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## Chick Lit in India: Possibilities for a Feminine Aesthetic in Popular Fiction

### Abstract

Implicit in the primary project of traditional aesthetics is the distinction made between “high” and “low” culture via standards that feminist critics have argued bar creative work by women from entry into the artistic canon. Since the mid-1990s these standards have been evident in the critical reception of the genre known as “chick lit” which is largely written by women using a distinctly feminine style and address. While the question of chick lit’s merit as a form of women’s writing and its claim to literary status remains undecided, chick lit has travelled a long way since *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and the conclusions drawn about Western chick lit cannot be seamlessly mapped onto chick lit’s others – its racially inflected and transnational iterations. