her to wear to college. Godawful things they are too – all shiny and brilliantly coloured. She wears her gorgeous hair constantly in a ponytail and

\(^{15}\) Pallav: Loose end of the sari  
\(^{16}\) Tadka: Tempered spices
speaks in very soft polite tones in a mix of Hindi and English” (ibid., 23). After the meeting with her parents, however, Topsy “changed into track pants and a tank top and threw a shawl over her shoulders” and calls her boyfriend over for comfort (ibid., 207). The narratives of dress in Indian chick lit highlight the performativity of Indian identity by showing that for these young women at least, Indianness has to be “put on” via dress, and, to some extent, can be discarded by dressing differently, though for some of them traditional expectations remain to be dealt with no matter what they are wearing.

*Cosmopolitan Clothing*

Although the young women might not accept a prioritising of Indian over Western dress, they are not immune to social norms. Arshi in *You Are Here* recounts being told by a broker that their clothes were too “phoren”¹⁷ and to dress differently when they met the landlord: “‘Phoren’? Us? Topsy was in a vest, and I was in a fitted T-shirt, but a T-shirt nonetheless, and we thought we looked okay. I mean we wouldn’t win any contests for traditional Indian womanhood, but we weren’t branded with the scarlet letter or anything, the way he made it sound. We didn’t go back to that broker” (Madhavan 2008, 208). In her study of single women and mental illness, Pinto notes how assessments of women’s clothing were part of the clinical diagnostic process whereby “certain kinds of self-presentation represented the excessive crafting of selfhood” (2014, 243) She comments: “I soon came to feel that the linkages of psychiatry with discipline, or clothing with agency writ large, were overdrawn, that they overlooked not only the many and movable forms of agency in play, but also the ways clothing, as a marker of self-fashioning, was part of gendered visions of cosmopolitan selfhood beyond the clinic” (ibid., 239). It is these “visions of cosmopolitan selfhood” that are at play in chick lit.

¹⁷ Phoren: Foreign
In *Keep the Change*, the censorious eye is also wielded by Damayanthi herself, who sometimes expresses disapproval of women who are too glamorous or sexy. Thus, she notes that her roommate Sonya “dresses as though she is going for a fashion show” who “either wears these chic trousers and short stylish shirts with the top button open, tailored to fit her curves, or straight skirts just short of being micro-minis that show off her long legs. She might very well be a model for Chanel’s Office Couture for Young Ladies collection” (Subramanian 2010, 127). Sonya is a private banker, and Damayanthi insinuates that her roommate’s looks and sense of style if not sex appeal are what gets her ahead in the office. Thus, Sonya’s clothing is perceived as symptomatic of other “shocking” behaviour like smoking, drinking and “entertaining men in her room” (ibid., 131). Damayanthi is equally scathing about Veronica, the boss’s secretary who “wore a tight red silk blouse which, as usual, presented a clear view of her anatomy” and who, when talking to a man “smiled up in a desperately arch and coy way and batted her mascara-coated lashes at him” (ibid., 277). While this behaviour is glamorous in a Western woman like Victoria, it is disapproved of in Indian women, who are typically cast as the vamps of the piece, even if they reveal themselves, in this case, to be alright at the end.

Damayanthi’s attitude towards women who appear too sexy might also be read as her insecurity about not being sexy enough or her more sheltered and conservative upbringing. In general, though, in Indian chick lit, enactments of “cosmopolitan selfhood” through clothes mark the singleton, who must demonstrate the ability to not just be comfortable in Western dress but to dress appropriately and fit into settings such as the nightclub. Thus, Damayanthi wonders if her beau does not call her because “he is ashamed of taking me to a posh club. I would look so out of place there among those slinky models with short skirts and long legs. So I have to become the woman he would like me to be” (Subramanian 2010, 253). In contrast, Aisha in *Almost Single* is comfortable standing out at a nightclub in a “dragon-red
dress with a Chinese collar that stops just short of the knees” which she pairs with “red satin stilettos”, her hair in a chignon held up by chopsticks, while her friend Anushka “looks stunning in a gold off-the-shoulder top, coupled with a form-fitting pair of black trousers” and “Misha is in her Second Skin jeans which now look as if they were grafted on” (Kala 2007, 49). When the three single women enter the club, they are the cynosure of all eyes, and the fact that are not rankled by this attention distinguishes them from “the new entrants making their debut in the social jungle” who “get spotted as soon as they walk into a room, which makes them extremely self-conscious of course, and very aware of their short skirts and transparent straps. In a desperate attempt to blend in, they desperately try to flick away imaginary locks of hair: the glorious feminine equivalent of the nervous male tic” (ibid., 50).

Aisha thus draws a distinction between herself in the upper-class habitus of the nightclub and its new entrants, and revels in the power that familiarity with the milieu gives her. To be a singleton then is to be comfortable not just in Western wear, but in Western wear that exposes or sexualizes the body. Thus, Aisha can flirt with her beau: “Giving my hair a toss and adding that extra swing to my hips, I saunter off, revelling in the freedom of being all woman. No demure seedha pallav saree to hold back the sex appeal tonight” (ibid.,54). Here, once again, Aisha works with the gaze and enjoys it because she is ostensibly scripting the performance. In fact, the performance described above harks back to another performance in which the gaze was reversed – when Aisha first chanced upon Karan naked in his hotel room.

In both cases, it is she who is in control.

*Hybrid Wardrobes*

The above discussion indicates that the traditional and modern with regard to dress do not function in an uncomplicated way, and traditional dress need not always signify a traditional core while the same might be said for modern dress and values. Rather, Indian
chick lit indicates that these concepts and how they play out in the daily lives of young women might be more complicated and surprising than earlier analyses have suggested.

In fact, the most recent trends indicate that Indian women do not pick exclusively Indian or Western dress, but rather mix and match and select clothes based on the occasion. Indian fashion magazines, Sandhu notes, emphasize “the need for Indian women to carefully assess how they should be able to make ‘free’ and educated choices about her sense of style, based not necessarily on Western trends, but more so on personality as well as her Indian roots. There is also a strong assertion on the need of the Indian woman to suit both modern and traditional expectations” (2003, 142). A compromise might be effected in what Nagra th describes as Indo-Western outfits – a fusion of Indian and Western wear which marks the wearer as someone who is “fashionable” and free from the constraints of the “traditional sari” (2003, 365). Among the middle classes in urban India, Tarlo notes, “A fashionable urban woman’s wardrobe might contain some clothes considered classically Indian, like the sari; some that are both modern and Indian, like the shalwar kamiz; some that are glamorously ethnic, like Gujarati embroidery; some that are chic in Western terms, and some leisurewear and at least one pair of denim jeans” (1996, 335). This mix-and-match attitude to dress might provide a visual metaphor for the selfhoods under construction in Indian chick lit.

Body Issues

A discussion of fashion cannot evade a consideration of the body. Scholars have noted the slippage from shopping, fashion and consumerism to a focus on the body and a beauty regime in chick lit (Ferriss and Young 2006). Gill categorizes the “obsessional preoccupation with the body” as characteristic of postfeminist media culture whereby “the body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness” (2007,
Moreover, the body is construed as indicative of the “individual’s interior life” so that excessive consumption of calories in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* implies emotional breakdown since “a sleek, toned, controlled figure is today normatively essential for portraying success” (ibid., 256). Tincknell argues that “while generally in late modern culture the body does not simply carry the message, it is the message, this remains more ‘true’ for women than for men since for women the self has been insistently recast almost entirely in corporeal and objectifying terms” (2011, 86). So central is the preoccupation with the body to chick lit that Umminger contends that the quest for a toned body supersedes the quest for romantic partnership because of the financial rewards of being thin: “Looks are a form of currency that aid not only one’s search for a mate but also one’s ability to secure that promotion, get that next job, and become a fully realised human being” (2011, 240). However, Ferriss and Young caution that “chick lit’s focus on weight does not necessarily mean that it endorses cultural expectations of women’s beauty” (2006, 11).

In the Indian context, scholars have observed that the ideal Indian female body in media representations has radically changed since the 1990s and is now aligned to Western standards of beauty, with the average height of film stars and models increasing and the average weight concomitantly decreasing (Loomba 1997; Munshi 2001). The fully-figured heroines of the films of the 980s have given way to “the perfectly sculpted body to meet exacting international beauty standards”, evidenced in the mushrooming of fitness centres and beauty parlours even across small towns in India (Munshi 2001, 85-86).

Both the injunction to be thin and the critique of it are evident in this passage from *Keep the Change*:

> I suppose it is good in a way, since my body cannot be seen in public in a swimsuit. Not that I am fat. Curvaceous will be the best word to describe my hips and generous will be apt for my bosom. I would have been a contender for a Tamil film heroine had we lived in another era. These days I am overweight. It wouldn’t be so bad if I am not confronted by perfect specimens of femininity every time I open a magazine or switch on the TV… Our beauty ideal today has been influenced by western norms and
everyone wants to look like a toothpick and have less body fat than a bell pin. The message is clear – if you don’t look like a beauty pageant contestant, you should be prepared to live the life of a social outcast with a paper bag (XXL) over your head (Subramanian 2007, 160).

The above passage demonstrates that Damayanthi is keenly aware of the beauty-industrial complex and the patriarchal norms it espouses. Throughout the novel, she alludes to it, and makes token attempts to adhere to the updated norms with regard to the female body but does not seem to go very far, save for eschewing dessert out of guilt on occasion.

At the outset of Almost Single, Aisha refers to herself as being “rather large” (Kala 2007, 2). This, however, does not seem to affect her attractiveness to others or sense of self much, as the novel does not chronicle any extended struggle with her weight. Umminger notes that in Western culture, “fat people are equated visually with conspicuous consumption, scapegoats for the ‘ambivalence provoked by living in a society that deeply wishes us to over-consume, yet savagely punishes all bodily evidence of overconsumption’” (2006, 70). On the other hand, Karlan (1995) has argued that fat as a form of excess can be a mode of rebellion. It is the latter contention that seems applicable to Aisha as she does not seem particularly concerned about her weight. Instead, she makes a one-time appearance at the gym and ends up injuring her neck leading to an amusing encounter with her beau. Other than throwaway references to being on a diet, Almost Single does not make much of its protagonist’s size. Just as in Keep the Change, references to dissatisfaction with one’s body seem more a hat tip to a generic convention than a real theme in the novel.

It is Arshi in You Are Here, arguably the most Westernized of the three protagonists under consideration, who displays the most self-consciousness about her body. She often compares herself to her slimmer roommate Topsy around whom she feels “bloated and fat, like a troll with greasy hair and a snarly voice” (Madhavan 2008, 32). She plans her outfits with care, choosing a bra in anticipation of being thrown into a pool and emerging with
“standing-at-attention nipples, which would only draw more eyes to my chest” (ibid., 31) and then ends up feeling self-conscious about her hair “forming weird rat-tails all over my next and face” and the top that was clinging “oddly” to her body (ibid., 40). Topsy, her roommate, on the other hand is at ease with her body, wandering around their flat in summer in her underwear, a comfort attributed to the massage ritual at her family home in Meerut: “Babies are brought out, massaged thoroughly with oil and made to lie in the sun, the older women of the family use the time to gossip and oil each other’s hair while they’re at it, and the teenagers who are being massaged for the first time quickly forget their shyness in this communal nakedness” (ibid., 86). You Are Here thus inverts the urban stereotype that a metropolitan upbringing signals greater liberation of the body. Arshi tends to describe people according to their body type – her nasty boss “was the kind of fat that mean old sows are, with beady eyes and immense power” (ibid., 29), Topsy has “elfin grace” (ibid., 36), Esha is “exceedingly thin. You could see her ribs jutting out between her almost non-existent breasts” (ibid., 36) and her intern Anuba is “plumply pleasant and totally non-threatening in any way to anybody” (ibid., 187). This could simply be the author’s way of bringing alive characters but coupled with Arshi’s own body-consciousness, it appears to be in sync with her character to pay attention to other people’s bodies. Arshi however displays awareness of this body-consciousness and it is played up and examined in the novel. Thus, the novel lays bare the scrutiny some, but not all, young women attach to their bodies but does not condone it and offers examples of women who do not feel this pressure like Topsy or are defiant like Esha.

**Synthetic Selves**

In this chapter, I have shown that Indian chick lit protagonists flout conventional expectations of Indian womanhood with regard to food and fashion while not rejecting these norms entirely. Thus, all three protagonists eschew cooking duties, but continue to eat Indian
food. Rather, it is their cosmopolitan consumption of food that is played up to signal their singleton identity. Damayanthi’s sticking to Tamil food staples and its caste implications mark her as a singleton-in-progress in this regard. Similarly, when it comes to clothing, all three protagonists express their discomfort with the sari because of its association with traditional Indian womanhood, although Aisha demonstrates that its meanings can be stretched. Wearing either Indian or Western dress for these women is a performatory act, and “putting on” clothes signals the performance of certain values which can be exchanged for other as the need arises. While the meanings attributed to Indian and Western wear seem to conform to the tradition/modernity binary, the selfhoods cloaked therein are more complicated, retaining a rebelliousness that troubles the inner/outer dichotomy. Finally, Indian chick lit protagonists are conscious of the pressure on them to perfect their bodies via conventional rules of femininity, but do not entirely succumb to these beauty norms, a departure from their Western counterparts. How does one read this mix-and-match approach to self-construction in Indian chick even when negotiating the very scripted tradition/modernity binary?

Ashis Nandy’s (1983) work on the self provides a useful lens through which to understand the process of self-construction via inconsistent choosing in Indian chick lit. Reflecting on the impact of colonialism on the selfhood of both the colonizer and the colonized, Nandy has argued that colonialism necessitated a self split along the masculine/feminine binary with colonialism exaggerating the masculine conception of self and suppressing alternative bisexual or androgynous conceptions. While there are problems with Nandy’s theorization – in particular, that it seems to rest on an essentialized authentic conception of self that does not address regional or gender variations (Fox 1996; Mankekar 1999) – I find parts of Nandy’s overall conception of the impact of colonialism useful, particularly his idea of “synthesis” as the proper resistance to any aggressive thesis.
Nandy suggests that “in the chaos called India the opposite of thesis is not the antithesis because they exclude each other. The true ‘enemy’ of the thesis is seen to be in the synthesis because it includes the thesis and ends the latter’s reason for being” (1983, 99). The triumvitate of thesis, antithesis and synthesis have their origins in Hegel’s dialectical method (although he does not use these terms), most fully explained in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* (1770-1831). In the presentation of logic, Hegel argues, the first moment – the moment of understanding – is one of fixity; the second – the “dialectical” moment – is when some one-sidedness or weakness is revealed in the moment of understanding, leading to its “sublation” (*aufhaben*, both cancelled/negated and incorporated) into the second moment. The third moment – the “speculative” or “positively rational” moment – grasps the unity between the first and second moment (Maybee 2016). The result of the dialectical process, Hegel says, “is a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding – richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite” (1813-1832, 33).

Hegel’s dialectic was further developed by Johann Gottlieb Fichte who argued that the contradiction between the self and not-self that inevitably arises in the quest for the source of knowledge can be resolved through a synthetic procedure which involves “discovering in opposites the respect in which they are alike” (1982, 108-112). Thus, Nandy draws on the Fichte’s development of Hegel’s dialectical method in which a proposistion (thesis) is negated by a counter-proposition (antithesis) to form a new proposition or synthesis that reconciles the two. While thesis and antithesis are conventionally seen as being in opposition, Nandy shifts his focus to the process that Hegel called sublation and to its result, the synthesis.
He diagnoses both the many forms of Indian nationalism and the tortured selfhood of Indian-born British writer Rudyard Kipling as being fraught by the choice between East and West, without the possibility of being both at the same time. However, he argues, “the ordinary Indian has no reason to see himself as a counterplayer or an antithesis of the Western man. The imposed burden to be perfectly non-Western only constricts his, the everyday Indian’s cultural self, just as the older burden of being perfectly Western once narrowed – and still sometimes narrows – his choices in the matter of his and his society's future” (ibid., 73). I read the chick lit protagonist’s struggle as being the navigation of this choice posited as a binary, and the resolution of the novels as seeking a way to opt out of the binary in favour of a synthesis.

For Nandy, the synthesis is epitomized in Gandhi, in his refusal to accept the binaries of colonialism between masculine/ androgynous, modern/ pre-modern, Indian and Western by formulating his own path that embraced androgyny, championed maternal strength over masculine power, and sidestepped the dilemma of modernity by instead creating “a maturer, more contemporary, more self-critical version of Indian traditions” (ibid., 75). This Gandhian synthesis might be too high-minded to be straightforwardly applied to chick lit, nor do I contend that the protagonists are ultimately successful in this synthesis. Rather, I argue that their inconsistent choosing and their refusal to pick a side suggests that such a synthesis is what they aspire to. A less ambitious and more down-to-earth example of synthesis can be found in Arundhati Subramaniam’s poem (2014), which I reproduce here in full:

*Or Take Mrs Salim Shaikh*
Who ripples hospitably
out of her halwa-pink blouse
and sari (“Synthetics are so practical
to wear on trains, na?”). Who invokes
the protocol of Indian railways to ask
for your phone number even before
the journey begins. Who unwinds
her life story, well-oiled,
without a single split end.

She’s Hindu,
a doctor, like her husband.
The Matron warned her
about inter-faith unions,
but she had no doubts,
not even in ’93 when others did.

Her ancestors supplied butter
to Queen Victoria,
His grandfather, better still,
was court dewan of Kolhapur.

“I’ve been lucky.”
“The gods have been good.”
“I eat and cook non-veg.”
“Many of my friends are pure brahmin,”
“My sons are circumcised.”
“My heart is pure.”
“I practise no religion,
only homeopathy.”

Over lunch she remembers
the day her mother-in-law died in her arms.
“I bathed her,
and when the body was taken away,
I told my husband
I want to be buried in the kabrastan –
it’s closer to our home than the crematorium.”

I do not intend here to undertake a complete analysis of the above poem; I supply it here as an example of the kind of synthesis Nandy proposes. As Nandy argued, East/West and North/South is not the only, nor should be, the primary contradiction of concern to Indians. While I argue that East/West, or rather tradition/modernity, is the framing binary in chick lit, Subramanian’s poem proposes another one – Hindu/ Muslim, a polarization that seemingly has no easy resolution until Mrs Shaikh proves otherwise by invoking the “synthetic” (material of her sari) as a metaphor. While “synthetic saris” made of nylon and polyester are commonly used by middle-class and lower-class women, they are also increasingly sneered at by the more fashionable and well-heeled for being inauthentic and
unhygienic. Mrs Shaikh’s cheerful celebration of the “synthetic” as practical rather than impure offers a way to think about the self, by reclaiming the modern as both useful and aesthetically pleasing. The synthetic of Mrs Shaikh’s sari, like the sartorial mélange of the chick lit protagonists, becomes a metaphor for her life, which has seamlessly melded the Hindu and Muslim without the pressure of consistency. While the synthetic in Nandy harks back to an authentic past and seems to suggest consistency, the synthetic of Mrs Shaikh that I would like to read in chick lit novels as well, is whimsical, incoherent, and thus resists closure. The term “synthetic” encompasses the Hegelian sublation of conflicting terms and the Nandyan emphasis on unifying contradictions implicit in the concept “synthesis”. However, the emphasis in “synthetic” is on inherent inconsistency, what Hegel might have called a “negation of negation”, but embodied as a constant and random process rather than a cycle of history, and one that foregrounds its artificial or constructed nature.

The self that Aisha and Damayanthi may be groping, not entirely successfully, towards is this kind of “synthetic” whereby one does not need to pick between the two sides of the traditional/Indian/inner versus the modern/Western/outer binary but where one can embody both in various combinations, even though the narratives foreground these binaries. It is the “pressure to be the obverse of the West”, a pressure that, Nandy argues, ties one “even more irrevocably to the West” (1983, 76), which I believe chick lit protagonists resist, but they equally refuse to ape the West. This would mean that the autonomy associated with the modern or the global is not always fated to be circumscribed by tradition signified by family and community as was the case in Radhakrishnan’s (2008) study. Rather, each woman strategically deploys the various traditions, both Indian and global, available to her at different junctures, sometimes compositely.

Among the protagonists under consideration, Arshi and her flatmate Topsy come closest to embodying this “synthetic self”. Arshi may be considered “Westernized” but rather
than being perfectly so, she treats it as “a subtradition which, in spite of its pathology and its tragi-comic core, is a ‘digested’ form of another civilization that had once gate-crashed into India” (Nandy 1983, 75). Nandy notes that the East/West conflict is the concern of a minority of Indians who were thoroughly exposed to the West. But even these Indians, he says, “have not been fully deprived of their self-confidence vis-a-vis the West; even they carry the intimations of an inner conviction that they would not be swept off their feet and that they could use the Occident for their own purposes. Even the crafty babus, as Kipling recognized in utter disgust, know how to use the white man: they too have a theory of the West” (ibid., 77) If the chick lit protagonist, especially in the case of Arshi, demonstrate the conflicts that exposure to the West, heightened by liberalization, provoke, they also as Nandy suggests, use this exposure to their own ends. The very genre of chick lit, a Western import, exemplifies this, as it is adopted but rather than being aped, is adapted.

Arshi can immediately recognize other members of her “tribe”, people from similar backgrounds, and contrasts herself to women like the sister of a colleague who “saw no need to be friends with me either. What could I offer them? No future kitty parties, no company for jewellery shopping, no bitching about how hard it was to get a manicure appointment and no older brother that they could have a love-arranged marriage with” (Madhavan 2008, 82). Thus, Arshi distinguishes herself from certain Indian women with whom she does not identify, but she does not uniformly scorn this tradition or see it as a monolith. She points to the positive aspects of her flatmate’s upbringing, such the massage ritual, which account for Topsy’s greater comfort with her body, or the camaraderie at the sangeet at a friend’s wedding where “the women would sit with Deeksha on the terrace getting their palms decorated with mehndi and listening to the loud Punjabi folk singer belt her way through gruesome songs about mothers-in-law” (ibid.: 249). While Topsy performs submissive Indian womanhood in front of her parents, her personality otherwise is not an outright rejection of
their tradition which is informed by the intimacy of joint family living that is transformed in the city into her relationships with her friends. The singleton identity in these novels reveals itself to be one in which the characters blend various traditions, even when they seem to be invoking a dichotomy. The “synthetic” here reveals itself not simply as a fusion of the two poles of the binary, but rather a refusal of the binary itself.
Chapter 5: National Fantasies

In her exploration of couple-formation in commercial Hindi cinema, Sangita Gopal writes:

“Heterosexual couple-formation in Hindi cinema … has always served as a site in which to imagine a model of the ideal citizen. In classic Hindi cinema, it was the task of the lead romantic pair to exemplify society’s capacity for negotiating the differences of class, caste, and ethnicity, as well as to define the limits of such couplings. A single love story therefore became the object of identification of a large, heterogeneous audience, putatively fusing the diverse population inhabiting the theatre into one desiring subject. The underlying thesis of Hindi cinema was that diversity had to be overcome if the nation was to succeed” (2011, 127).

In Indian chick lit, as I have argued, it is the protagonist who is called upon to reconcile the binary of tradition/modernity, home/world, local/global. Her single status marks her out as more problematic than the New Indian Woman of the 1990s who had already perfected this balancing act. The singleton in Indian chick lit refuses the ultimate conformity to tradition espoused by the mother figure, by proposing a synthetic self that resolves these contradictions on terms of her own choosing. Gopal’s quote above alludes to another site of resolution that manifests itself in romance narratives – that of the nation at large. The role of the novel in the imagination of the nation has been persuasively argued by Benedict Anderson (2006). If as Timothy Brennan proposes “nations … are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (1990, 49), one might ask what role Indian chick lit novels play. I will seek to answer this question by analyzing two novels by arguably India’s most popular chick lit writer Anuja Chauhan.

*The Zoya Factor* traces the rise to fame of midlevel advertising executive Zoya Solanki when it is discovered that she possesses a unique power – the ability to boost the sporting chances of whichever cricket team she breaks bread with. While this does not seem particularly useful, Zoya notes: “We’re talking twenty-first century India here. People who can win cricket matches are about the richest people in the country today” (Chauhan 2008,
Although Zoya is, despite her special powers, not interested in cricket, she finds herself attracted to Nikhil Khoda, the captain of the Indian cricket team, and while he seems to reciprocate her sentiments, he is also the biggest skeptic of her powers. Battle for Bittora (2010) is set amid a political campaign as the world’s largest democracy goes to the polls. The novel’s protagonist Sarojini (Jinni) Pande is coerced by her grandmother, a veteran politician, to stand for elections in the fictional rural constituency of Bittora. Unprepared for the realities of Indian politics, Jinni has to wrestle with her conscience on a number of occasions, and her dilemmas are complicated by the fact that her political rival is her childhood sweetheart Zain Altaf Khan.

**Indian Makeover**

In charting Jinni’s journey, Battle for Bittora, like Keep the Change (Subramanian 2010), deploys the makeover trope, but reverses its typical form so that now the trendy, urban singleton must be remade into good Indian womanhood. Unlike the typical chick lit novel, Jinni’s journey is not towards greater embedment into the city, but one that turns backwards towards her small-town roots until she embraces all of India signified in her election as a representative of the people in Parliament. Along the way, the novel delineates Jinni’s struggles to bridge a number of binaries – urban/rural, pragmatic values/high-minded ideals, head/heart and the possibility of a union between India’s two polarized identities, Hindu and Muslim.

Since Jinni’s journey reverses that of the typical chick lit protagonist, she must shed her trendy urban wear and don suitably modest Indian garments. Wearing a sari to a wedding attended by the political top brass, her grandmother criticizes her for draping the garment so that it shows off her breasts: “We would not call that thing a blouj,” she grumbled. “It

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18 Blouj: blouse, pronounced in accented English

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doej, not match your sari colour, and the neck is so deep, if you bend even a little bit, your partition will sow (Chauhan 2010, 37). When it is clear that Jinni has been chosen as the Pragati Party’s candidate, Pushpa demands she “better get some decent bloujej stitched” because “salwar kameez won’t do, now that you are the candidate” (ibid., 65). As a woman running for electoral office, Jinni has to project “good Indian womanhood” and the only way to do so is in a sari. Moreover, she is deprived of high heels and asked to wear locally made Champapaul slippers, which give her blisters and make her look short. Although wearing a sari enables Jinni to project idealized Indian femininity, the modest blouses she got stitched do not protect her from slander and allegations she had “managed to get a ticket to contest the election only because I had sexually serviced practically the entire Pragati Party working community in just about every position. They also said that I was a shameless wanton man-eater who had recently had an abortion” (ibid., 267). On the other hand, her rival Zain can wear jeans but with a kurta, signalling both his modernity and his traditionalism.

Although Jinni continues to wear shorts and a “Spiderman ganji (ibid., 154) or “tracks and a ratty old tee” (ibid., 360) at home and is “thankful for my jeans and sweatshirt instead of the usual cumbersome sari” (ibid., 245) during a crucial scene in which she takes control of a car, increasingly she appears to get comfortable in a sari: “Slipping into a white sari with an orange and pink border and a firoza blue blouse. I slipped a tri-coloured Pragiti Party scarf around my neck, ruffled my hair until it regained its Bombay rosebudness and sighed at my reflection in the mirror” (ibid.,317). In one of the final scenes in the novel, when she drives to Bittora to track down Zain she wears a “crisp blue-n-purple sari and ruby red blouse” (ibid., 397), presumably the same one she wears to her swearing-in ceremony. That Jinni chooses a sari for the final resolution of the novel – both her union with Zain and her

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19 Doej: Does
20 Sow: Show
21 Ganji: vest
22 Firoza: turquoise
commitment to the people of India during her swearing in ceremony – could indicate a capitulation to traditional norms. However, because her relationship with Zain is rebellious and her commitment to politics involves taking on the mantle of power, it cannot be read entirely simplistically. It is also significant that at the beginning of the novel, Jinni’s intense physical encounter with Zain took place at a wedding while she was wearing a sari, and at the end of the novel, she chooses to have sex with him, unspooling her sari. Jinni being clad in a sari during these romantic and sexual moments gives them a Bollywood-esque air, but also transgress easy assumptions about women and dress.

**Sampling Rural Delights**

Like the other chick lit protagonists, Jinni does not cook. Rather, she signals her membership of the middle class by being served rather than serving, and her nonchalance with regard to her culinary skills marks her singleton identity. However, Jinni differs from her chick lit peers in the trajectory her gustatory journey takes as she must accustom herself to the taste of small-town India. Thus, her morning cup of Nescafe is now “Bhainscafe” made with “a dollop of thick, oily, stinky buffalo milk” because of the lack of homogenized milk in the state. On the campaign trail, Jinni also gamely samples “fluorescent biryani” (ibid., 165), “fat, yellow, black-pepper-pod-encrusted boondi ka ladoo and chunky greasy kachoris” (ibid., b204), a greasy cream roll from a thick glass jar that the shopkeeper cleans with a filthy rag (ibid., 246), and “greasy puri aloo” (ibid., 375). The only food she really enjoys, however, is the upper-caste temple food:

“There was steaming resadaar aalu – a hot red curry of broken potatoes with lashings of hing, jeera and desi ghee, hot sitaphal ki sabzi, and a rocking yellow

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23 Bhains: female buffalo
24 Biryani: spicy rice dish
25 Boondi ka ladoo: dessert balls
26 Kachori: spicy puffed pastry
27 Puri aalu: Potato with fried puffed bread
28 Resadaar aalu: Potato curry
29 Hing: Asofoetida
30 Jeera: Cumin seeds
31 Desi ghee: Indian clarified butter
dal tadka\textsuperscript{33}. There were moong-ki-daal ki pakodis\textsuperscript{34}, with ringlets of cold white radish and, of course, steaming hot-n-sweet suji ki halwa\textsuperscript{35}. Suppressing a moan of pure ecstasy, I sat down a table next to Amma and proceeded to eat myself sick” (ibid., 298).

She is also appreciative of the “divine” smelling, refreshments, including a “crisp, delicious canape” provided by the Oberoi (a five-star hotel) catering team at a high profile rally (ibid., 319). Even as Jinni gamely samples the food of the interiors of India, her grandmother appears to move in the opposite direction, abandoning her usual diet of “a little tadka-less dal and brown rice” (ibid., 14) and biting into pizza, relishing red meat and tucking into dessert. Pushpa’s attitude to food does not necessarily signal a new more open-minded value system but a loosening of standards as she knows her life is drawing to a close.

Food’s association with caste is openly referenced in Battle for Bittora, making it probably the only chick lit novel to deal somewhat extensively if humorously with the subject. Jinni’s grandmother, Pushpa, tries to slander her political rival Dwivedi by declaring that “he and his family ate their vegetables \textit{unpeeled}. A Brahmin so stingy that he grudging the cows in his courtyard his vegetable peels” (ibid., 20). While this salvo backfired, later, the rival indicted himself by arranging to spend a night with a poor family but refusing to drink their water or eat their food because they were Dalits, and Pushpa finds herself back in the race. Food, then, has the ability to make or break political fortunes as well as personal ones. In contrast to Dwivedi, Jinni unselfconsciously drinks water and shares food with members of the Dalit community while campaigning, and while we are not told if this specifically wins her favour in the eyes of voters, it is clearly intended to cast her in a sympathetic light with the reader. Even more so than Damayanthi in Keep the Change, Jinni’s caste blindness is foregrounded as a virtue, but it is the privilege of this very blindness that marks her out as

\textsuperscript{32} Sitaphal ki sabzi: Vegetable dish made of custard apples

\textsuperscript{33} Dal tadka: Lentil curry with spices

\textsuperscript{34} Moong-ki-daal ki pakodis: Dal fritters

\textsuperscript{35} Suji ki halwa: Semolina sweetmeat
upper caste. Jinni’s tastes highlight her upper-caste privilege and urban roots, even though her willingness to eat whatever is on offer enhances her likeability and proves to be a political asset. While the widening of Pushpa’s food horizons is ultimately revealed to be her acknowledgement of a loss of control, in this one aspect at least, Jinni’s gustatory trajectory, unlike other chick lit protagonists, is not towards greater awareness of global cuisine but an exploration of the humble, local and indigenous.

**Hindu-Muslim Union**

In addition to the latent tradition/modernity binary that is typical of chick lit and signified in food and fashion, the manifest drama in the novel arises from the Hindu-Muslim love story. Hindus comprise the majority of the Indian population, while Muslims are the largest minority. Even as the two communities as well as other religious groups in India such Christians, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs have lived side by side for generations, communal tension, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, became prominent as the Indian nationalist movement gained steam. The division of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan and the traumatic event of Partition which predicated one of the greatest migrations in human history that was accompanied by devastating violence on both sides of the border resulted in Muslims in India being constituted as the “intimate enemy” in the popular consciousness (Kumar 2008, xvii). In the early years after Independence, the Indian state under the leadership of Nehru championed the ideals of “secularism” and “tolerance” of different religious beliefs. However, the tenuousness of secular discourse and its fading resonance became starkly evident in 1992 when Hindu nationalists, with state complicity, demolished a mosque in Ayodhya claimed to be built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. This was a cataclysmic event that resulted in communal riots across the country. The demolition of the mosque marked the coming of age of the Hindu nationalist movement that has since gathered steam across the country, culminating in 2014 in the election of the Hindu
right wing Bharatiya Janata Party’s Narendra Modi as prime minister, a politician known for his adherence to a Hindu nationalist agenda.

Chauhan deals openly with prejudice against Muslims and how it plays out both politically and at the personal level in a climate of rising Hindu nationalism. The communalization of politics is depicted in the contest between the Pagriti Party (a thinly veiled reference to the Congress Party which dominated Indian politics for decades until recently) which Pushpa and Jinni belong to and the IJP (resembling the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is backed by fundamentalist Hindu organizations) which in an attempt to appear secular is fronting Zain, a Muslim, as its candidate in Bittora because the young generation want “a clean, intelligent government that delivers progress to everybody” (Chauhan 2010, 225). The “pseudo-secularism” of election publicity material is referenced in the novel when Jinni points to the “standard ‘secular’ shot of a Muslim guy with surma in his eyes and a white lace cap perched on his head, getting a rakhi tied on his wrist by a simpering Hindu girl with a Ganesha locket around her neck. Fully brother-sister vibes” (ibid., 11) because, Jinni astutely notes “of course, no party had the guts to show a couple like that getting married” (ibid.), although this is exactly what she will pursue as the plot unfolds. Later, when an IJP politician is asked whether the party is against Hindu and Muslim marriages, he glibly replies: “We in the IJP … believe in Hindu-Muslim unity. We believe Hindus and Muslims should be close, very close, like brothers and sisters… And you don’t marry your brothers or sisters, do you?” (ibid., 224). Chauhan also references the “love jihad” controversy where it was alleged that Muslim men were marrying Hindu women in order to convert them, though she problematically assigns this conspiracy theory to a Muslim cleric who “exhorted all young eligible Muslims males to go forth and marry into other religious communities and thus slowly turn the world Muslim” (ibid., 222).

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36 Surma: Kohl/black eyeliner
37 Rakhi: A thread tied by sisters around the wrists of their brothers on the festival of Raksha Bandhan
Virdi has noted how the Indian-woman-as-nation configuration proves to be “an unstable signifier” during political contingencies such as the debate around the Uniform Civil Code, whereby the woman comes to stand for her religious community (2003, 72) While Indian women were mobilized as signifiers of Indian tradition in the anti-colonial movement in the nineteenth century, the debates over the need to amend the various religious laws governing the “personal” sphere in the mid-1980s onwards saw women being held up as signifiers of their respective religious communities. Thus, women slide between representing the nation to “outsiders” and their religious communities within India, though in both cases, they are construed as signifiers of tradition. The potential scandal in Jinni’s romantic union with Zain is imbricated in these prohibitions.

More admirable than Chauhan’s sardonic depiction of political expediency is her eye for how Hindu-Muslim relations play out at the personal level. While publicly presenting a secular face, Pushpa sneers at Jinni’s assumed name as “Mohammedan sa name hai: You sound like a poor carpenter’s fourth wife” (Chauhan 2010, 11). Delineating Pushpa’s prejudices, Jinni notes:

“Bengali, Bihari and Gujarati women are man-eaters and husband-stealers. Their menfolk are impotent. Kashmiris are crooks and drug addicts and they don’t bathe. Good Nepalis are nightwatchmen, bad ones slit the throats of their employers. Punjabis (of either gender) are permanently randy. Christians are scheduled caste and out to convert anybody they meet. And Mussulmaans? They are all dirty, stupid, constantly breeding, Pakistani-cricket-team-cheering-rapist-murderers” (Chauhan 2010, 12).

Pushpa thus seems to hold every typical stereotype a Hindu upper-caste Indian might, but this does not mean she acts on them. On the one hand, she has amicable relations with Muslims, such as her fellow politician Anthony Suleiman as well as Zain’s family. On the other, it is her anti-Muslim tirade in which she condemned her Muslim tailor as a cheat and Zain’s

38 Mohammedan sa name hai: A Muslim-like name
39 Mussulmaans: An exaggerated pronunciation of the Hindi word for Muslim
father as promiscuous that Zain overheard as a teenager which resulted in his cutting off ties with Jinni and her family. Pushpa seems to hover between Nandy’s “peripheral believer”, the (largely non-modern) people whose is experience is of “neighbourliness and co-survival”, and his “Westernized ethnic” whose “command over modern statecraft, combined with his efforts to protect his earlier hegemony in competitive mass politics, and his desacralized secularism has created a volatile situation in the country today” (1995, 58).

Ultimately, while the Hindu-Muslim contest plays out politically between Jinni and Zain, their rivalry is in tension with their desire for each other. Hindu-Muslim love stories do appear in popular cinema (Virdi 2003), – the most famous example being Mani Ratnam’s film Bombay (1995) which sets the romance in the incendiary backdrop of the 1993 communal riots in Mumbai – but they are generally seen as taboo, and have become increasingly politicized in recent times. Chauhan’s novel rides on this background, but is successful in creating such a natural chemistry between her central duo that we cannot help rooting for them. Chauhan also gives the reader the ultimate satisfaction of Jinni having her man and her victory, when the two outcomes seemed incompatible. Zain proves himself a truly modern hero by gamely accepting his election loss and supportively driving Jinni to the swearing-in ceremony. Thus, Chauhan refuses the superficial safety of the Hindu-Muslim friendship depicted in the political posters for the more dangerous route, culminating in a romantic and sexual union. Their union takes on greater significance when Jinni’s mother shares an entry from Jinni’s idealized grandfather’s diary – a poem entitled Indian Love Story by Sarojini Naidu, depicting a conversation between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman, under which had Bauji taped a photograph of Zain and Jinni as children, betraying his “fondest dream” (Chauhan 2010, 346) that the two would marry. The title of the poem seems to signify that the union between Jinni and Zain would be more than any normal coupling, but is characteristic of a certain vision of quintessential Indianness itself.
Incredible India

The greater synthesis effected through the novel, however, is the vision of an India united despite its poverty and diversity. While Jameson (1986) and Brennan (1990) argue that the trope of nation dominates or figures prominently in third-world literature, others have hotly contended this proposition (Ahmad 1987). Nevertheless, a number of scholars have pointed to the novel’s role in imagining the nation (Singh 1996; Mukherjee 2000), although Chatterjee (2003) contends that the novel in India took a different form to its European counterpart. I suggest that both through its geographical trajectory and its conglomeration of people, *Battle for Bittora* discursively constitutes an India for its reader by synthesizing disparate and sometimes seemingly contradictory elements. In drawing attention to the hegemonizing tendency of the novel’s work in nation-formation, I am aware of Anjaria’s (2015, 15) critique of the monotony of postcolonial literary criticism’s preoccupation with the nation as a site of knowledge-formation. However, I believe that my delineation of the nation as an underlying discourse in these novels, particularly in the case of Chauhan’s novels, is pertinent because they are popularly received as being singularly concerned with romance.

In both food and fashion, Jinni appears to making a somewhat Gandhian movement towards what Nandy termed “that other India which is neither pre-modern nor anti-modern but only non-modern. It is the India which has survived the Western onslaught” (1983, 77). This movement is most evident in the geography of the narrative which moves from the urban metropolis of Mumbai to Bittora, the capital of the badlands of Pavit Pradesh, where Jinni campaigns in the poorer neighbourhoods and slums, to the rural areas of the state and finally to Forest of Unemployed Christian Tribals (FUCT) and Thirsty Hindu Illiterate Dalits (THID) regions. In a sense, the narrative trajectory mirrors that of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), as Jinni travels deeper into the interior of the state. However, the narrative is also reminiscent of the journey of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, described
in his magnum opus *Discovery of India* (1959) in which “the new nation emerges in the trope of discovery” (Singh 1992, 153). Like Jinni, Nehru acknowledges that he comes to India almost as an outsider confessing “I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly Westerner” (1989, 50); however, while Nehru’s quest is to attest to the reality of India as a tangible entity, by Jinni’s time this has been firmly established. Moreover, if Nehru “was ashamed of much that I saw around me, of superstitious practices, of outworn ideas, and, above all, our subject and poverty-stricken state” (ibid., 49), Jinni revels in the India she encounters. Unused to rural life, her experience is not without its material discomforts but rather than being embarrassed or discomfited, she is charmed by the unfamiliar. Each encounter or incident is held up to the light for its absurd or humorous potential to delight or surprise. The skill with which Chauhan elucidates these anecdotes is such that they are both very familiar (to an Indian reader) and defamiliarized by satire, irony or comedy.

Thus, we are treated to the hilarity of the bizarre turn a visit from the local Muslim cleric and his entourage takes when the goat they brought along is attacked by Jinni’s sexually adventurous dog: “Ponky tongue lolling, eyes glazed over, idiot grin in place, was atop the sacrificial billy goat, thrusting away inaccurately but busily in the general erogenous zone, while the entire Jummabagh delegation, a perspiring Pappu, ecstatic press people and an appalled Amma watched in unqualified horror” (Chauhan 2010, 158). We also witness a wrestling match at a rural fair at which Jinni sees “a smooth, hairless, spectacular specimen of manhood striding into the ring, clad in a red chaddi, festooned with a golden rocket over the crotch” (ibid., 181) fighting freestyle with another local contestant. We are told of the absurdity of the Indian election arena in which “an independent candidate, bald, transvestite and much given to flashy nylon saris, with a pair of fleshy, swollen red lips as his symbol” was routed by a mob after he [sic] produced at his rally, not a Bollywood star as promised but “Mac Mohan aka Sambha from *Sholay*, a fat blonde woman with suspiciously dark roots, and
a monkey-faced Shahrukh Khan lookalike” (ibid., 266). Jinni visits a red-light district where instead of cutting a ribbon or lighting a lamp she is asked to demonstrate putting a condom on a “wonderfully lifelike, flesh-coloured wooden penis, complete with scrotum and foreskin” after which she is asked by one of the sex workers to raucous laughter: “It is all suited-booted now and looking very smart, but can you tell me … because I am very innocent … where do I put it?” (ibid., 205).

From the small-town urban sprawl of Bittora, Jinni journeys into the tribal jungles of Durguja where Pushpa is supported for protecting the Christian tribal folk and drawing attention to forced “re-conversion” attempts by Hindu political parties, but where there is also a serious water problem resulting in tribal people stealing water from passing trains. Finally, when she gets to Sujunpur, the tone turns sombre as Jinni discovers the results of decades of political neglect: “When we drove through the arid, dusty villages, our convoy was greeted with wide, skeletal smiles form girls of twenty who looked like old women. We met men with skittering eyes and restless movements who seemed to smirk at everything I said. We met little children with jutting collarbones and unnaturally large, listless eyes, who looked indifferently at the shiny sticker and bandanas we had to offer” (ibid., 240).

At each stage of her journey, Jinni encounters groups of people who have been politically constituted as vote banks – Dalits, tribals, upper-castes, Muslims. They represent the “enumerated communities” that Kaviraj (2010) tells us signaled the move to colonial modernity. Although located in the rural and semi-rural, these communities are thoroughly modern in the sense that their members articulate their identities based on their relationship to the state. If the India Nehru discovers must be “rid of that narrowing religious outlook, that obsession with the supernatural and metaphysical speculations, that loosening of the mind’s discipline in religious, ceremonial, and mystical emotionalism…” (1989, 518), Jinni has no such grand modernizing designs. She does exhibit a problematic superhero complex, and
even though her saviour instinct is satirized although in the end, Chauhan does allow her to save the day. Unlike Nehru, Jinni does not seek to enlighten, but she does seek to uplift, a desire that is viewed by her election team as beside the point in a game that is essentially about power.

While on the one hand, the upper-caste and upper-class protagonists of Chauhan’s novels do not overturn hierarchies, Chauhan distinguishes herself by the visibility she accords the underclass in her sharp and detailed portrayals of domestic helpers, party workers and the rural and urban poor. If Chowdhury (2015) argues that this is the India that must be either forgotten or held up as the undesirable other of the modern, Chauhan’s counter-argument is a portrayal of this “other India”, not idealized but presented with all its flaws and foibles, as somehow a lovable and unique treasure-trove of characters. Unlike other novels in this genre, the domestic help that form a ubiquitous part of middle-class life in India are not relegated to the background but delineated in recognizable and lively colour. Jinni’s “crack team” of party workers – Munni the hard-as-nails Dalit campaigner, Pappu, “the silver-earinged, puffy-with-muscles little guy” (Chauhan 2010, 80), Rocket Singh the ex-wrestler and Jugatram, the long-serving and loyal driver – are recognizable types from the political landscape. Chauhan’s depiction of these characters and their relationship to Pushpa and Jinni could be described as realistic, if not exactly empowering of members of the lower castes and classes who remain in service roles though presumably profit in some ways from their proximity to power. Although Chauhan does not condone this state of affairs, her portrayal sentimentalizes it, and thus, does not provoke questioning of the status quo.

On the other hand, members of the underclass are not entirely silent or devoid of agency. Thus, Joline Bai, Pushpa’s “ancient cook-cum-housekeeper” is “Luytens royalty” because “her family has lived in the quarters of the great white bungalows for years” serving
the elite as “drivers, dhobis\textsuperscript{40}, cooks and sweepers to prime ministers, home ministers, the Pragati Party TB\textsuperscript{41}, even presidents” (ibid., 29). Serving almost as counterpoint to Jinni is Munni who:

“blazed into the public eye a few years ago when her college professor, a high-caste Brahmin, had promised her, a Dalit student, good grades in return for sexual favours. She’d agreed meekly enough, gone for a rendezvous with a tiny camera taped to the neckline of her straining kurta, strung him along nice and proper and then sneaked out through the loo window at the penultimate moment. The clip had run on all the major channels that same night, the professor was suspended and Munni soon became a Youth Pragati leader to reckon with” (ibid., 80).

Although this portrait of Munni is a parody of the dominant narrative of the Dalit woman in politics, a striking moment in the novel which lays bare the institutionalized caste and class inequality is when Munni challenges Jinni, pointing out that her own work for the party for years had gone unrewarded while Jinni had simply been accorded the party ticket for being Pushpa’s granddaughter. Jinni acknowledges the truth of this, but it does not cause her to step aside; rather, she ensures that Munni is granted an Assembly election ticket in the coming election. Jinni is here made out to be the benefactor, when she still holds onto the more prestigious Parliamentary seat.

At the end of the novel, while Jinni is distinguished by her urban pedigree, family connections and upper-caste status, she in some ways joins these more politically seasoned women by showing herself capable of taking the gloves off and using her wit if not her fists to defeat her political opponent despite her romantic feelings for him. Throughout the novel, Jinni wavers between the values of her pragmatic grandmother and her idealistic grandfather, and she wins the election by synthesizing the two in her own “superhero” action of rescuing a Dalit man from being lynched by a high-caste mob for his love for a Brahmin woman. In working out a synthesis between head and heart, here Jinni also draws a connection between

\textsuperscript{40}Dhobis: washermen
\textsuperscript{41}TB: Top Brass
herself, marked by privilege, and the masses of small-town and rural poor and underprivileged who have to rely on less than legal means to ensure their survival. Her Gandhian move towards non-modern India, then, is inspired by the idealism of her freedom fighter grandfather, but infused with the pragmatic wit of her grandmother.

Through her journey Jinni partakes of the nationalist project whereby the heterogeneity of India in terms of religion, language, caste, class and other can be convincingly yoked together (Singh 1992; Kaviraj 2010). In *Discovery of India*, this homogeneity of the nation is found to lie not in geography, but in the people: “the mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out over this vast land. *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people and victory to her meant victory to these people” (Nehru 1959, 60). This idea of the nation as composed of a chorus of voices of “the people” is epitomized in the final scene of *Battle for Bittora* when Jinni, taking the oath of office, finds her thoughts submerged by “an aggressive horde, which shouldered its way into my mind without a VIP pass of any sort, refusing to be disallowed. Dour faced and unblinking, the eleven lakh forty-two plus people of the eight legislative assembly segments of Bittoragarh took centre space in my head” (Chauhan 2010, 422) and it is to these people that she makes her solemn promise. The final clinch of the narrative is not between lovers but between the newly elected member of Parliament and Jinni’s constituents, “the people”, evoking the romance of a unified nation. The ultimate synthesis in *Battle for Bittora* is the confluence of the disparate people and the cultures and “types” they represent into the “imagined community” of India via the protagonist Jinni’s own coming to terms with urban/rural, head/heart, traditional/modern inherent in herself.

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42 A unit in the Indian numerical system equal to 100,000
Localized Synthesis

If *Battle for Bittora* charts the imagining of a nation through the symbolic and geographical journey of its protagonist, *The Zoya Factor* achieves its national synthesis stylistically and affectively. On the one hand, Zoya is a hip young woman whose job takes her across the country and sometimes overseas. She presents herself not as a fashionista, but comfortable and chic in cargo pants or jeans and T-shirts, including tops borrowed from male colleagues such as one emblazoned with the slogan “Drink. Hump. Die.” (Chauhan 2008, 74) or “a baggy red shirt of my dad’s and loose unflattering jeans” (ibid., 150). For an ad shoot starring SRK, a reference to one of India’s biggest film stars, Zoya carefully chooses “loose khaki cargos and a skinny black ganji\(^{43}\)” (ibid., 4) but can’t resist matching her red sneakers with her bag (“fully uncool I know, but what to do – control *nahi hota*\(^{44}\)” (ibid., 5). Zoya’s penchant for unfashionably matching her clothing and accessories is attributed to her less than sophisticated origins in the loud Punjabi district of Karol Bagh which conjures up images of “a pushy wannabe in a chamkeela\(^{45}\) salwar-kameez with everything matching matching. Someone who says ‘anyways’ instead of anyway, ‘grands’ instead of grand and ‘butts’ instead of butt. (As in: She has no *butts*, earns twenty *grands* a month and lives in Karol Bagh. Who does she think she is, *anyways*?)” (ibid., 4). Although Zoya is not immune to occasionally donning “saucy little firoza-blue\(^{46}\) top” (ibid., 227) or “a long slinky black halter dress” (ibid., 243), she revels not in the posh environs of malls and hotels but in the city’s streets. She is as much at home in five-star hotels where we encounter her at the start of the novel feasting on “two Prawns-Pepper-Salt platters and a Triple Hot-Choc-Fudge” (ibid., 2) as in the middle-class environs of Ajmal Khan Road with its neem trees, street vendors and “lounging youths on black Hero bicycles” (ibid., 467). On her first date with Nikhil, they

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\(^{43}\) Ganji: vest

\(^{44}\) *Nahin hota*: doesn’t happen/can’t control myself

\(^{45}\) Chamkeela: shiny

\(^{46}\) Firoza: turquoise
queue up at a street stall “where an old sardarji presided over a massive flat copper skillet, frying mashed potato cutlets to a rich golden brown” and sipped free tea while they waited (ibid., 187). While Nikhil declares her a “cheap date”, he also admires her down-to-earth quality. It is Zoya’s embrace of the emotional aesthetic of lower-middle-class urban India symbolized by the neighbourhood of Karol Bagh that marks her personality. Although Zoya’s job takes her away from Delhi, she is emotionally rooted to her family’s home in Karol Bagh, where she lives in a house divided among four brothers creating “eccentric architecture, like a kitchen in a garage, a dining room you enter through a loo, a perfectly circular drawing room or gol kamra, various secret passages and a bathroom window through which members of all four families can talk and lend and borrow stuff” (19). Given that the family is often used as a metaphor of the nation (Virdi 2003), Zoya’s eccentric yet beloved family and home could also function as metaphor for India with its feuding groups and seemingly absurd mix of cultures. In the novel, Zoya as both career woman and indulged daughter and niece, a representative of glossy New India who remains rooted to the streets of her childhood neighbourhood, is subtly contrasted with the sacralized and Brahminised image of Indian womanhood as goddess.

The Goddess

The novel is driven by the discovery of Zoya’s power to influence the fortune of the Indian cricket team, throwing her into public glare. Expounding on what comes to be dubbed “The Zoya Factor”, a spiritual guru Lingnath Baba proclaims: “The very cosmos bowed to the prayers of a united Bharat and wrought mighty changes in the arrangements in the paths of the planets that day in June, 1983. Owing to which an entirely propitious girl child, an avatar of Durga-ma herself, was born” (Chauhan 2010, 339). In Chapter 4, I elaborated on how the Indian nation came to be symbolized as the self-sacrificing mother goddess, who is both protector and to be protected. Zoya personifies the goddess in her more active avatar as
Shakti or divine power. Hiltebeitel and Erndl note that “of all the world’s religions, Hinduism has the most elaborate living Goddess traditions. Hindu conceptions of female deities and the over-arching Great Goddess stem from the supreme cosmic power Shakti, from whom all creation emerges and by whom it is sustained” (2000, 11). While this is so, a number of critics have pointed out that this tradition of worship of the divine feminine has not translated materially into the empowerment of Indian women (Kurtz 2000; Menon and Shwed 2000; Pintchman 2000) although Gross argues that some Hindu goddesses provide a repertoire of images of “strong-willed, creative, and powerful females who are auspicious and beneficent” (2000, 107).

These discussions and debates about the goddess in Indian culture are reflected in the portrayal of Zoya as modern-day deity in the novel. Initially, Zoya is flippant about her power, not quite believing in it herself. Nevertheless, she has a headstrong and impetuous streak that could be attributed to either her Rajput clan origins or her innate Shakti, which combined with her growing attraction towards Nikhil, make her perversely insist on claiming credit for the team’s early win when Nikhil demanded she stop thinking she had any role in their victory. Similarly, it is defiance and a desire to provoke Nikhil that has her agreeing to support another attractive player, Zahid’s side in a league match. Here, she rather comically embraces an over-the-top goddess image by dressing the part – “I went to the Punjab Emporium opposite Hanuman Mandir and picked up this hardcore salwar kameez, a little phulkari\(^{47}\) jacket, juttis\(^{48}\) and a pink parandi\(^{49}\)” (Chauhan 2010, 132) – although in a fit of pique with Nikhil, she kisses Zahid passionately on the mouth. After Zahid’s team registers a historic win for his team, calls for Zoya to be included in the Indian team’s contingent to the World Cup grow stronger and she is offered “official status” by the Indian Board of Cricket Control (IBCC). The contract she is asked to sign, influenced by the Board chairman’s

\(^{47}\) Phulkari: Embroidered with flowers  
\(^{48}\) Juttis: Traditional embroidered leather shoes from North India  
\(^{49}\) Parandi: Hair ornament
spiritual guru, Lingnath Baba, contains clauses restricting her from sexual activity and getting married because, as the godman explains, “your propitiousness is directly proportional to your purity” (ibid., 172). Zoya is both humiliated at being publicly outed as a virgin and enraged at being told what to do, and rejects the contract in favour of an agreement that guarantees her no money but doesn’t restrict her in any way. The linking of Zoya’s sexual “purity” with her powers echoes the discussion of Indian goddess mythology above in which female sexual expression is associated with the uncontrollable power of the goddess. By refusing to be domesticated, in this case by the contract devised by the Board’s patriarchs, Zoya insists on a more erratic and independent course for herself.

Increasingly, Zoya finds herself, as her boss Sanks puts it, “caught between two Indias. The let’s-put-a-man-on-Mars one and the don’t-go-into-the-kitchen-if-you-have-your-period one” (ibid., 403). The two viewpoints are to some extent crystalized in the characters of Nikhil and Zoya, who are pitted against each other as belief in the self versus belief in luck, rationality versus emotions, head versus heart, Western versus Indian (although there could be nothing more Indian than being the captain of the Indian cricket team, Nikhil seems mainly supported in his scepticism of Zoya by the team’s Australian coach). Nandy in his treatise on cricket in India has noted that the cricketer “has to learn the dialectic that is natural to many apparently fatalistic traditions; he has to learn to maintain an inner balance by being simultaneously a firm believer in fate while all the while acting as if it did not exist” (Nandy 2001, 21). Nikhil, however, stoutly denies this belief in fate that is part of Hindu tradition, and thus one might see Zoya the goddess as being sent to jostle his hubristic rational security. In this sense, the novel conforms to the patriarchal paradigm of male/rational, female/emotional. In embodying the goddess, Zoya appears to take on the role of an emotional and premodern tradition attributed to mothers in other chick lit novels. However,
although Zoya, first disbelieving and embarrassed and finally defiant, embraces her powers, she does not accept the Brahmanical expectations of remaining pure, maternal or benevolent.

As the pressure on her escalates, Zoya begins to embody the more feared aspects of the goddess. When a new team member kisses her without her consent because he believes Nikhil’s performance on the field was enhanced by his sexual relationship with Zoya, she curses him, resulting in his dismal performance. When this event gets widely publicized, the novel cites a column by “a Wicca Witch of Indo-Dutch descent” who reproduces some of the academic discourse on the goddess archetype, pointing out that in Indian lore, the goddess “was created by the gods to vanquish demons that the gods themselves could not defeat” and that once the “drunken, wide-hipped, bow-twanging, battle-loving warrior with rolling red eyes and a lust for blood” had finished the task, the gods would beseech her to return to her dwelling place (Chauhan 2008, 441). The columnist alleges that Zoya is a creation of the earthly cricket gods at the IBCC in India but that she is now out of control, dubbing her “the Raktdantini, the Goddess who likens the taste of blood on her teeth” who “opens her maw even wider and roars for an even larger share of the juicy cricket pie” (ibid., 442).

This pie is largely financial as Zoya has been offered the opportunity to endorse a brand of beedi\textsuperscript{50} owned by the IBCC chairman’s associate. Since tobacco product advertising is banned on television, it would be advertised as incense sticks named “Sheraan-wali”, “the agarbatti of the Goddess who bestrides a tiger, who of course is Durga Ma, the main Goddess of the Hindu pantheon” (ibid., 237). The ad itself exemplifies the co-option of goddess iconography by chauvinistic, capitalist and nationalistic forces. The script paints Nikhil in a bad light, showing him and his vice-captain bowing to Zoya-as-goddess, but Nikhil’s agent Lokender is willing to sell out the skipper. At the ad shoot, Zoya is decked in “a Bharatnatyam dancer’s costume, with a light-blue divided sari and a low embroidered belt. A

\textsuperscript{50} Beedi: Hand-rolled cigarettes
shiny, gold-coin-encrusted corset went on top, along with a vast number of gold and bead necklaces and a cardboard kind of gold crown for my head. The trident was a flashy blue and silver” (ibid., 452). This recreation of the richly decorated statues of Indian goddesses is enough to convince the masses of devotees bussed in by a right-wing political honcho who wants Zoya to contest the election on his party’s ticket: “When my ‘devotees’ saw me, standing there frozen in the doorway of the make-up van, resplendent in my Goddess get-up, an ecstatic, collective groan rippled through their ranks and the chanting started up again, accompanied by the manic tinkling of about fifty little brass bells” (ibid., 463). Their devotion, fuelled by alcohol and hype, and their final act of bringing down the “false temple” (the backdrop) at the ad shoot is a satire on the communal mobs that destroyed the mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 sparking riots around the country. It is also a symbolic end to the façade of Zoya’s status as a goddess. Thus, Zoya trussed up as Durga51 for the ad shoot represents the goddess as the canvas on which the passions and desires of men play out, sometimes to disastrous consequences.

The complexity of the synthesis of traditional and modern embodied in Zoya as contemporary goddess is also alluded to in food. The significance of food in the novel lies in the consumption of breakfast when it is revealed that Zoya activates good luck among those she eats with. Zoya is invited to join the Indian cricket team at their communal breakfast. Significantly, when she presides over this meal in her goddess avatar, Zoya rarely consumes Indian food – she awkwardly chews toast, struggles to swallow a mouthful of Vegemite she is offered by the Aussie coach, and eats slices of fruit. One of her momentous achievements as goddess is when she breaks a stalemate within the team between Nikhil and the Australian coach on one side and the IBCC chairman Lohia and his favoured player Rawal on the other by ordering pizza. The pizza delivery bike accidentally runs over Rawal on the street, taking

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51 Durga: The Hindu goddess personifying “Shakti” or the cosmic energy, also known as the protective mother
him off the team and solving Nikhil’s crisis. While her powers as goddess are exercised largely through Western food, Zoya’s own tastes lie with the Indian street food mentioned above, but also in the homely fusion concoctions of her aunt: “Rinku Chachi’s pizzas were legendary. They were loaded with tandoori chicken, achaari\textsuperscript{52} paneer, Amul cheese and hara dhaniya\textsuperscript{53} and no Italian would ever recognize them, but they rocked” (ibid., 93). She also made “hamburgers for dinner – spicy aalu tikki\textsuperscript{54} really – and cold coffee in big glasses” (ibid., 177) and “rajma\textsuperscript{55} pasta”. It is the enjoyment of these “cosmopolitan” culinary experiments, the kitschy transformation of Western food concepts to suit the Indian palate, that epitomizes the synthetic selfhood of Zoya.

**Synthetic Language**

One could argue that a similar spicy synthesis is what Chauhan undertakes in the novel form itself. Chauhan’s ingenuity lies in combining the magic of Indian mythology wherein Zoya (who incidentally has a Muslim name) is cast as a reincarnation of the great Hindu goddess with the absurdity of Indian life whereby her power is specifically connected to the fortunes of the cricket team. Thus, at the formal level, Chauhan pulls of a synthesis more complex than that of other Indian chick lit authors by fusing Western generic conventions with the postcolonial literary tradition of magical realism. One could argue that Chauhan partakes of an exoticizing move by attributing goddess powers to her protagonist, but I suggest that part of her achievement is the distinct address to an Indian middle-class audience that would instinctively share her allusions to both myth and popular culture as well as her imitation of Indianisms and the mix of English and other Indian languages. Moreover, in a sense, Chauhan harks back to the earliest novels in India in which despite the “avowed affiliation with realism” were filled with “elements of fantasy and intimations or history”

\textsuperscript{52} Achaari: Pickled
\textsuperscript{53} Hara dhaniya: Fresh coriander
\textsuperscript{54} Aalu tikki: Potato cutlets
\textsuperscript{55} Rajma: A North Indian preparation of kidney beans
whereby “chronicles merge with legend, events lapse into magical happenings, and kings who lived once-upon-a-time cast their spell on those who ruled at historically recognizable periods over geographically precise areas” (Mukherjee 2006, 606).

Chauhan’s ability to indigenize the genre is no doubt drawn from her career in advertising, where she gained renown for coining such iconic slogans as “Yeh dil mange more”\(^{56}\) and “Oye\(^{57}\) Bubbly” at the height of India’s cola wars. Mazzarella (2003) has shown how advertising agencies in the post-liberalization period came to mediate the very understanding of Indianness as they positioned themselves as brokers between multinational firms and the Indian public, and Fernandes notes that the advertising industry has played an important role in the cultural creation of the new middle class (2006). As advertising professionals, Zoya and her colleagues are immersed in the work of this mediation. The ad pitches detailed in the novel draw heavily on Indian popular culture, including its obsession with cricket, the film industry and Indian myth, couched in the everyday Hinglish of the new middle class.

Chauhan’s rendition of different registers of colloquial speech, in which English is infused with Hindi, adds to the enjoyment of her novels. Anjaria suggests that the linguistic mélange in Chauhan’s novels and those of other post-liberalization commercial writers such as Chetan Bhagat, differ from the “chutnification” of Rushdie because “the intended audience is not the cosmopolitan elite but precisely those Indian readers who might potentially read in English and one of the bhashas” (2015, 12). While I agree that Chauhan’s linguistic code-mixing addresses a different audience from Rushdie’s, I also would like to draw attention to the skill with which she mimics the speech of everyday India, even while using English.

*The Zoya Factor* and Chauhan’s subsequent novels give her room to showcase her talent for code-mixing, matching it with sustained character portraits. Thus, we have Eppa,

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\(^{56}\) *Yeh dil mange more*: This heart wants more  
\(^{57}\) *Oye*: Hey
with her mix of Hindi and English with an accent from the South [“Hoo’s dyuere?58” and “Why yu are skaring me, notty gul?59” (Chauhan 2010, 16)], the boy who wins a competition run by a popular beverage company and whose speech follows the earnest lilting tones of Indian children speaking English [“It was sunny days in the jungal60… Guru Drona was giving his dissy-pills61 an arching lesson. …” (ibid., 77)], the street vendor in Karol Bagh [“Yes-madam-tee-shirts? Yes-madam-baggies?” (ibid., 186)] and the familiar lopsided analogies of cricket commentator Beeru, a fictionalized version of Indian cricketer-turned-commentator Navjot Singh Sidhu [“Vul, gumballs62 are like girlfriends, my friend… very very expensive” (ibid., 229)].

The latter example harks back to the role that cricket commentary in various Indian languages on the radio and then in television and the print media played in mediating and indigenizing the sport in the country (Appadurai 1996, 100). Just as the The Zoya Factor as a chick lit novel bears the marks of cultural translation, cricket as a sport has been cited as an example of decolonization (Appadurai 1996, Nandy 2001). While on the one hand, cricket is that part of “Indian culture today that seems forever to be England” (Appadurai 1996, 89) given its origin and continued association with Victorian elite values, it has been thoroughly indigenized so that it is today unrecognizable from the gentleman’s game that graced the fields of Eton. Appadurai’s example of the liberal use of English technical terms in a Hindi commentary exchange in the 1970s echoes the robust and even more linguistically muddled cricket commentary in The Zoya Factor that mimics what Indian audiences listen to today.

Thus, it is perhaps apt that some of the best examples of indigenized English in The Zoya Factor come from those involved with cricket. For example, the little monologue of fast

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58 Hoo’s dyuere?: Who’s there?
59 Why yu are skaring me, notty gul?: Why you are scaring me, naughty girl?
60 Jungal: Jungle
61 Dissy-pills: Disciples
62 Vul, gumballs…: Well, gambles…
bowler Zahid: “Some people say you should try and block out the crowd. Pretend ki⁶³ they are not there. But I don’t. Kyunki⁶⁴ tension can work for you. You can use it to make you play better. If whole-of-the-stadium is booing me also. I just think ki, theek hai,⁶⁵ I will prove all the behen-ke-excuse-me-please⁶⁶ fools wrong” (ibid., 206). Pathan’s Hindi-infused English exemplifies the speech of small-town, non-native English speakers, a mode that Chauhan endorses and celebrates by having her more sophisticated protagonist indulge in it as well, using phrases such as “control nahi hota”⁶⁷ (ibid., 5).

**Cricket Fever**

Because Zoya’s powers are connected to cricket as well to goddess iconography, her fate is yoked to that of the nation at large. Chauhan’s choice of cricket in India as the backdrop to her novel is not accidental. On the one hand, as Nandy (2001) has pointed out, because of its form, the outcome of a cricket match is contingent on luck, making it eminently suitable to the Hindu world view. Thus, Chauhan’s invention of a Goddess of Cricket seems not much of a stretch. More importantly, cricket in India, as Appadurai points out, “links gender, nation, fantasy, and bodily excitement” (1996, 110). Moreover, today, Nalin Mehta notes, India is “the spiritual and financial heart of the global cricket industry” (2009, 594) and cricket in the twenty-first century, particularly in its intensified shortened T20 version, has become symbolic of “new India”, aggressive and triumphant on the global stage (Varughese 2013).

Zoya describes the passion of the Indian public for the game and their wrath when the national team loses expressed in the “sacred Indian ritual” whereby “people gather in hoards to chant bitter breast-beating slogans and smear fresh, still-warm cow droppings on the faces of cricket players on advertising billboards all over the country” (Chauhan 2010, 29) as well

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⁶³ Ki: That
⁶⁴ Kyunki: Because
⁶⁵ Theek hai: Fine/okay
⁶⁶ “Behen ke …” is the start of an abuse phrase involving sisters
⁶⁷ Control nahi hota: Control doesn’t happen/cannot control myself
as its capacity to bring the nation together, symbolized in her family whose internecine sparring ceases during international cricket matches and also apparent in the queue for the flight to Bangladesh comprising “Malayalis, Manipuris, Sardars, old, young, pierced or vibhooti-smeared all eager to watch a match live (ibid., 24). Zoya’s own reading of the country united by cricketing passion is less positive; she is unimpressed by the sport, which she dubs “The Great Indian Disease, I tell you. Worse than dengue or polio or tuberculosis. They should vaccinate us against it when we’re born” (ibid., 24).

Chauhan sets the sport in its current spectacular, post-Indian Premier League avatar, a fast-paced aggressive, glitzy combination that is as much about media, money, glamour (including ties to business tycoons and Bollywood) as about athleticism, the centre of which has shifted from England to the subcontinent with its commercial underpinnings closely tied to economic liberalization. She represents the mediascape of cricket through the polyphonic voices of newspaper columns, television interviews with experts and cricketers, advertisements and internet comment sections. Cricket started out as and continues to be a masculine activity in India so that “the Indian female gaze, at least thus far, is twice removed, as they are most often watching males play but also watching males watching other males play” (Appadarai 1996, 111). While the increasing presence of female cricket fans and now sports journalists and commentators, represented in the novel by the knowledgeable sports writer Shanta Gokhale, seems to belie the claim of female non-involvement in the sport, as a woman (and worse, one with no interest in cricket), Zoya is an interloper, made particularly evident in the descriptions of her presence as the sole female among the “boys in blue” at breakfast. Nevertheless, by making Zoya-as-goddess an active source of power albeit in a distinctly unsporting mode, Chauhan introduces a third possibility to the masculinized participant/excluded feminine dynamic of Indian cricket.

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68Vibhooti-smeared: smeared with sacred ash
Over the course of the novel, Zoya’s fate as goddess is tied not just to cricket but the destiny of the nation. Early on, in an angry exchange between Nikhil and Zoya, referring to the idea that she bestows greater luck on those she kisses, he asks her: “How far are you willing to go for your country?” (Chauhan 2010, 90). He is alluding to the commonly held belief that facilitating the team’s win is a patriotic duty. Zoya confesses that though “I stand up for the national anthem, and I cried when that fat kid made all the goras sing Saare jahan se achcha in the school scene in Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham but the truth is that my patriotism has never really been tested” (ibid., 311). She is contrasted to not just Nikhil, who ostensibly fights for India on the cricket pitch, but also her brother Zoravar, a “real” patriot who is a soldier in the Indian army following in the footsteps of Zoya’s father and uncles. The parallel between Zoya’s role as goddess with the power to win India victory on the proxy battlefield of cricket without putting herself on the line and Zoravar’s contribution to the nation is intensified in the penultimate section of the novel when Zoya is forced to decide whether she will stay with the team and influence their win, or retreat and allow Nikhil to claim a more uncertain victory on his own. It turns out that Zoravar had been injured in a real battle on the India-Pakistan border, bringing home to Zoya and the reader who the “real” patriots are. Zoravar also saves Zoya from betraying Nikhil and the team by seeing through the nefarious plan of the IBCC chief to discredit Nikhil by hyping up Zoya, tossing his words into the already charged trailer like “he’d causally pulled out the pin of a hand grenade and tossed it, smouldering onto the floor of the make-up van” (ibid., 461). It is also Zoravar who rescues Zoya as she lights firecrackers a little too enthusiastically in a bittersweet celebration of India’s win at the World Cup without her. Thus, it is the heroic rationality of her brother that helps Zoya, the goddess, see through the illusory temptations of fame, money and worldly power, and which saves her when she emotionally endangers her own life.

69 “Hindustan is Better than the Whole World”, a patriotic song
70 “Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad”, a family drama film directed by Karan Johar and released in 2001
Zoya, however, makes her own decision not to go to back to Australia and assist the team in its win after she witnesses a roadside cricket match. As Zoya gently stabilizes one of the fielders with her hand enabling him to make a catch, she has an epiphany:

“If I was a Goddess of the Game, born at the very moment of India’s greatest cricket victory, if my purpose in life was to help them win, if my hand was supposed to hover over them in constant benediction, wasn’t it part of my job description to keep Indian Cricket from harm? By going back to spoon cornflakes and slimy papaya slices into my face with the team before they played the Final, all I’d end up doing was erode their faith in their own ability” (ibid., 470).

She thus makes the active choice to retreat from the scene and take a passive role by remaining in India and letting Nikhil lead the team in Australia on his own. She returns to the domesticated goddess form, which allows Nikhil to shine in the spotlight he worked so hard for, but leaves her publicly abused and financially uncompensated. Her victory at the end of the novel is the love of a good man, a satisfying conclusion for the reader if not the feminist.

The climax of the novel, however, lies not entirely in the reunion of Zoya and Nikhil, which given the genre might have been a forgone conclusion. Rather, it is also in the victory of the Indian cricket team at the World Cup, a less secure conclusion and one that was at the heart of Zoya’s dilemma. The intense affective thrust of the novel lies in the romantic trajectory being overlaid by the nationalist spectacle of the cricket team’s fortune. The conclusion of the novel which brings arguably the most popular man in India, Nikhil, humbly back to Zoya is fused with the euphoria of India’s cricketing triumph which unites the nation. Thus, the romantic closure of the novel also signals a nationalistic closure which glosses over cracks and divisions in its suggestion of pan-Indian celebration. This end can only be reached if the goddess steps back so that her sons can defend her honour, an act made possible by her rather Austenian realization that love, after all, is greater than pride.
Conclusion

*Battle for Bittora* and *The Zoya Factor* probably even more fully than other chick lit novels present protagonists who represent a synthetic idea of Indian feminine selfhood. This is fully articulated in Zoya, who repeatedly stresses her allegiance not to age-old ideas of Indian tradition but to newer forms of local culture and place, such as the emotional aesthetic of her Delhi neighbourhood, an allegiance represented in dress, language and food. Zoya’s synthetic self is contrasted with the ideals of the goddess she is supposed to embody; here too she embraces the absurdity of anything-can-happen-India but refuses to bow down to its chauvinistic expectations. Jinni in *Battle for Bittora* showcases the journey of travelling back to one’s roots, but again it is not a journey of regression into conservatism, but a discovery of resources of strength in the self and a delight in local cultures.

However, the romance in both novels comes from the journey towards heterosexual coupledom being played out against the backdrop of national synthesis. Singh proposes that since Independence, the Indo-Anglian realist novel illustrates Anderson’s formulation of imagined communities having “given a sociological solidity to disparate actors and actions” and “woven together or elided the material disparities and discursive instabilities of a nation-in-formation” to make “an imagined community seem natural and inevitable” (1996, 161). Chauhan’s novels, while being skilfully crafted comedies, continue this nationalist realist project. In the context of Hindi film, Gopal argues that Hindi cinema in its classic mode from the 1940s to the 1980s, constituted a “master genre” that included comedy, drama, spectacle, and thrills in “response to the challenge of creating a national film audience under the conditions of single-screen exhibition” (2011, 126). In contrast, she says, post-liberalization Hindi cinema came to be staged in multiplexes and featured “multiplot films” which “construct a more capacious and internally diversified conception of the middle classes that
corresponds more adequately to the broader audience being solicited by the multiplex” (ibid. 127).

These films:

“…feature a plurality of couples from all parts of the social spectrum; yet these couples share habits, attitudes, and dispositions that enable them to navigate the same spaces. Sociological differences notwithstanding, they are anchored in a shared milieu and, taken together, produce the social. In other words, diversity and difference in the new multiplot are enabling factors that are crucial for the construction of a new version of society and its citizenry” (ibid.).

It is noteworthy that chick lit, as a post-liberalization phenomenon, does not generally follow the multiplot tendency of its cinematic counterpart. Although some chick lit novels, such as *Almost Single*, might follow the trajectory of multiple characters, they tend to focus the narrative through the voice of the protagonist. The novels can then be said to hark back to an earlier formal moment in both the novel and cinema, in which the reality of the nation itself is not called into question; rather, the suggestion of Indian tradition as embodied in the mother, concretizes the idea of an underlying pan-Indian unity. The rearticulation of the national project of “unity in diversity” is most powerfully presented in *The Zoya Factor* and *Battle for Bittora* through the delineation of the variety of colourful characters, the imitation of local diction and peculiarities of speech, and more importantly the depiction of the cheerful interaction of these various types of people from different backgrounds. Both novels end not simply on a note of romantic fulfilment but by evoking national pride through victory at the hustings or on the cricket pitch. While the diversity of the nation is highlighted, instead of any radical questioning of the concept of nationhood itself, in Chauhan’s novels, the nation is not only taken for granted but affirmed.
Chapter 6: Happy Endings

One of the most prevalent feminist critiques of chick lit as a genre is the novels’ tendency to end in heterosexual coupledom, which “delimits the kinds of narratives circulating about single women and the kinds of feminine subjectivities that are seen as inhabitable” (Taylor 2012, 3). Pointing to Anglo-American chick lit’s centering of the “love plot”, Wells notes, the novels usually end with “mutual declarations of romantic love after a long and tumultuous period of misunderstandings, with future marriage likely but not guaranteed.” (2006, 49). Others, however, are not so sure of the romantic conclusions of Anglo-American chick lit’s urtexts. Whelehan observes that “chick lit heroines often seem to be wrestling with a nascent feminist consciousness set against their quest for The One” (2005, 5). Mabry (2006) and Harzewski (2011) have argued that chick lit decentres romance and highlights other spaces of expression of women’s desires from friendship to commodities. I have argued that Indian chick lit while conforming to the generic conventions of depicting heterosexual romance, in some ways, displaces the affective thrust of the narrative by refocusing on other arenas such as career satisfaction, or in the case of Chauhan’s novels, national triumph. My argument throughout has been that while these novels are ostensibly about romance, the central problematic is about other areas of self-formation, particularly the resolution of the tradition/modernity binary and the (possibility of) forging of synthetic selfhood. In line with this, I have decentred the discussion of romance in the organization of this dissertation as well. However, the fact remains that romance is a core generic convention and an important plot point in these novels, and therefore requires some discussion.

Rosalind Gill (2007) points to the resilience of the romance genre in the face of cultural and demographic changes such as divorce, the increase in the number of single-person households and the diversification of family forms. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue
that “romantic love is gaining ever greater significance as a ‘secular’ religion” (1995, 173). Others point out that instability in the post-911 period may have exacerbated demand for romance narratives in the West (Harzewksi 2011). Bauman proposes that “an ambient fear – of being dumped, of becoming waste, of exclusion – has become the emotional backdrop to the theatre of globalization” (2012, 102). The novels seem to indicate that in the aftermath of the gains of the women’s movement, women desire to be saved “from the complications of life as an independent woman” by recourse to “love saves all” narratives (Ferriss and Young 2006, 81).

In the Indian context, as explained in Chapter 2, the historical conjuncture of the 1990s and the entrenchment of neoliberalism in the new millennium predicated a reassessment of female identity. As more middle-class women entered the workforce and engaged with Western norms in both work and romance, the need to craft selves that took into account both tradition and modernity arose. This transitional moment may have renewed the desire for romance narratives among young Indian women. However, Pearce and Stacey argue that “romance survives because of its narrativity”, that is, “its capacity for ‘re-scripting’ that has enabled it to flourish at the same time that it has been transformed” (1995, 12). Seen in this light, the emergence of the chick lit novel is both a testament to the powerful hold the romance narrative has on readers and to its adaptability. The persistent popularity of the genre gives credence to Snitow’s view that “romance is a primary category of the female imagination” and that Harlequins, and by extensions other women-centered romance fiction, “may well be closer to describing women’s hopes for love than the work of the fine women novelists” (1986, 261).

**The Structure of Romance**

Romance novels typically focus on a single, developing relationship between the heroine and hero and their movement from misunderstanding to love (Modleski 1982;
Coward 1984; Radway 1984; Snitow 1986) turning the spotlight on courtship, women’s “one socially acceptable moment of transcendence”, in a culture in which the myth of the brave, autonomous, questor is reserved for men (Snitow, 1986, 252). The intense focus on the couple, Radway (1984) argues, promotes identification of the reader with the protagonist. This readerly identification is successful even in far-removed contexts such as India as Puri’s (1997) study of Indian readers of Harlequin romances shows. Puri attributes this to the novels being written in the third person from the woman’s point of view.

Radway notes that “the romance is concerned not simply with the fact of heterosexual marriage but with the perhaps more essential issues for women – how to realize a mature self and how to achieve emotional fulfillment in a culture in which such goals must be achieved in the company of an individual whose principal preoccupation is always elsewhere in the public world” (1984, 139). Snitow proposes that “all tension and problems arise from the fact that the Harlequin world is inhabited by two species incapable of communicating with each other, male and female” in a culture that “produces a pathological experience of sex difference” (1984, 247). The differences and resulting tension between the sexes are thus polarized in romantic fiction, including chick lit which shares similarities and differences with its romantic counterparts.

Although Gill (2007) has commented that the Anglo-American chick lit protagonist is less spirited than her counterparts in traditional romance, the Indian chick lit heroine tends to be sassy and rebellious. Readers of Harlequin novels in India in Puri’s (1997) study prized heroines who they perceived to be strong, independent and feisty, within the confines of femininity. However, unlike the protagonists of traditional romance and the Harlequin, the chick lit heroine is not outstandingly beautiful. Both Damayanthi in Keep the Change and Aisha in Almost Single compare themselves unfavourably to thinner and more stylish women. More than the other novelists, Chauhan stresses the ordinariness and imperfections of her
protagonists. Zoya in The Zoya Factor says, “People are always going ‘so cute’ when they see me and grabbing my cheeks and squeezing them with gusto, which is okay when you’re a moppet in red corduroy dungarees but not so good when you are a working woman” (Chauhan 2008, 2). If her protuberant cheeks are Zoya’s defining feature, Jinni in Battle for Bittora is characterized by her “XXL” mouth that is “so wide that I look like one of those stupid, smiling Disneyland dolphins” (Chauhan 2010, 3). Nevertheless, these women attract the attention of eligible men, in large part due to their personalities, which combine irrepressibility with a penchant for fumbling and failing “suggesting that character flaws are part of one’s unchangeable personal make-up” (Whelehan 2005, 175). While Gill (2007) suggests that the protagonists’ ordinary looks serve to deflect envy in the reader and also set her up for the makeover paradigm, I would argue that the protagonist’s ordinariness serves to heighten the distance between her and the hero, dramatize the extent of her daring to challenge him, and emphasize his choice of her as a recognition of her less superficial attractions.

In their amplification of the difference between the male and the female socially as well as in terms of personality, chick lit, as Coward (1984) argued of the Harlequin, has taken Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813) as its prototype and tended to feature a spirited but otherwise ordinary young woman gradually captivating a socially superior, arrogant and masterful man. Jones notes that while the romance genre appears to be flexible, one of the points on which it will likely remain unchanged is the construction of the hero: “He is still older, richer, wiser in the ways of the world, and more experienced sexually than the heroine” (1986, 214). The latter point may no longer be true of chick lit which often alludes to sexually experienced young women, but the hero’s greater experience in all other arenas contributes to general air of superiority that harks back to Mr Darcy in Pride and Prejudice (and his modern-day counterpart in Bridget Jones’s Diary) and the smouldering heroes of the
Apart from these qualities, the characters of these men are not fleshed out at all, with the exception of the heroes of Chauhan’s novels who admittedly leave distinct impressions on the readers.

In the novels under consideration, all the men that elicit interest from the protagonists appear to be wealthy – Karan in Almost Single is an investment banker, CG in Keep the Change is Damayanthi’s boss, the various young men that Arshi in You Are Here is interested in are wealthy, Nikhil in The Zoya Factor is the captain of the cricket team and explicitly tells her at the end of the novel “My crores are your crores”, and Zain in Battle for Bittora is the scion of a royal family. Moreover, while Indian chick lit protagonists tend to demonstrate more career focus and competence than their Western counterparts as argued in Chapter 2, they seem to come undone or be wrongfooted in the presence of the hero.

In Keep the Change, on first setting sight on CG, the man she ends up with, Damayanthi says “he looked insufferably superior. His expression seemed to say – ‘I know everything and what I don’t know is not worth knowing’”. His “cool, appraising nod” made her “wonder if my minimal make-up was smudged or my kurta71 was crumpled or my tongue was hanging out like a thirsty dog’s” (Subramanian 2010, 101). Further, he carries a copy of the Economic Times and flabbergasts Damayanthi by asking her what she thinks of a loan waiver policy for farmers. Over the course of the novel, Damayanthi discovers the more approachable side of CG, but does not develop romantic feelings for him until the very end.

Although Arshi in You Are Here appears to conduct herself on an egalitarian footing with the opposite sex, she acknowledges that she tends to idolize the men she is in love with. Moreover, while the novel depicts a series of love interests, the one she remains most focused on is defined by his wealth as well as his inscrutability, a characteristic she attributes to all men:

71 Kurta: tunic
They never worry, these boys we love. They keep us on tenterhooks, just by their unconcern. We spend our days agonizing over them; at night if we’re out together we try to make them jealous by flirting with someone else. But they rarely seem to care and at the end of the evening just a casual arm around our waists or a murmured “Ready to leave?” can make us weak in the knees. This is it, we think, this is the night we will make out and they will whisper the sweetest of sweet nothings in our ears, only they won’t be nothings: they’ll be deep meaningful somethings (Madhavan 2008, 46).

Like the men in Bridget Jones’s Diary and Sex and the City, Kabir is commitment-phonic. He “had a terrible habit of making plans, promising to come over, only to call at the last moment and tell me he was busy and couldn’t make it, leaving me fancy-underweared and cleavage-perfumed and miserable” (Madhavan 2008, 105). The novel draws attention to the complicated rules of the dating game in contemporary society and women’s desire for love to break these rules that Whelehan (2005) has pointed to, although Arshi’s relationships never achieve this transcendence.

The pairing of an urbane, composed man with a somewhat childlike, flustered-in-his-presence woman is exacerbated in Chauhan’s novels. If, as mentioned earlier, in several Indian chick lit novels the romance plot proves somewhat anticlimactic at the end despite fulfilling the generic requirement for heterosexual coupling, Chauhan makes romance central to her novels by focusing on the tension involved in sexual difference, and the role this has played in her success as a writer cannot be discounted. The status mismatch between hero and heroine is particularly intense in The Zoya Factor since Nikhil is one of the most famous men in the country while Zoya is a veritable nobody. Despite Zoya’s disdain for cricketers in general, she cannot help being impressed by his celebrity status. Moreover, he cuts an attractive figure: “Nikhil Khoda was tall. His shoulders were broad under his navy-blue India blazer, and his slightly over-long hair was very black against his creamy white shirt. His brown eyes were warm in a strong, bronzed face. As his lean fingers gripped mine an insane
little voice in my head instantly started warbling, *Yeh to bada toinnng hai*...”72 (Chauhan 2008, 41). In *Battle for Bittora*, Zain is literally an aristocrat, and although Jinni is not in awe of him since they were childhood friends and briefly sweethearts, he too is drawn up as one of the tall, dark and handsome masterful men of the Mills and Boon era: “His features were strong. Slightly aquiline. He was clean-shaven but slightly stubbly. His sleeves were rolled up to just above his elbows, revealing lean but muscular forearms. A black thread was tied tightly around one sinewy wrist. A tiny scar lurked at the corner of his seriously sexy mouth” (Chauhan 2010, 42). Both Chauhan’s heroes hark back to Radway’s observation that romantic heroes are specimens of “spectacular masculinity” with Zain’s scar fulfilling the obligation for “a small feature that introduces an important element of softness into the overall picture” (1984, 128).

However, the higher social status of these men does not prevent the protagonists from defying them. On Nikhil’s suggestion that she might try to take advantage of her position, Zoya blazes at him:

> “Mileage? That is so uncool! You know, not to be rude or anything, but I don’t even like cricket! The last thing in the world I would want to do is become some glorified cricket groupie!”
> That surprised him. I guess his trio of Bollywood starlets didn’t talk back to him like that (Chauhan 2008, 90)

And when Nikhil continues to push his point saying “You’re pretty cocky for a Lucky Charm who’s only three matches old!”, she fires back: “And you’re pretty cocky for a skipper who’s lost every Final he’s ever played” (ibid.). Similarly, Jinni on a number of occasions bests Zain not only verbally but in practice: when he gate-crashes a rally for Muslim voters that he organised, she offers them a big donation, and when his team offers to buy her out of the

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72 *Yeh to bada toinnng hai*: This one is very “toinnnnng”. The last word is easily translatable but refers to a springy feeling with an underlying sexual undertone.
race, she accepts the money and then continues her campaign. At a dinner party, Zain and Jinni have the following exchange:

“You feel … shorter tonight,” he said.
“It’s my stupid Champapuli chappals,” I muttered, scowling, sticking one foot out to show him.
“Ah!...” he grinned. “You’ve been taken down a couple of pegs.”
I just glared at him. He was wearing Champapulis too. But of course, they hadn’t made him shrink magically, like mine had.
“Well, get used to the feeling …” He folded one large hand into a fist, reached out and biffed me gently, very gently, on the chin. “Coz you’re going down, Bappa Nagar.”
“In your dreams, baby,” I snapped, so pissed off, my heart forgot to skip a beat at his touch (Chauhan 2010, 227).

This sort of sparring is reminiscent of the exchange between protagonists of romance novels going back to Jane Austen and continuing in the Harlequin. In *Almost Single*, when the central pair are first introduced, Aisha is not only at a disadvantage due to her status as a customer service executive at a hotel in which Karan is a guest, but also due to having been seen by him breaking the rules of two different establishments. Consider this exchange between the two:

“Must you insist on stripping me with your eyes?” he says without preamble.
“Excuse me?” I mutter.
“I have never ever been so stared at.” He towers over me, his lips pursed in mild disdain. I really don’t know what to say and look up at him feeling mortified and guilty. Maybe I should just apologize for everything – for seeing him naked, for staring at him, for cursing him under my breath, for global warming, for Osama still being on the sprint. *Just apologize for everything, Aisha, and get this over with!*”
My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of him chuckling. “Actually, I love being objectified. And thinking of all the wicked ways in which you want to have your way with me …” (Kala 2007, 52-53).

Although Aisha walks away in a huff, she then reconsiders:

The temptation to turn and flee is strong, but this is not a classic Bollywood Moment, and I am no Bollywood bimbette. So, I turn around deliberately and walk straight back up to him. I hold his eyes as I reach behind him suggestively, only to pick up my glass. “And you thought I was returning for you,” I smile sweetly. (ibid., 54)

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73 Chappals: slippers
74 Bappa Naga: A reference to Zain teasing Sarojini that her name is reminiscent of the garish Sarojini Nagar
A number of revisions to the romance formula are implemented here. Aisha may be wrongfooted but she recovers with elan and flirts in a sexually explicit manner. Moreover, she marks herself out as a different heroine from the “Bollywood bimbette”. Given that Bollywood heroines are usually known to be paragons of virtue, if not particularly intelligent, it is unclear what exactly Aisha means by this, but she seems to be suggesting that she is both overtly sexy as well as smart and capable of holding her own despite Karan’s social and material advantages, a combination that proves irresistible.

**Sexual Tension**

These scenes remain charged with a latent sexual tension that sometimes becomes manifest. Zain, for example, combines the sexual aggression of the Harlequin hero with the persistence of his Bollywood counterpart in the scene in which he and Jinni first reencounter each other:

> Even as I was thinking this, the new, taller, hotter, Zain walked in, dropped down at the other end of the sofa, and in one fluid movement, swung his legs over the arm of the sofa and deposited his dark head in my lap.
> “That’s okay,” he said, his eyes dancing. “I know you really well. I know you hate logarithms and love rock music and ...” His voice grew huskier and one lean hand rose up to brush my cheek caressingly. “I know you have a little, cream-coloured South America-shaped birthmark way up one you… um... left… right, no, definitely left thigh – wanna hear more?”
> “No, thanks,” I said hastily, and tried to haul his head off my lap.
> But quick as a flash, he caught my hand and pressed a soft kiss on the inside of my wrist.
> Fireworks. (Chauhan 2010, 54)

This scene is reminiscent of typical sequences in Hindi films in which the hero pursues the heroine, who feigns reluctance but eventually capitulates, down to him pulling her by the loose end of her sari. While the exchange problematically smacks of the “no means yes” of rape culture, the difference is that Jinni’s desire is immediately clear, their childhood
romance has been alluded to a couple of pages prior to this scene, and she is allowed to enact
desire herself. When he first places “a contrite, lingering kiss on the soft skin at the back of
my neck. The same place where he’d once kissed me, my first kiss, eleven years ago” (ibid.,
56), she “reached up, found his extra-large ears, pulled down his head and kissed him”
(ibid.). The scene melds old (the aggressive pursuant hero in both Western romance fiction
and Hindi cinema) conventions with new (a sexually agentive heroine). If the heroines of the
traditional Bollywood romance “serve an iconic function in representing family values that
Western decadence and materialism have undermined” (Sharpe 2005), particularly in matters
of sexuality, the Indian chick lit protagonist no longer suits this purpose. She is an active
desiring subject, whether or not she actually engages in premarital sex.

In *The Zoya Factor*, Chauhan evokes sexual tension through another strategy used in
older romances – the withholding of pleasure:

I closed my eyes, still giggling and braced myself for the collision. But
nothing happened. There was just the feel of his lean, strong fingers cradling the back
of my neck. Suddenly I was almost scared to open my eyes. But after a while, I did. I
blinked and looked up. He was looking down at me. His face was very still, his eyes
unreadable.

“Your hair is so soft,” he said.
I didn’t know what to say. I mean, “thank you” would’ve sounded idiotic in
the circumstances. So I just looked up at him, though it wasn’t easy. His Boost-brown
eyes were mesmerizing. Then his gaze slid and I relaxed a little, only to realize he
was now looking at my mouth.

“I really want to kiss you, you know,” he said, softly. “I’ve been wanting to,
all evening.” He touched the centre of my lower lip gently with one calloused thumb.
“Right here.” But then he said, even though his thumb lingered, “But I’m not going
to, okay?”

“Okay, I whispered back idiotically, really for lack of anything to say.
He shook his head and laughed, sounding half amused, half amazed. “Aren’t
you going to ask me why, Zoya?”

“Not if you don’t want to tell me,” I said, striving for a mature tone even
though my heart was slamming against my ribs. “And listen, if you’re *not* going to
kiss me, do you think you could get into your car and reverse it out of here, quickly.
This is my Gajju Chacha’s parking slot and he get really angsty if anybody else uses
it…” (Chauhan 2008, 193-4)
Nikhil’s dark brooding looks and intense personality hark back to the heroes of the Harlequin novels. He is described by one female fan as a “VPL” or “Violent Passionate Lover” who would “let you flirt with other guys all evening and then … take you home and make violent, passionate love to you and show you who’s the boss” (ibid., 386). Although Zoya smirks at this sentiment, it is exactly this fantasy that underlies the typical romance hero. It is notable here that not only does Nikhil, the presumably sexually experienced man, exercise restraint, but that if he typifies the romance hero, Zoya represents the feisty heroine in a new way. Her nonchalance in the face of his overtures marks her as different from the glamourized feminine heroines of both the Harlequin and Bollywood.

In contrast to the heroines of earlier romances, the chick lit protagonist is sexually experienced. While feminism has long championed the sexual liberation of women, feminist scholars critique the commodification of sexuality and compulsory performance of sexiness young women are incited to today (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Harzewksi 2011). Taylor (2012) argues that public displays of sexuality are integral to representations of single women who are now implicated in what Hillary Radner has called a new “technology of sexiness” (1999, 15-16) in which sexual knowledge and sexual practice are central. Others, however, see in the Anglo-American chick lit protagonists’ enthusiasm for sex a sanctioning of women’s sexual exploration without judgement or taboo (Mabry 2006) as well as a focus on other desires be they for friendship or shoes (Harzewski 2011). Moreover, the expression of sexuality by Indian women, for whom the taboo on premarital sex is still strong, cannot be easily read in the same register as the “compulsory sexuality” of Western women. In fact, studies in the Indian context have shown that romance novels function for young women as “instructional manuals on sexuality” (Parameswaran 2002), particularly in the emotive aspects of sexuality (Puri 1997).
Perhaps it is Damayanthi, the least sophisticated of the protagonists under consideration, who best expresses the experience of middle-class Indian women. Damayanthi attributes her lack of sexual experience to the conservatism of Chennai where “the boys are locked away in boys’ colleges and the girls are sequestered in theirs, and the parents ensure that the twain never meet. In other cities and other countries young persons are losing their virginity as quickly as possible, but here in Chennai you must at least preserve the notion of being pure and untouched till you reach the marital bed” (Subramanian 2010, 8). This is reinforced by her mother, who warns her before she leaves for Mumbai:

Amma: You should not do anything silly before marriage.
LV: You mean – Do not sleep around. Preserve your virginity like a precious gem to be gifted to your lawfully-wedded husband on your wedding night.
Me: Uh-uh (ibid., 62).

That Amma’s strictures are commonplace in middle-class households have been ascertained by a number of studies (Mankekar 1999; Puri 1999). Although she rolls her eyes at her mother, Damayanthi confesses that “it is not as though I am desperate to have a sexual encounter. My imagination, which is usually vivid and conjures up minute details, blurs when it comes to the actual sexual act” which she expects will be “an anticlimax” (Subramanian 2010, 9). Nevertheless, when Damayanthi meets Rahul, who was “movie star good-looking, the kind a girl like me could only dream about and hanker after from a distance” (ibid., 167), she is desperately tempted, and makes a mental flow chart about whether she should sleep with him or not. On one side, in bold, are the words “BECAUSE YOU WILL HAVE A WILD NIGHT OF PASSION AND NOT DIE A VIRGIN”, on the other numerous objections ranging from “because the moment he touches you, you will give into your carnal desires, get pregnant and be ostracized by family and society” to “because you are not wearing sexy, black lingerie, but ugly brown old underwear that will turn off the most ardent suitor” (ibid., 197). In the end, on both occasions on which Damayanthi was poised to have sex for the first
time, she is interrupted by the calls of home – her mother’s voice in her head saying “‘Don’t do anything silly! Don’t do anything silly! Be good. Be good’” (ibid., 198) and the telephone summoning her home due to an emergency. Thus, Damayanthi refrains from sex, but through the novel acquires romantic and sensual experience.

Rather than conforming to traditional taboos on premarital sex, however, Indian chick lit sanctions the sexual desire and experience of the protagonists. Thus, almost at the end of *Almost Single* when Aisha’s friend Misha has decided to marry a childhood friend, they have a discussion about sexual compatibility. Misha insists that she must sleep with her beau before they wed, and Aisha asks her if “he expects you to be a virgin”. Misha’s response is “we haven’t talked about it” and “it’s not important, I’m sure he’s not” leading Aisha to muse: “Sexual compatibility is important, but is it sufficient? These days, it’s like the last bastion to be conquered before one travels down the aisle. A betrothal is a visa to a preconjugal tryst and most people are keen to make that trip which makes me wonder just how many virgin brides there are” (Kala 2007, 273). Aisha’s own sexual status is not explicitly stated, but various conversations in the novel seem to allude to her sexual experience. Analyses of Hindi films of the 1990s (Uberoi 1994; Mankekar 2004) have noted the centrality of the sexual purity of Indian women to the constitution of Indian identity, rooted in the idea that Indianness could be maintained even in the diaspora through the exercise of sexual self-control. In constructing the singleton as a sexually experienced woman, chick lit somewhat casually breaks a defining bastion of Indian feminine identity itself.

Unlike earlier romances, chick lit novels do not dwell excessively on sex or include sex scenes. Chick lit’s coyness about depicting sex, Whelehan (2005) suggests, could be evading depictions of less-than-satisfying sex. I find it more likely that chick lit, tracing its roots to nineteenth-century courtship novels, accurately senses a contemporary appetite for interaction between the sexes beyond sex or for the tension between the sexes before the
actual sexual encounter. Moreover, in the Indian context, chick lit’s lack of open sexual representation also draws on the tradition of Indian film, in which song and dance typically substituted for the sex act (Gopal 2011; Virdi 2003). The spirit of popular Hindi cinema is particularly active in the interactions of Chauhan’s central characters. At a time when kissing and allusions to if not depictions of sex have begun to appear on the Bollywood screen, Chauhan’s novels’ evocation of sexual tension harks back to earlier modes of romantic engagement.

Madhavan’s work stands as an exception here and her frank depictions of sexual awakening and activity among women have earned her some notoriety. However, her writing lacks the worldly-wise enactment of sexuality in chick lit that Harzewksi (2011) has termed “late heterosexuality”. In Arshi’s description of her first sexual experience, sex is an act of perseverance towards the goal of becoming a certain kind of person: “So even though my thighs hurt and I was sore in areas I didn’t know existed in my body, I felt like quite the diva, straight out of Hollywood, talking to the man lying next to me in a slightly husky voice, blowing smoke rings into the air.” (Madhavan 2008, 77) It is notable that Arshi is conscious of herself as being both “surveyor and surveyed” (Berger 1972). By foregrounding her protagonist’s own act of self-surveillance, Madhavan heightens its performativity and thus defamiliarizes it.

Again, in the scene in which Arshi has sex with Kabir, there is a long and performative description:

“But now it seemed as though our bodies were other people’s bodies, completely focused and in sync. There were two slightly awkward moments – one when the maid knocked on the door with the coffee and Kabir yelled through the door for her to leave it outside, and another when he moved away from me and to his cupboard, from where he produced a condom, like magic, and I didn’t know whether to feel insulted that he had one, or really happy that it didn’t have to stop. And then there was some foreplay, to make up for the pause in action. This was sex with someone who knew what he was doing but wasn’t mechanical about it. This was the kind of sex where you’re helpless and writhing and don’t care about anyone or anything, including the volume and nature of the sounds that automatically leave your throat and the way
your lips might twist into a half smile half grimace in the moment when pure, mind-numbing pleasure courses through your body. Yes, we were finally there, and marvellously, I was finally there, for the first time ever. Not even with Cheeto had I felt like this and Kabir knew, and I saw him watching me and waiting and I loved him for it. When he came, he moaned into the side of my neck and I felt pleased that it was me, me, who had reduced him to moaning and I felt protective and full of love and like the first woman in the world discovering sex for the first time” (Madhavan 2008, 242).

This is not the romanticized sex of traditional romances, although this description is haunted by those depictions. If the traditional heroine is “a passive, expectant, trembling creature who feels incomplete without the attentions of the hero” (Snitow 1986, 144), Arshi is active in her pleasure and her articulation of it. Nor is Arshi constructed as seeking to be “re-virginized” through sex with The One (Gill 2007; Taylor 2012). While Madhavan does include the trope of sexual awakening, this act does not signify for Arshi the beginning of the happily-ever-after, but the end. She realizes Kabir “was no more in love with me now than he had ever been. But somehow it was okay” (Madhavan 2008, 242). The sexual awakening then signals her move away from dependence and into newfound confidence. Sex in You Are Here functions in the *feminine écriture* tradition as a form of self-expression and self-discovery, rather than as a commoditized display or a quest for transcendent monogamous love. This is unusual for the genre, though, which focuses more on flirting with a sexual undertone and allusions to sex than sex itself.

**Conflict and Resolution**

The sparkling exchanges between hero and heroine belie a certain wariness on the part of the protagonist that proves an obstacle to romantic closure. Structurally, Radway (1984) proposes thirteen functions which characterize a typical romance novel, but for our purposes, Snitow’s simpler, albeit sexually charged, template will suffice:

1. The man is hard (a walking phallus)
2. The woman likes this hardness
3. But, at the outset, this hardness is too hard. The man has an ideology that is anti-romantic, anti-marriage. In other words, he will not stay around long enough for her to come too.

4. Her final release of sexual feeling depends on his changing his mind, but not too much. He must become softer (safer, less likely to leave altogether) but not too soft. For good sex, he must be hard, but this hardness must be at the service of women (1986, 260).

Snitow’s theory suggests that the novels depict women putting in place the conditions that would enable orgasmic sex to take place: “The shape of the Harlequin sexual fantasy is designed to deal women the winning hand they cannot hold in real life: a man who is romantically interesting – hence distant, even frightening – while at the same time he is willing to capitulate to her needs just enough so she can sleep with him not once but often” (1986, 259). While Snitow’s exclusive focus on sex seems overdetermined, others have more generally argued that the novels seem to latently work out the journey of women learning to trust men, to “convince women that the price of being taken care of does not have to be eternal vigilance” (Modleski 1982, 29).

The novels rehearse latent psychodramas. Coward (1984) reads a regressive pre-adolescent fantasy coded with desire for the father and a displacement of the mother inherent in these novels. Radway, however, reads a desire to “reconstruct the lost intensity of the original mother-daughter bond” (1984, 135). While I am inclined to find Radway’s reasoning more convincing than Coward’s mainly because of the underlying psychological theory it is based on, regardless of which view one subscribes to, it is apparent that the novels have deep psychological dynamics which resonate with unmet needs and anxieties in women’s present lives. However, it has been argued that Freudian psychology’s Eurocentric emphasis on the family triad cannot be generalized to all cultures (Grewal and Kaplan 2001). Kakar (1981), for example, has shown how ties to the mother predominate in India, but what this impact might have on heterosexual romance fantasies for women (Kakar’s analysis seems to focus on male fantasies) remains unclear.
And yet, at the level of romance, the dynamic in Indian chick lit is markedly similar to the one in the typical Western romance. The young women encounter men who seem to be something of an enigma. The inscrutable hero is particularly marked in *Almost Single* and *You Are Here*, while in *Keep The Change*, Damayanthi is distracted by an unsuitable Mr Wikham-type character before the hero softens enough for her to realize his charms. Modleski (1982) suggests that if the Gothic depicts the woman’s movement from love to fear, the Harlequin presents the opposite move, from fear into love. The question that arises in chick lit is “fear of what?”

Chauhan’s novels follow the classic romance formula of introducing conflict between the hero and heroine through misunderstandings, but further polarize the two by making them embody the head/heart, reason/emotion binary, associating the hero with the former and the female protagonist with the latter. The core conflict that prevents the two from being together is not the opposition of family that is typical of commercial Hindi cinema, but the inability of the protagonist to trust the hero. In Zoya’s case, she increasingly becomes paranoid that Nikhil wants a relationship with her only to capitalize on her special powers to enable his team to win, despite the fact that he has resolutely denied believing in luck. Zoya’s insecurity is explained as stemming from having been used by men in the past for their own advantage, but her constant back and forth drags on a tad too long and makes her come across as irrational. Jinni’s suspicion of Zain is more understandable considering he is a political opponent. This “love-hate relationship” – what Zoya terms “Love and Loathing” – is typical of romance novels which “must create some form of conflict to keep the romantic pair apart until the proper moment” (Radway 1984, 65). Thus, Jinni is “torn between two primal urges. To stab him in the eye with the cocktail shaker or to rip off his Deep Purple T-shirt and cover his toned, honey gold chest with fervent kisses” (Chauhan 2010, 220). In both cases, the resolution of the novel is satisfactory on two levels – it provides the reader with the closure of
romantic fulfilment but also solves the other nationalist dilemma encoded into the novel as explained in Chapter 5.

Unlike other chick lit novels in which more than one suitable man is presented and the one the protagonist will end up with is not necessarily clear at the outset, Chauhan’s novels, like the Harlequin romances, present only one possible option. Given the genre, it is clear to the reader who the protagonist will end up with, the question is rather how she will overcome the misunderstandings that come between them. The key emotion here is trust – in both novels, the protagonist has to learn to trust the man in question given the situations they find themselves in. Scholars have noted that traditional romances are characterized by “a moment of collapse through which power relations are reversed” (Jones 1986, 200). Either the man falls ill and finds himself dependent on the woman due to illness or injury, or the woman disappears predicating a realization of his need for her in the hero. Modleski observes that “a great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes, I am convinced, from the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees” (1982, 45). This plot point is absent from Chauhan’s novels and the other chick lit texts analysed. In Battle for Bittora, Jinni realizes the depths of Zain’s feelings for her when it is revealed that he was given evidence that could have ruined her chances in the election but that he chose to withhold. In The Zoya Factor, Zoya realizes that political forces were manipulating both her and Nikhil, and that her role as goddess is to step aside. Both novels then chose practical rather than emotional reasons for their protagonist’s change of heart. Moreover, in traditional romance, the vulnerability of the hero often results in the heroine taking on a nurturing or mothering role (Modleski 1982; Coward 1984). In chick lit, however, the protagonists demonstrate concern for the heroes throughout – when they are not loathing them – but never take on anything resembling a maternal function. As argued earlier, it is exactly the maternal function that they seek to avoid. In fact, none of these young women
profess a fondness for children. Zoya notes, “I don’t dislike kids, but I mostly don’t know what to say to them” (Chauhan 2008, 158) and proves inept when she escorts a little boy to the toilet. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Zoya has warmed to him, just as by the end of *Battle of Bittora* Jinni ends up becoming fond of the precocious little boy who insisted she give him English lessons. However, neither Zoya nor Jinni find themselves in anything resembling a maternal role vis-à-vis the men in their lives.

Apart from the significant absence of this “revenge fantasy”, Chauhan’s novels hark back to an earlier mode in romance writing in which the pleasure of the text is gained from wrangling with sexual difference and a gradual building of trust (Modleski 1982; Radway 1984). Like the romance novels prized by the readers in Radway’s study and the Harlequin novels, these novels end with the union of the romantic pair and for the reader the vicarious promise of a harmonious and fulfilling relationship between the sexes.

However, this resolution is not so easily achieved in the other three chick lit novels under consideration. While these novels, as mentioned above, also rehearse the conventions of the genre in terms of an aloof, powerful hero and an ordinary-looking but feisty heroine, their overarching mood is a profound ambivalence, not simply towards men, but towards marriage as a goal. This is particularly clear in *Almost Single* in which Aisha seems torn between her desire for Karan and her propensity to fall into situations that defer the closure of the piece. Thus, when he finally pops the question, she responds with “I don’t know.” Unlike traditional romantic heroines whose mistrust of men is latent or Western chick lit protagonists who scholars have argued are ambivalent about feminism, Indian chick lit heroines are ambivalent about marriage itself, because they seem to clearly recognize the patriarchal nature of Indian family life that marriage will propel them into. They seem all too aware that marriage will neutralize their privileges of caste and class, and reduce them to their gender and status as the lowest in the pecking order of the Indian patriarchal family.
Thus, in *Almost Single* all the heterosexual married couples are unhappy. In *Keep the Change*, when Damayanthi’s mother points out examples of cousins who are successfully married, Damayanthi counters that said cousin is clinically depressed. The anxiety that the readers of romance novels in Puri’s study (1997) expressed about their futures and the disjuncture between their expectations of romance and the reality they saw around them are made explicit in these novels.

If the single life offered these young women the space to develop a subject position, the unstated but obvious fear is that marriage will slam shut that window of opportunity. This is cogently described in *The Zoya Factor* when Zoya has a vision of what awaits her if she consents to marry one of the suitors her aunt proposed:

I had a sudden vision of Kattu and me at a honeymoon hotel in Goa, him all cocky and expansive in swimming trunks, with a towel hanging around his neck, snapping his fingers at the waiter. And me, with sindoor in my hair, a mangalsutra\(^75\) dangling demurely between my recently-pawed-by-Kattu breasts, modestly encased in a prim salwar kameez, of course, smiling bravely in spite of suffering a raging case of honeymooners’ syndrome a.k.a urinary tract infection. Later, we would live in an apartment with stiff cream curtains that you pull open with a cord, in a gated community in Gurgaon, and make a couple of Kattu-like kids. I would feel them every single meal by hand, like a good mother should. Naturally, I would have to give up my job, start wearing long kurtis to hide my flabby, scarred-stretch-marks tummy, learn to do a million clever things with leftovers and bread crumbs, and would have to ask Kattu for money to buy sanitary napkins every month. In the holidays we would go on long car trips where the kids would drink Mango Frooti and throw up on my lap. We would spend every weekend with our in-laws, including horrible Anita Chachi. The kids would leave home and then bald, pot-bellied Kattu would get diabetes, without losing his appetite for sex. I would have to take his urine samples in warm little jam jars to the doctor every day. Then I would die.” (Chauhan 2008, 132)

The satirical tone allows the reader the catharsis of humour but doesn’t entirely blunt the edge of social critique. Even though the protagonists seek to deflect the danger of such a banal future by selecting their own spouse, it is not entirely convincing that they will be successful. Examples of “love marriages” such as that of Damayanthi’s free-spirited friend

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\(^75\) Mangalsutra: chain women wear as a symbol of their married status
Sumi whose boyfriend’s parents want her to morph into an ideal Bengali daughter-in-law seem to throw up similar problems to those of arranged marriages. This is also the case in You Are Here’s single example of a young married couple. As Arshi drives to a wedding with the couple and their children, she develops a headache: “This was obviously what my future held as well: screaming kids, a distant husband and a memory of once being hot. Either that, or dying alone and unloved. There seemed to be no happy middle path” (Madhavan 2008, 82). Later, the wife Mandy nostalgically looks back on her single days: “My father told me, ‘Beta’ don’t worry about marriage. Go abroad, see the world.’ But I met Dhiraj and I thought this was the life I wanted. My friends... now one is a CEO, one is a lawyer, and they’re all looking for someone to marry. I tell them to enjoy their lives” (ibid., 83). Although Arshi ends this anecdote with the scene of the family reunited and “how they seemed to gain definition from each other”, she also questions how “my we-don’t need-nobody-dude generation” will figure out who they are if men no longer define them (ibid., 85).

Almost Single and Keep the Change end with intimations of heterosexual coupledom, but these are not entirely satisfying. Disillusioned with the corporate workplace, Damayanthi flees home and resolves to accept the proposal of an NRI groom she has not met yet. She is convinced otherwise by CG, not on the grounds of any passionate plea on his behalf, but on the basis that she should pursue her career interests in India. That they may have a romantic future is quietly alluded to when she places his hand over hers. But, the real “settling down” in the novel is related to her career; she eschews the corporate ladder for a socially responsible role in microfinance. In Almost Single, Aisha’s ambivalence towards marriage has her turning down a proposal of marriage from the man she was pursuing throughout the novel. Ironically, it is her married cousin’s endorsement of the single life that provokes a change of heart and she rather abruptly rushes off “to be a bride to the right man” (Kala 2007, 76 Beta: child

76 Beta: child
The novel concludes with a reverse proposal of sorts, with Aisha committing to Karan but she proposes putting off marriage and getting to know one another. More radical is the ending of *You Are Here*, which eschews romantic coupledom for its protagonist. Instead, Arshi decides to focus on her studies and vows that she was done being “one of the victims who thrive on having our minds messed with, our hearts constantly in a drum of adrenalin” (Madhavan 2008, 255). The conventional happy ending in the novel is displaced onto Topsy, who finally rebels against her family’s insistence on an arranged marriage, by choosing to have sex with her Muslim boyfriend. This again is not to be interpreted as a gesture towards marriage because Topsy insists that she does not know what the future holds.

In these novels, the romance genre conventions seem to be a haunting presence that belie the real plot. The novels fulfil the generic demand for a coupled ending but evade the satisfaction that comes from full romantic closure. The real climax comes from elsewhere, from the knowledge that these young women are “settled” although they haven’t “settled down” as their mothers would have them. It is here that the career of the young woman becomes important, because it is this that enables her to not just flee the home and the mother but also to resist closure into a maternal role. Even in *Battle for Bittora*, which has all the elements of a true romance, including satisfying romantic closure, the last word is the woman’s career success.

Scholars note that romance novels ultimately work to reassure women, to assuage their fear and convince them that men can be found who will care for them as they wish to be cared for. The new stipulation seems to be that men demonstrate that they will accept these unconventional women and their desires for autonomy within marriage. Dudovitz observes that even the empowered heroines of Danielle Steele’s novels in the 1980s who moved into male bastions of power sought men who were stronger and more powerful than themselves. The change, however, was that the ideal hero “must understand and support a woman’s non-
traditional behaviour” (1990, 170). The ability to appreciate a strong woman is a characteristic of the hero in Indian chick lit. Moreover, although the “arranged love marriage” in which young people’s romantic choices ultimately are sanctified by parental approval predominate socially and are celebrated in Hindi films (Uberoi 1998), in chick lit, parental approval is never explicitly gained, but assumed. It is the protagonist who has to consent and commit, not her parents.

Conclusion

The endings of the novels indicate that the resolution of the narratives does not necessarily lie in the protagonists’ being satisfactorily coupled. Rather, the “settling” that happens is related to achieving peace with a selfhood that does not involve a choice between tradition and modernity. It is the all-or-nothing traditional that the mothers in the novels are problematically associated with that is rejected. Instead, the protagonists seem to be inching towards a selfhood that is not circumscribed by family but that may autonomously select from different available traditions, a privilege to some extent of their upper-caste, middle-class status, and yet one that not all their peers avail of. This is not to say that this selection process is entirely unmediated by societal or discursive constraints but that the women express the desire for such agency, and to some extent embody it, even as they are constrained by the very caste and class markers that make such agency possible.
Conclusion: Towards a Synthetic Aesthetics

My analysis of the chick lit that emerged in the aftermath of economic liberalization in India has shown that the grounding problematic of the novels is the tradition/modernity binary and that the plots of the novels, rather than solely describing a romantic quest, feature a latent desire to resolve this binary. In Chapter 4, I took inspiration from Nandy’s suggestion that it is the synthesis that provides the way out of binaristic thinking, which I read through the figure of “Mrs Salim Shaikh” in Arundhati Subramanian’s poem, who I suggested embodies a down-to-earth “synthetic self”. However, I was startled while writing the final chapter of this dissertation to come across another poem which appeared in the same collection and that seemed to contradict the ethos of Mrs Salim Shaikh. I reproduce that short poem here:

Poems Matter

It was snobbery perhaps, (or habit)
    to want
    perforation,
to choose cotton, for instance,
with its course asymmetries,
over polyester
or unctuous rayon. But this, I suppose,
is what we were looking for all along –
this weave
that dares to embrace
    air.
this hush of linen, these frayed edges,
these places where thought
runs,
    threadbare
where colours bleed into
something vastly blue
like sky.
these tatters
at peace almost
with the great outrage
of not being around.
It’s taken a long time
to understand
poems matter
because they have holes.
It seems to me that in this poem, Subramanian abandons her elevation of the much-maligned plebian synthetic fabric in favour of cotton, the preferred cloth of the intelligentsia, even if she does us (me) the favour of acknowledging the “snobbery” involved. The reason for the sensitive soul’s preference for cotton, she seems to suggest, is because of its “threadbare” quality, its very ability to breathe, to, in almost Derridean fashion, embrace gaps. When my indignation over this volte-face faded, I realized that these two poems do not negate each other, but highlight exactly the distance that undergirds discussions of chick lit in the larger body of women’s writing – that of its literary quality. If poetry, and by extension art in general, must “have holes”, or to use Cixous’s (1976) terms work “(in) the in-between”, chick lit with its synthetic tightness, its loud crowd-pleasing colour, its simplistic garish appeal must always fall short.

That this seems largely self-evident is indicated in the paucity of attention to chick lit’s literary qualities. One could, as Shari Benstock (2006) has suggested, leave the question of chick lit’s literary merit to the test of time, but that seems to be a cop-out. Aware that the summary dismissal of women’s writing has characterized literary criticism down the ages, Wells, perhaps singularly, does attempt to address the question of chick lit’s aesthetic value. However, her conclusion is not encouraging: “Chick lit amuses and engrosses, but does not richly reimagine in literary form the worlds that inspire it” (2006, 67). Her perusal of chick lit texts shows up a lack of “imaginative use of language, inventive and thought-provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure”, elements that are commonly thought to characterize literature (ibid., 64). “Only in its deployment of humour,” Wells concedes, somewhat grudgingly, “can the best of chick lit stand up favourably to the tradition of women’s writing, and humour – perhaps unfairly, as many have argued – has never been the most valued and respected of literary elements.” (ibid.).
Humour seems like a good place to start. Why humour in chick lit is easily dismissed though satire remains an important literary form when wielded by men is not clear. I would suggest that the humour deployed particularly in *Keep the Change* and *Almost Single* serves to critique dominant social norms that pressure women into marriage even if in so doing they blunt the rage and desperation behind the satire. As several critics have noted, chick lit functions in the realist mode, and yet Damayanthi’s and Aisha’s experience of the “marriage market” is dramatized and satirically critiqued. To take one example, *Keep the Change*, employs the epistolary format to draw attention to the precarious processes of self-formation and particularly the pressure to conform to neoliberal standards of success, both in career and romance. Tracing the origins of the adoption of the diary form by women in the nineteenth century, Catherine Delafield (2009) notes that as a private and coded domestic document, the diary was seen as a suitable form for women that offered limited possibilities of self-expression. As it is taken up by Subramanian in *Keep the Change*, the diary turns confessional under the cover of fiction, allowing the writer to articulate thoughts that cannot easily be publicly voiced.

In writing to her imaginary correspondent, Victoria, significantly an English woman who in imagination leads a more glamorous and liberated life, Damayanthi presents not only her dissatisfaction with her own bland and manless existence but also a portrait of the life of a single middle-class Indian woman of marriageable age. For example, she describes an encounter with a “boy” who was brought to her house to “see” her:

“I want my wife to be adjusting well with my parents,” the boy declared when we were sent to a corner to “get to know each other.” He had this irritating habit of popping out his tongue and licking his lips after every sentence.
LV: “Adjust? Like I adjust my sari pleats with three sharp safety pins?”
“Oh!” I said, a sort of questioning, sarcastic “oh” which he seemed to take as an assent to his statement.
“I hope you are not planning to be employed after marriage?” he continued.
LV: “If I do give up my dead-end, boring job, it is not going to be for another
dead-end, boring job as your cheap house-keeper.”
I said, “Yes, I am.” (Subramanian 2010, 25-26).

Damayanthi’s critique of the patriarchy implicit in the arranged marriage system is made
trough a complex system of voices within voices:

1. The voice of Damayanthi, the narrator, writing to Victoria (who is actually her
   imaginary more glamorous alter-ego)

2. The voice of Damayanthi in the encounter with “the boy”. This is the polite “good
   Indian woman” voice, though it gets increasingly rebellious as the narrative advances.

3. Her “little voice” (LV) – the voice in her head that provides a steady stream of
   subversive commentary.

Another strategy is when she goes off into “fantasy”, indicated in the text through the use of
italics.

*Vision of myself with a mad gleam in my eyes, a la Norman Bates in the last scene of
Psycho, demonic laughter behind wild Medusa hair. I gaze at the boy, my eyes turn a
glittering red and two fangs emerge from my mouth. Boy and parents scoot away,
terrified...* (Subramanian 2010, 24).

It is these textual devices that make me question the verdict on chick lit as seamlessly
neoliberal or patriarchal. *Keep the Change* employs the trope of the interior monologue to
enable its protagonist to envision a variety of non-traditional futures and narratives of self
while critiquing the status quo. Wells notes that in its “interest in heroines’ emotional
maturation and the role of humiliation in that process, chick lit owes a direct debt to Frances
Burney and Jane Austen, by way of the Hollywood screwball comedies that were influenced
by those writers” (2006, 53). Indian chick lit differentiates itself from these novels not only in
its unwillingness to punish the heroine for her flaws, but also in its more explicit questioning
of the status quo.
In *Almost Single*, Aisha’s resistance to the conventional expectations of Indian women are evident not only in her lifestyle but also her conversations with her mother and her observations of the arranged “marriage market” and the dating game she and her friends must partake of. For example, in the following paragraph, her tone is parodic:

In all fairness, life has not been particularly kind to my mum. First there is me, and then there is my dog. My mother hates dogs, but bowing to familial pressure, she ended up housing one. Julian is a St. Bernard, huge, furry and very cute… My mum agreed to keep him with the aim of mating him for puppies. One St. Bernard pup can go for as much as twenty-five thousand rupees. Only, it turns out that Julian just can’t get it up, so there is no way he is going to earn his keep and spawn his own li’l cottage industry. Between impotent dog and unmarried daughter, Mamma Bhatia’s social future is sealed. If she is not dodging the “when is your daughter getting married” question, it’s “why don’t you mate your dog, he’d have such cute puppies?” As though this round of questioning isn’t enough, in a cruel twist of irony, the dog gets more proposals than I do. When you are as socially active as my mother, it’s a tight-rope walk every day. (Kala 2007, 100)

Aisha thus makes a tongue-in-cheek comparison between her own situation as an unmarried woman and that of a prized animal reared to be bred. Rather than explicitly stating the “exchange of women” (Rubin 1990), she insinuates it while professing sympathy for the other women – the mothers – involved in the process.

While satire on the patriarchal organization of society is less direct in Chauhan’s work, as I have discussed in Chapter 5, she makes inventive use of Hinglish, the popular lexicon among the urban middle classes, to lend both authenticity and humour to her novels. Although this might be an audacious claim to make, Chauhan’s chutnification of the language may be on par with literary greats such as Salman Rushdie, particularly because she performs her synthesis in a completely accessible register. Chauhan’s transformation of the generic conventions of chick lit to suit the Indian reading palate, her marrying of contemporary events with timeless romantic tropes and of the quotidian with the absurd, and her comic timing are admirable achievements that should be given their due. Although the
politics of her novels fall short in the ultimate analysis, this should not detract from her literary accomplishments.

Confessional Interior Monologues

Apart from humour, as indicated in *Keep the Change, Almost Single, The Zoya Factor and Battle for Bittora*, the interior monologue functions as a way of women to express their rebellion against oppressive social norms. For example, in *You Are Here*, Madhavan employs a stream-of-consciousness style to confessional effect. In its tendency to confession, the novel allies itself with the women’s movement which Rita Felski (1998) observes played a role in “‘personalizing’ the literary text” by foregrounding the most personal and intimate details of the author’s life which are then tied to experiences that bind women. That the novel forms part of a confessional enterprise is indicated from its first page when Arshi, explaining the impulse behind writing, notes “the words are collecting at the tips of my fingers and if I don’t shake them out over the keyboard they could go backwards and form word clots around my heart” (Madhavan 2008, 1). In the first chapter, Arshi moves from stating the impetus for telling her story to a number of philosophical musings on life to introducing the two major issues she faces – predictably her boyfriend (or lack thereof) and her career – to her own indecision, to a recipe for Potato Pickle Surprise, to her family. The episodic narrative continues throughout the novel, which seems to proceed plotlessly. In so doing, the novel refuses a unified vision of selfhood, by configuring Arshi as a whimsical assemblage of disparate female-centered experiences filtered through memory.

Broadly, chick lit partakes of the “comedy of manners” tradition, which “focusses on society and culture, frequently satirically, with narrators and characters often reader-participants of class hierarchies, their maintenance and their penetration” (Harzewksi 2011). Chick lit’s focus on the marriage plot ties it to the romance genre and although novels of manners may end in tragedy or death, they usually tend to be comedic in tone. Kathleen
Rowe (1995) points to the potential comedy holds of both rejuvenating and troubling society, though inherent to it is also a fear of what might happen if the liberation of oppressed groups comes to pass. Woman’s rebellion in romantic comedy is “tolerated because it is short-lived and serves the hero’s interests; the unruly bride is ultimately disciplined” (Virdi 2003, 83). While it is true that the very generic conventions foreclose the possibility of deeper rebellion, I hope I have demonstrated in Chapter 6 that not all chick lit texts convincingly perform this foreclosure.

Further, I would add that while chick lit texts remain heterosexual narratives, Indian chick lit texts have brought attention to different sexualities. As pointed out earlier, in Almost Single, a significant amount of space is dedicated to the gay couple, Nick and Rick, who are valorised for their domestic harmony. Although there are problems with Kala’s mirroring of the heterosexual married state in the gay relationship, given its date of publication, the novel remains an important intervention in popular culture representations of gay people in India. More significantly, writers are now including representations of lesbian characters and relationships in Indian chick lit, rare even in the genre in the West, with Madhavan’s Cold Feet (2012) and Itisha Peerbhoy’s Half Arranged (2014) being examples. Again, these representations may vary in complexity, but they are moves towards normalizing gay relationships at least in the middle-class milieu.

Perhaps these novelists do not boast the literary finesse of Dickens or Austen, but they must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. While Wells (2006) has noted that chick lit is compelled to adapt literary techniques to meet the genre’s demand for entertaining readers, Whelehan has argued that the simple language of the women-centred consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s “be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to expose those unwritten truths of women’s contemporary lives rather than an inability to cope with more ‘sophisticated’ and fashionable literary styles” (2005, 63). Thus, Whelehan seems to suggest that the feminist
goals of wider dissemination might conflict with artistic demands for literary experimentation. If theorists such as Cixous (1976) and Kristeva (1985) call for women’s writing that troubles dominant conceptions, including those of gender, through experimentation, the inaccessibility of such writing to the majority of women might detract from its effectiveness. Surely, there is a place for both the high literary and experimental as well as the simpler, popular forms in women’s writing, and that the inability of the latter to effect a total revolution should not efface all of its contributions or merits.

**Reading Readers**

Since the 1980s, the impact of popular forms of women’s writing such as the romance has been examined through reader response studies. Studies of romance reading have noted that affectively the novels work on female readers in different ways. They recognize women’s unmet emotional needs and chart a journey towards their fulfilment. Through the journey, the reader experiences with the protagonist frustration triggered by obstacles and misjudgements (Coward 1984). The end, however, must reassure the reader that she is safe with the hero, that her needs will be met, “soothing ambivalence” (Snitow 1986) and leaving her hopeful (Modleski 1982; Coward 1984; Radway 1984). The novels thus help readers cope with a less-than-satisfying reality, but do not necessarily provoke them to work towards changing it. Reading itself becomes the resistance but does not necessarily bring about material changes or collective action. Moreover, Modleski (1982) points out that the novels provoke an inbuilt addiction. Because the third-person narration, which allows identification, also has the reader surveying herself with an internalized male gaze, she emerges from the novel feeling more visible and guilty. Puri (1997) adds that apart from the formal structure of the novels, in the Indian context, the disjuncture between the setting of the novels and the context in which they are read would bring to the surface anxieties in young readers about their own futures.
All these studies conclude that in the end, the novels may effect changes in women’s lives at the individual level, but they do not prompt collective action and in fact may become self-referential exercises with women reaching for the next novel instead of being provoked to any actual rebellion in their daily lives. Chick lit is more explicit in its critique of the status quo, and it would be interesting to see what the impact on readers might be. Conducting a reader response study was beyond the scope of this dissertation, as I chose to focus on textual analysis, but I believe this might be a fruitful area for further research.

Future directions

As noted in the Introduction, the boom of commercial publishing in India was fuelled by the stupendous success of the novels of Chetan Bhagat, which dealt with life on college campuses and call centres in addition to cross-cultural romance. Bhagat has been followed by a stream of male star authors such as Durjoy Dutta, Ravinder Kapoor and Amish Tripathi, some of whom self-published their novels or worked with lesser-known presses and who boast thousands of fans on Facebook. By 2015, chick lit seemed to have run its course, with few exciting new novelists and older novelists branching off into other areas such as detective fiction (Swati Kaushal), young adult literature and mythological fiction (Madhavan) although Chauhan has continued to be extremely successful. Apart from Chauhan and Madhavan, few chick lit writers went on to write a second novel in the genre at least. While Bhagat and other male writers such as Vikas Swarup have had their novels adapted into films, this has not happened for chick lit. The Zoya Factor was reportedly optioned by film star Shah Rukh Khan’s Red Chilies Entertainment, but there has been no word on the prospective film since then. The adaptation of Chauhan’s Those Pricey Thakkur Girls into a Hindi serial was disappointing. Why chick lit texts have not become the mass media phenomenon that the books written by male authors have bears some thinking about, but it is possible that these stories of female self-fashioning and social critique were not easily taken
up by commercial cinema which has only recently begun making films with strong female
leads. More importantly, a comparative study of the male coming-of-age and romance
narratives with chick lit in the Indian context would be a fruitful direction for further
exploration.

As mentioned earlier, chick lit has blossomed in post-liberalization economies around
the world. However, most of the in-depth studies and monographs on the genre remain
confined to Anglo-American chick lit, with so-called ‘ethnic’ chick lit relegated to a chapter,
often taking the Western form as a point of comparison. This study has been an attempt to
redress that imbalance by focusing on Indian chick lit in depth and on its own terms. Given
that the origins of the genre lie in the Western world, comparisons to what are widely
considered founding texts such as Bridget Jones’s Diary and Sex and the City are inevitable
and in fact warranted. The relationship between the emergence of the genre and the economic
environment elucidated in this thesis makes it an interesting case for comparative studies of
the development of female subjectivities. A fruitful direction for further research, however,
would be to compare Indian chick lit with chick lit produced in other post-liberalization
economies such as China, Indonesia or even the former Soviet nations.

**Imagining the Synthentic**

In the Introduction to this dissertation, I charted the rise of chick lit, its reception and
the scholarly analysis of the genre through the frame of postfeminism. I chose, however, to
sideline the lens of postfeminism – even as I engaged with its critiques of neoliberalism’s
impact on young women’s self-construction – in favour of situating chick lit in the Indian
color, particularly the aftermath of the liberalization of the Indian economy in which these
novels emerged in the country. Moreover, I deferred consideration of the genre’s romance
narrative. As a result of these two analytical choices, I was able to highlight the relationship
between the emergence of chick lit and India’s post-liberalization economic reforms, which
in turn made evident that the struggle in chick lit was both old and new, and possibly unexpected.

By focusing on the relationship between mothers and daughters as a site of contestation in the novels, rather than on the interaction between the protagonist and her love interest, I was able to show that the tradition/modernity dyad grounds the plot of the novels. On the one hand, at a time of transition, the young women in chick lit were subject to an incitement to embody tradition, a move that is at least as old as the nineteenth-century nationalist public/private configuration. On the other hand, the young women marked a departure from the trope of “balance” that had characterized the New Indian Woman of the first decade of economic liberalization in the 1990s. I demonstrated through an analysis of the functioning of food, fashion and the body how, while chick lit protagonists did not completely eschew tradition and indeed in some cases reclaimed it, they did not commit to preserving an Indian “inner core”. Rather, they seem to be insisting on the right to make inconsistent choices, to embody the Indian and the global at different junctures that suited them, to mix-and-match tradition and modernity as they did with their clothing. The result of this blending that combines older forms of culture with new iterations based partly on the whims of the individual woman, in this case the protagonist of the novel, and partly on the constraints of the situation in which she finds herself, I termed “synthetic selfhood”. It is a selfhood that, as in the case of Mrs Salim Shaikh’s sari in Arundhati Subramaniam’s poem, might be both useful and beautiful even as it may be dismissed for being inauthentic. Further, I showed how the “synthetic” might also be applied to the form of the Indian chick lit novel, which is a Western popular culture import that was infused with Indian flavour, thematically, linguistically, and stylistically. The novels both critique the patriarchal and neoliberal ideologies pervasive in post-economic liberalization India and chart the struggles of women negotiating this terrain imaginatively.
The single woman has long been a figure “around whom broader cultural fears about feminism and about women’s power and independence have always coalesced” (Taylor 2012, 2), evident in attacks on spinsters in England to the heated debate on the question of widow remarriage in India in the nineteenth century. Inherent in singleness is the potential to disrupt the phallogocentric order. I do not claim that chick lit has the power to rouse women to collective action or to offer a direct riposte to patriarchy but it is possible that the novels allow women to process their anger at the pressures they face to live up to ideals of Indian womanhood, to feel solidarity with other women, albeit largely within their own class milieu, to fantasize about rebellion and finally to effect resolutions to the tradition/modernity dichotomy that are not inevitably conservative. I believe that the “synthetic self” in Indian chick lit novels offers a more liberatory model than earlier iterations of the New Indian Woman because of its refusal to prioritize either end of the binary or to demonstrate consistency. Although her co-option into capitalism undermines some of her revolutionary potential, the singleton in Indian chick lit carries with her the traces of this disruptive potential and even openly articulates it in the novels through social critique only thinly veiled by humour. Even as it often bends to the generic conventions that demand a “happy ending”, chick lit points to other kinds of happiness – career satisfaction, strong friendships and the comforts of home. In highlighting and then refusing the tradition/modernity binary, Indian chick lit leaves cracks open through which other futures and other selves can be imagined.
Notes to Introduction

Dudovitz in her study of bestsellers by female writers notes that the highly stylized image of a woman on the cover signals to the reader that the novel deals with more than a love story, that it is “also about the life of a modern woman. The absence of a man towering over her re-emphasizes that the story the reader is about to read is that of the heroine’s struggle for self-identity or success” (1990, 39). The cover art of the typical Anglo-American chick lit novel not only makes a gendered address to an exclusively female audience (Gill 2007, 234), but also marks a divergence from earlier romance genres such as the Mills & Boon/Harlequin by foregrounding the singular subjectivity of the female protagonist. Initially, Indian chick lit novels offered more varied cover art than the staple Western fare of a slender woman or strappy sandal. For example, the cover of Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan’s first novel You Are Here (2008) depicted her protagonist’s life as a transport route map but later editions featured a woman smoking a cigarette and a woman wearing a beret and quirky sunglasses. Anuja Chauhan’s first novel The Zoya Factor (2008) had a cricket bat set against a heart and red roses on the cover and her second novel Battle for Bittora (2010) featured a heart protected with armoury and the flags of two opposing political parties sticking out of it but her later novels featured covers with single women often with their faces not in the frame. The initial cover art seems to suggest that the novels were not strictly marketed for women, but that it was later decided that they could be more successfully sold via a gendered form of cover art.

Notes to Chapter 1

A complete genealogy of women’s writing in India has been laid out in Tharu and Lalitha’s rich genealogy Women Writing in India (1993), in which they present a diverse range of writing by women.

Kaviraj (2010) intimates that the separation of spheres was assisted by Orientalist discourse itself which posited Indian culture as ineluctably alien and thus impossible for the colonizers to entirely manage. Thus, Kaviraj argues, the colonizers restricted themselves to the “political” sphere opening the space for the nationalists to claim hegemony over the “private”.

Notes to Chapter 2

The 2011-12 round of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) defined the middle class as those belonging to families with an annual income of Rs 88,000 (US$1,365) to Rs 150,000 (US$2,328) (Rukmini 2016). However, Credit Suisse’s Global Wealth Report defined the middle class as those with an estimated value of wealth more than or equal to US$13,662 (Rs 737,748) (Salve 2015). It is important to note that the middle class as thus defined in India does not necessarily compare to the middle class in the developed world; a World Bank study which used consumption as the indicator found that “India’s middle class lives barely or not far above India’s poverty line, and below international poverty lines, especially in the rural areas” (World Bank 2011, 3).

Caste is an “ascribed form of stratification” (Vaid 2014) which, according to Beteille, is “characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system” (1965, 46). Caste can be thought of as either varna or jati. Varna refers to the division of society into four
groups derived from Hindu scripture: the Brahmins (priests and doctors), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (businessmen), and Shudras (artisans and manual labourers). Lying outside this system are the “untouchables” who today call themselves Dalit, and who are associated with activities that are considered ritually polluting by higher castes (Vaid 2014). However, in reality rather than a four-fold hierarchy, there are many sub-castes or jatis whose relationship to each other differs by region (ibid.). Moreover, Jodhka (2016) has argued that the caste system be thought of as a relationship of power and status that is not unique to India or forever unchanging.

vi Oza (2006) suggests that the BJP’s advocacy of the Ram Janmabhoomi issue was to distract attention from its support for the implementation of the Mandal Commission report. For other factors linked to the rise of Hindu nationalism, see Rajagopal (2001b).

vii Munshi cites a series of Bollywood films that represent this trend: “Karishma Kapoor has a perfectly sculpted body and wears designer togs, but tears up divorce papers in Raja Hindustani (King Indian); Mahima Kapoor may have reached Las Vegas but refuses to sleep with fiancé Apoorva Agnihotri till they are married in Pardes (Foreign Country); the Oxford-educated Rani Mukherjee returns in mini skirts and can pluck the strings of a guitar, but can equally well sing Om Jai Jagdeesh Hare (a devotional hymn) in Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (A Little Something Happens)” (2001, 90).

viii Notably, in 2011, when Priya: In Incredible Indyaa, a sequel to Paro, was released, it barely caused a ripple.

ix The contrast between tradition and modernity in the Indian context might be seen as a contest over the philosophical leanings of Gandhi and Nehru, both of whom focused on the individual but in radically different manners hinging on their attitudes to modernity. Gandhi alleged that European modernity “turned the abandonment of restraint itself into the human life-ideal” which then requires individuals to be subject to the external control of the state rather than internal self-restraint or Swaraj (Kaviraj 2005, 286). In contrast to Gandhi’s Swaraj or the self-restrained individual who would need minimal state intervention, Nehru “had a vivid and thoroughly modernist political imagination based on the conception of an elective self, of an economically atomistic individual who would go out in a life of work in an open economy in which individuals could choose their occupation and emerge from the crippling continuity of hereditary occupations, and a democratic state which would confer on its citizens the right to act in a participatory public sphere” (ibid., 288). It was Nehru’s vision that dominated post-Independent India and that was internalized by the middle class although the Gandhian critique of European modernity as idolizing individualistic materialism lingers on.

Notes to Chapter 3

x Sita: The wife of the god Ram, prince of the kingdom of Ayodhya, the central character of the epic Ramayana. When Ram is exiled by his father, Sita goes with him and his brother Lakshmana into the forest where her abduction by the demon king Ravana provokes a war with Ravana’s kingdom. (Pauwels 2004)

xi Savitri: The epic Mahabharata recounts the story of the daughter of the solar deity Savitr who married Satyavan, a man destined to die. When the god of death, Yama, came to claim
her husband, Savitri refused to let him go, and followed Yama into the underworld where she manages to outwit him and secure her husband’s life. (Bose 2004)

xii Sati: The consort of the ascetic god Shiva is insulted when her father organizes a ritual but does not invite her husband. When her father insults her husband in front of his guests, a furious Sati immolates herself in sacrificial fire. (Das 1981)

xiii In contrast to Sita, Draupadi, arguably Sita’s counterpart in the Mahabharata, is rarely touted as a role model (Mankekar 1999). Rather, Draupadi functions as a conduit for women’s rage and a symbol of her vulnerability.

xiv A series of films in the 1950s, most prominently Raj Kapoor’s Awaara (Vagabond, 1951), and Yash Chopra’s Deewar (Wall, 1975) and Trishul (Trident 1978), depict sons coming to the rescue of their mothers.

Notes to Chapter 4

xv Appadurai observes that the chronicling of food traditions is a departure from from the Brahmanical indifference to the “textualisation of the culinary realm” except with regards to its medical and moral importance (1988, 5).

xvi Sandhu notes that the film “fetishizes Western high street, luxury, and high-fashion brands that are now accessible to urban, elite consumers within India, it also visually constructs an ideal image of Indian cosmopolitanism that is capable of making discerning choices from a plethora of brands and is able to mix and match Indian with Western, and new trends with vintage finds to create a unique look” (2015, 114).

xvii While long hair is symbolic of “good Indian womanhood”, loose flowing locks signal sexual wantonness. For example, Mankekar has noted how the rakshasis (demonesses) in the televised Ramayana were “depicted as sexually aggressive, physically strong, dark complexioned, and attired in feathers and beads. With their loose, flowing hair, the rakshasis look wild, masculine, and barbaric” (1999, 176).

xviii Rohit Bal, the enfant terrible of Indian fashion is known both for his flamboyant homosexuality but also his coveted muslin anarkalis (Vasudev 2012, 120). Vasudev also highlights the Swarovski epidemic in Indian fashion, alleging that the crystals have “usurped our embroideries and upstaged real, gold zari to become a metaphor. It stands for bling-at-large; a subculture in our style state” (ibid.).

Notes to Chapter 5

xx Superheroes are a latent theme in the novel, which opens with Jinni and her colleague and friend Rumi discussing the sexual predilection of superheroes. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed that Jinni always harboured dreams of being a superhero and alleviating the suffering of the poor and deprived masses of Indians.

xx Sunder Rajan (2000), in particular has highlighted how the more subversive goddesses worshipped by the lower castes are often ignored in discussions of Indian goddesses, and moreover, that goddess iconography has been co-opted by the patriarchal and nationalistic
Hindu right wing with violent consequences. Pintchman (2000) notes that “in Brahmanical environments, the most beneficent Hindu goddesses – Lakshmi, for example – tend to be portrayed as married, sexually controlled, and subservient to their husbands; more ambivalent and potentially destructive goddesses – Kali, for example – tend to be sexually freer, and when associated with a male they are less likely to easily submit to masculine authority”. The power of the female in these mainstream goddess narratives, Hiltbeitel and Erndl observe is “not agency but rather, potentiality”, “not power to do but power to be tapped [by males]” (2000, 19).

Although cricket did not start out as a nationalistic pursuit, it became one ironically, Appadurai contends, because “India” had to be invented so that the touring English team had a viable opponent (ibid., 98-9). Majumdar (2002) on the other hand argues that cricket when it was adopted by Indians did have nationalist undertones quite early on, which intensified in the post-Mutiny period. Cricket in the colonies took on the function of proxy battles to redress past and present grievances, with cricketers playing “representative roles” in the restoration of national pride (James 1963, 99). Nalin Mehta (2009) has shown how the rise of cricket in the Indian consciousness to its status is the unofficial national sport (supplanting the official national sport of hockey) was tied up with the development of television – India’s serendipitous win in the 1983 World Cup, its first ever, coincided with the introduction of colour television and the rise in ownership of private TV sets, and the sport was developed in tandem with its televisual properties.

Notes to Chapter 6

Sudhir Kakkar (1990) has pointed to three kinds of heroes in commercial Hindi film: The “Majnun” type who tends to be extremely emotional typified by the character of Devdas; the “Krishna” type who forces the woman to reckon with her own sexual desire typified in the roles played by the actor Jeetendra; and the “Karna” type based on the doomed but heroic figure in the Mahabharata. Indian chick lit draws on none of these models and I would suggest takes its cues from the Western romance genre.
Appendix 1: Mothers of Chick Lit

Romance Writers of America defines the romance as having a “central love story and an emotionally satisfying ending”. It is telling that chick lit does not figure among the subgenres included on its website, though arguably chick lit could fall under “contemporary romances” which are defined as “romance novels that are set from 1950 to the present that focus primarily on the romantic relationship”. While a romantic relationship always figures in chick lit, it is debatable whether the primary focus of chick lit novels is that relationship, and discussions with readers highlight this ambivalence (“Romance Subgenres” 2015). According to Goodreads.com, “Chick lit is genre fiction which addresses issues of modern womanhood, often humorously and lightheartedly. Although it sometimes includes romantic elements, chick lit is generally not considered a direct subcategory of the romance novel genre, because the heroine’s relationship with her family or friends is often just as important as her romantic relationships” (“Chick Lit Books” 2015). However, since chick lit almost never exists without a romantic relationship as an essential feature of the plotline and because the novels typically end with the resolution of a romantic dilemma, most often a happily-ever-after pairing, I would argue that chick lit is indeed a sub-genre of romance, but possibly one that requires its own category.

The Romance

The term “romance” has been applied to variety of fictional forms, and cannot be easily defined as it has meant different things at different historical periods (Sage, Greer, and Showalter 1999). Romance in its earliest form initially appeared as a development of classical mythology. Margaret Williamson (1986) argues that Greek romance evolved as a popular alternative to the major genres of Ancient Greece. It was, Jean Radford says, “a non-mimetic prose narrative focussing on emotion” that emerged out of the split between public and private worlds and reflected the subjectivity of the Greek polis (Radford 1986, 8).
Romance emerged as a stable genre in twelfth-century France in the form of quest narratives whose ideological aim was to “consolidate positions of privilege for the male aristocracy and to console younger sons for the economic loss entailed by primogeniture” (Sage, Greer, and Showalter 1999). The genre in its French mode emphasizes plot over character development and lacks clear causal development, often resorting to deus ex machina resolutions (Harzewski 2011, 27-28).

Northrop Frye suggests that romance has always been connected to the popular, as opposed to tragedy which is associated with high culture, and hence romance is particularly vulnerable to cultural devaluation in societies in which Platonic/Christian values demand that serious literature portray higher truths. Frye sees romance coming to the fore in transitional stages, providing a toolbox of devices from which new formal developments can emerge and pointing to new literary developments (1976, 28). The devaluing of romance as a feminine form of fiction began in the nineteenth century, as the realist novel became the hegemonic literary form (Radford 1986, 12). Ann Rosalind Jones notes that until the eighteenth-century romance was written and read by aristocrats of both sexes, and has only recently become aimed exclusively at women (1986). Rather than a static ideological form, romance can be seen as inherently parodic. Frye argues that a number of eighteenth-century realist novels were parodies of earlier novels: Don Quixote (Cervantes 1605, 1616), marked the end of one kind of fiction and the birth of another, followed by Joseph Andrews (Fielding 1742) which parodied Pamela (Richardson 1740), and Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1817) which parodied the gothic romance (Frye 1976, 39). Harzewski (2011) suggests that this parodic element of the romance genre is also present in chick lit, which parodies earlier literary forms.

Moreover, chick lit today can trace two of its generic conventions to the early history of romance – the bildungsroman and the picaresque. The bildungsroman or “novel of growth” describes the protagonist’s personal development and maturation where he/she
learns to balance social and individual roles (Childs and Fowler 2006). The picaresque novel features the episodic adventures of a low-born anti-hero or picaro (ibid.). Some of the earliest prose novels ever written incorporated the quest element of the romance by personalizing it as the protagonist’s journey towards self-realization – the result was the bildungsroman. Moreover, in many eighteenth-century bildungsroman novels, such as Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* (1749), the protagonists’ personal growth and maturity come through a series of adventures roughly modelled on those of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. These novels reflected what historians have referred to as a growing “affective individualism” influenced by Puritanism and capitalism, whereby by the eighteenth century “a person had come to be viewed primarily as the owner of her- or himself” (Green 1991, 1). Harzewski proposes that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* “parodies the unilinear progress characteristic of the heroes and heroines of the traditional bildungsroman” (2011, 62) and that in their first-person autobiographical voice, episodic structure, urban setting, and approximate realism chick lit novels bears resemblance to the picaresque: “It can be suggested that the chick lit heroine, with her sometimes upfront gold digging and sexual carousing, is a kind of prostitute picara made safe and acceptable in an unapologetically materialistic age” (ibid., 39).

**The Courtship Novel**

The form that chick lit bears the closest resemblance to, however, is the courtship novel of the nineteenth century. Nancy Armstrong (1987) has argued that what she terms “domestic fiction” that emerged in the eighteenth century and featured female protagonists – from Richardson’s *Pamela* and Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* to the novels of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters – pioneered the emergence of a new consciousness that centred the aspirations and values of the middle class. These novels offered the first representations of a model for valuing an individual in terms of their qualities of mind rather than their fortune or status in society and that using women rather than men in these representations served as a way to
consolidate middle-class power without directly challenging aristocratic authority. Armstrong says: “These stories of courtship and marriage offered their readers a way of indulging, with a kind of impunity, in fantasies of political power that were the more acceptable because they were played out within a domestic framework where legitimate monogamy – and thus the subordination of female to male – would ultimately be affirmed” (ibid., 29). Contrary to what is now standard feminist theory that woman developed as the other of man, Armstrong performs an inversion that suggests that “a modern, gendered form of subjectivity developed first as a feminine discourse in certain literature for women before it provided the semiotic of nineteenth-century poetry and psychological theory” (ibid., 14). Thus, following Foucault’s proposition of the discursive construction of the self, Armstrong makes the audacious claim that “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman” (ibid., 8). Armstrong’s argument on the use of female protagonists to propose and popularize new subjectivities should be kept in mind when reading the emergence of the single woman in chick lit.

More obviously, several chick lit novels take their cue from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and thus attempt to elevate their literary pedigree (Wells 2006). *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is seminal in this regard in making a number of deliberate inter-textual parallels with *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen’s writing is the culmination of what Green (1991) calls “the courtship novel”, which flourished between 1740 and 1820 as a result of a growing emphasis on companionate marriage, whereby a woman was encouraged to choose her own spouse based on love. Green contends that two important factors that shaped the courtship novel’s emergence were “the broader social imperative to legitimize women’s self-actualization as affective individuals” and as a supplement to the two other textual forms involved in the redefinition of women’s social roles – conduct books and periodicals (ibid., 4). The courtship novel focussed on the brief period of autonomy between a woman’s coming out and her marriage. It described her entrance into society, the ensuing challenges, her
courtship and finally, her choice of partner. Green writes: “Thematically, it probed, from a woman’s point of view, the emotional difficulties of moving towards affective individualisation and companionate marriage despite the regressive effects of female role definition” and thus fostered “heightened awareness of sexual politics” (ibid., 2-3). The novels feminized the genre by making the woman the focus of the narrative, brought readers into the domestic sphere and appealed to the identification of their (female) readers, did not include prolonged scenes of sexual pursuit, and provided instructions on women’s proper conduct. In these novels, women “mythologized the new reality for themselves” and represented women’s experience of love (ibid.,15).

The similarities between the courtship novel and chick lit, which deals with a similar period in the woman’s life during a transitional moment in history, are striking. Harzewski argues that chick lit emerged as a response to upheavals in marriage, education of women, increased first age of marriage and the emergence of a singles culture (2011, 72). Both the courtship novel and chick lit use a romantic plot as the ground for reflecting deeper social transformations.

**The Harlequin**

If chick lit mirrors the script of and acknowledges its debt to the eighteenth-century courtship novels, its most cited predecessor is the Harlequin romance series that emerged in the 1970s in the wake of second-wave feminism. The Harlequin offered, according to Ann Barr Snitow (1983), an archetypal, fixed image of the exchange between men and women as well as a counterpoint to a shifting and confusing social reality. Harzewski terms chick lit “a postfeminist alternative to the Harlequin” and “a partial parody of Harlequin romance modifying the latter through greater realism and a different representation of the hero” (2011, 26).
The Harlequin novel is a romance in serial form published by the Canada-based Harlequin Enterprises Limited. The company, which was founded in 1949 and published a range of books, had a turning point in 1957 when it acquired the rights to the novels published by British romance publisher Mills & Boon. Harlequin Mills & Boon books are sold in over 25 languages in over 100 countries (“About Harlequin India” 2015), and are immensely popular among Indian middle-class women. While

A Harlequin typically involves a man and woman falling in love and overcoming obstacles, including their own dispositions towards each other. The novels feature young working sexually inexperienced women who are nevertheless outspoken and not easily daunted by the rich, good-looking hero’s sexual advances. The encounter between the sexes is marked by sexual tension (Puri 1997, 437), which is finally resolved in a happy pairing. Puri says: “Gender-specific and symbiotic relationships are affirmed as attractive, morally upstanding, ‘good’ middle-class women find rich, protective, and possessive husbands. On the other hand, arrogant, dominant and ‘successful’ men are eventually fulfilled and gentled as they come to depend on the nurture and warmth of the heroines” (1997, 437). Harzewski notes that the novels are in the *amour courtis* or courtly love tradition in which romantic love is “an ennobling, transcendent force” that functions in a universe in which the good are rewarded with love and the promise of lasting happiness (2011, 26). Jones reads in the Harlequin the clash between “feminism as emergent ideology and romance as residual genre” (1986, 204) whereby, just as recent critics have claimed of chick lit, “certain positions put forward by feminism are taken for granted, along with the economic and ideological benefits it has brought many women, while the movement itself is perceived as alien, threatening and excessive” (ibid., 201).

Harzewski notes that while the Harlequin retains the quest plot of the medieval romance with a focus on the union of a female protagonist with a suitable male, in chick lit
the traditional happy-ever-after is not necessary: “Frequently Mr Right turns out to be Mr Wrong or Mr Maybe. Sometimes the novel chronicles a succession of Mr Not-Rights” (2011, 28). In chick lit, she argues, “the quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social activity is given equal or greater attention than the Harlequin’s relationship conflict” (ibid.). Chick lit also differs from the Harlequin in its heroines: while the typical Harlequin heroine is a beauty, the chick lit heroine emphasizes the ordinariness of her appearance and part of her quest is to remedy this. Another major difference is her sexuality, which is more overt in chick lit. While the Harlequin heroine’s job is merely a setting for a romantic encounter, in chick lit “workplace obstacles, which the heroine confronts and negotiates, run concomitantly with dating circuit adventures” (ibid., 29). Harzewski suggests that chick lit’s greatest difference from the Harlequin is in the portrayal of men, who, in chick lit, function as they do on the covers of bridal magazines, as ciphers, shadowy presences or background figures. Here, she says, the chick lit heroine’s relationship to men is closer to the picaresque than romance and the female-centered narrative often renders male speech indirect. The differences between chick lit and the Harlequin possibly reflect the impact of the women’s movement and women’s changed lived experience, including their relationships to men and their career prospects, which readers demand to see in novels.

**The Feminist Bestseller**

While one response to the women’s movement was the popularity of the Harlequin romance, other writers offered women more feminist points of identification. Whelehan points to the emergence of the feminist bestseller in the 1970s, epitomized by novels such as Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977). These novels adopted the bildungsroman form and sought to make the personal political by “showing how our personal relations shape social relations and how the whole forms a backdrop to the choices and decisions we feel able to make” (2005, 65). They continued the
work of consciousness raising and while they often denied their readers a neat ending, they portrayed emotions that had been neglected by feminist discourse, such as love, sexual attraction and maternal feelings, in all their ambiguity. Chick lit takes from these novels with feminist themes the bildungsroman tradition of subject-formation and the portrayal of an everywoman that the reader can identify with. However, while both the feminist bestsellers of the 1970s and chick lit novels today are in dialogue with feminism, according to Whelehan, the relationship is a direct one in the former while in the latter “a nascent feminist consciousness” battles with the quest for The One (ibid., 5).

**The Bonkbuster**

Perhaps the most direct precursor of chick lit is the “superwoman” novel or the “bonkbuster” that emerged in the wake of women’s massive participation in the workforce in the 1980s as a result of women’s increased access to education, a buoyant economy and a lack of consensus on women’s role (Whelehan 2005). Harzewski cites chick lit writers who say that the chick lit novel is a reaction to the novels of the 1980s by writers such as Judith Krantz and Jackie Collins which featured a glamorous, aggressive and sexually gregarious woman who makes it in a man’s world (2011, 64). Rita Felski notes that “the money, sex, and power novel is the only popular form that celebrates and rewards the female desire for power and the power of female desire” (2000, 109). These novels were attractive for the power they offered women, expressing the euphoria of the aftermath of the women’s movement (Whelehan 2005). While the novels featured “a glamorous, ambitious heroine who fights her way to the top of a corporate empire while engaging in conspicuous consumption of men and designer labels” (ibid., 100), the women remained markedly feminine. Likening the “superwoman” protagonists of these novels to the male superman, Dudowitz notes that the superwoman bore a double identity as a strong professional woman by day and a housewife after hours, thus showing “her readers that women can accede to positions of greater power
without radically changing the larger social order”. Ultimately, the novels assuaged fears raised about women’s participation in the workforce by representing the family as strengthened (1990, 14).

Towards the beginning of the nineties, there were fewer superwoman novels being published worldwide, which Dudowitz attributes to the exaggerated demands these novels make on women to be superwomen. This does not mean that women were rejecting the freedoms enjoyed by the superwoman, but rather “awareness that life doesn’t have to be so difficult has become a permanent element of current women’s popular fiction” (ibid., 190). This awareness might be said to manifest itself in chick lit which represents an antiheroine as a counterpoint to the eighties novels’ superwoman, and one who attempts to strike a compromise between the demands of feminism and the desire for safe harbour in the arms of a man.

While chick lit retains the fascination with shopping and fashion of its predecessor, the protagonists are easier to identify with, being neither as self-driven nor as goodlooking as the bonkbuster heroine, and while the latter normally progresses on a solitary cut-throat fight to the top, the chick lit heroine’s progress is less ascendant and is buffered by a supportive friends’ circle. As Whelehan notes: “It is the image of the bonkbuster heroine as supremely capable and effortlessly in control – the very model of the power feminist – which the chick litters will write against in the following decade” (2005, 155).
Appendix 2: English Language Publishing in India

According to the “Nielsen India Book Market Report 2015: Understanding the India Book Market”, conducted in association with Association of Publishers in India and the Federation of Indian Publishers, the Indian book market is worth $3.9 billion, the sixth largest in the world (PTI, 2015). Moreover, the Indian English book market has edged out the United Kingdom to become the second largest market for English books after the United States. Fifty-five per cent of trade sales are books in English with “general and literary” genres marked as the top genre in the trade books category. The study’s survey of 2,000 consumers revealed that on average Indians read books 2.1 times a week while nearly two-thirds read books occasionally (ibid.). The nation’s 2001 census lists the number of English speakers as 10% of the total population, more than 125 million people, second only to the United States (TNN, 2010) and a publisher from Penguin India estimated that the market’s annual revenue from books in English was US$2 billion (Crabtree 2015). With the publishing industry growing at 20.4 per cent between 2011-12 and 2014-15, India is seen as one of the more vibrant markets for booksellers.

The proliferation of the English language in India can be dated back to passage of the Charter Act of 1813 which allocated funds for the development of literature and education in India, provoking a discussion on the language to be adopted in educational institutions in India (Narayanan 2012). Thomas Macaulay’s Minute on Education of 1835 settled the question in favour of English, and the passing of the English Education Act in 1835 made English both the lingua franca and the medium of education (ibid., 81). Joshi’s fascinating study of reading in nineteenth-century India reveals that while the history of the novel and that of imperialism are inseparable (Said 1994), library records and archives of publishers show that colonial readers voraciously consumed novels and that although their choices were
restricted to British authors due to colonial tariffs, they were selective in what they read (Joshi 2002).

**The Novel in India**

British publishers set up shop in India soon after the establishment of English as an official language and the rapid expansion of educational institutions, and far from viewing India as a dumping ground for leftover books, Macmillan, the most successful publisher in India, carefully cultivated the market and its Colonial Library series with other publishers following suit to feed huge demand from Indian readers (ibid., 94). As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the novel form became immensely popular among readers, and was quickly taken up by Indian writers.

Indian novels both in English and the bhashas (vernacular languages) bore the traces both of canonical English novels and the popular texts that had flooded the Indian market in the decade (Mukherjee 2000). Moreover, even novels in local languages bore the traces of English while novels in English were influenced by innovations in the bhashas (ibid.; Mehrotra 2009). While novelists in both English and indigenous languages belonged to the same social segment – upper-caste urban Hindu male (with women writers being rare exceptions) – novels in English were restricted to a male readership, while novels in Indian languages attracted female readers (Mukherjee 2000).

**Indian Writing in English**

As demonstrated above, novelists employed English from the early nineteenth century onwards, although the history of the Indian novel in English is usually marked by the triumvirate of writers in the 1930s: R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. These writers experimented consciously with both form and language to indigenize the novel, and given that they emerged in the decade prior to Independence, it is not surprising that they in different ways constructed the idea of India as nation (Mukherjee 2000). From here onwards,
however, it is difficult to delineate a tradition of the Indian novel in English, as writers drew on different influences, styles and themes in their work making categorizations difficult (Mukherjee 2000; Mehrotra 2009).

From its inception, though, Indian writing in English has been beset by claims of inauthenticity due to the alleged foreignness of the language in which it is written. Thus, Bankim famously advised Romesh Chandra Dutt to write in Bengali even if he was more fluent in English and Aurobindo Ghose commented with regard to writing in English that “there is something unnatural and spurious about it – like speaking with a stone in the mouth or walking with stilts” (cited in Mukherjee 2000, 34). Indian writers in English were not immune to meditating on the contradictions of writing an “Indian novel” in English, most prominently, Raja Rao in his famous forward to his novel Kanthapura in which he notes “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” but adds, “English is really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up” (cited in Mukherjee 2000, 167).

The controversy over the politics and value of Indian writing in English flares up every decade or so as Mehtrotra (2009) has demonstrated. Mehtrotra notes that “the animosity towards Indian literature in English stems in large measure from the animosity towards the social class English has come to identified with: a narrow, well-entrenched, metropolitan-based ruling elite that has dominated Indian life for the past fifty and more years”, but adds that “while it is true that many who write in English belong to the metropolitan elite, it is also true that many who write at all, irrespective of language, belong to the privileged stratum” (2009, 25). While acknowledging that Indians write in English usually because it is the only language they are competent in, Mukherjee by and large seems to regard it as a disadvantage due to the lack of an indigenous literary tradition, the inability to truly know one’s audience
and the pressure to please a non-Indian audience, resulting in a tendency towards “a homogenization of reality, an essentializing of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community” (2000, 171-72).

Nevertheless, in the 1980s, a series of Indian writers, most notably Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and more recently Arundhati Roy, perhaps aided by the growth of postcolonial studies in academia in the West, gained significant critical attention for the originality and literary quality of their work. While these writers too have been accused of pandering to western tastes for exotic and hybrid content and for contributing to a marginalization of writing in other languages, their literary status at least is rarely disputed and their success prompted greater attention to and investment in Indian writers by global publishing houses. Amid the euphoria of the empire writing back in a particularly Indian form, however, popular writing in English remained a somewhat neglected enterprise.

**Commercial Indian Writing in English**

Post-independence, under the English Language Book Scheme sponsored by Britain and other subsidy schemes, a large number of books were imported from the UK, the US, and the USSR and sold at affordable rates making it hard for unsubsidized domestic publishing houses to compete (Butalia 1993, 187). For example, while India was a large export market for remaindered Mills & Boon novels, novels set in India or written by Indian authors were not common. Parameswaran’s study has shown that Indian readers preferred it this way because “a good Mills & Boon, by definition, had to transport readers into a ‘realistic’ fantasy world of love and courtship that was embedded within particular class and race structures” (2002, 840). Interestingly, however, Hsu-Ming Teo argues that in the post-war era, Mills & Boon novels published for British readers did use India as a setting whereby “British readers are gently encouraged to embrace gender equality by contemplating the play
of this fantasy in a distant and exotic land” (2004, 13-14). Having exported to India for 60 years, Mills & Boon set up an Indian division in 2008, and in 2013, the company announced that it would publish novels in Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi and Marathi (Singh 2013).

Contrary to popular opinion, Butalia suggests it was strict regulation, rather than deregulation, that fostered the expansion of Indian writing in English. A development of the enactment of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act in 1973 was that foreign publishing houses began to form partnerships with Indian houses. The Indian managing editors of these houses who replaced their British and American counterparts finally began experimenting with publishing indigenous writing rather than the tried and tested strategy of importing foreign books so that “at the end of the 1980s, Indian readers in English finally had what regional-language readers had had for a long time – an impressive long list of their own authors to choose from” (Narayanan 2012, 94). However, it was only since the mid-2000s that Indian publishing houses began to seriously invest in commercial fiction by Indian writers in English. A watershed moment was the publication and runaway success of Chetan Bhagat’s *Five Point Something* in 2004; his subsequent novels have all gone on to sell more than a million copies each prompting Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO of Westland, to note that Indian publishing today falls into two periods: “BC” (before Chetan) and after (Joshi 2002). The new breed of commercial fiction is written in the “Indian English of the outsourcing generation” (McCrum 2010) and addressed to an audience in tier 2 and tier 3 cities who may or may not speak English fluently. Chick lit is part of the rise of “market-led” commercial fiction that speaks to the aspirations of young India since the liberalization of the Indian economy.

These writers have been dubbed “lo-cal literati” by journalist Sheela Reddy to signify their local appeal as well as lowbrow status (Joshi 2002). They mix regional languages into their English and adopt an intimate address to the reader (Joshi 2005; Anjaria 2015). What
Joshi terms India’s “‘new’ fictions” “short-circuit a book culture of metropolitan acknowledgement and prestige” and “circulate in and beyond print, in film, Facebook …, TV, and radio, alongside more ‘traditional’ forms of publication” (ibid., 319). Historically, Sangita Gopal notes, the Indian novel in English and Hindi popular cinema have not had many synergies: “English novels and Hindi films had belonged to two entirely different social realms in postcolonial India; one might even say that a rejection of the demotic pleasures of Hindi popular cinema was a measure of one’s (Anglicized) modernity in the Nehruvian era. The Mumbai film – in turn – lampooned Western and Westernized sensibilities as elite and inauthentic and had little truck with the rarefied world of the Indian novel in English” (2015, 360). The synergy between the Hindi film and the Indian novel in English in recent years, according to Gopal, is a “transmedia” phenomenon whereby commercial fiction in English and what she terms “New Bollywood cinema” are “engaged in the making of one (fictional) world, inhabited by the denizens of Young India” (ibid., 361). “Young India” is imagined as “undoing the distinction of class, caste, and region that have been entangled with linguistic hierarchies in India. In the process, English is claimed not only as an Indian language but as one that is potentially accessible to the masses”, a “diglossic mode – once the province of elites – is now identified by both English fiction and New Bollywood cinema as constitutive of Indian identity” (ibid.)
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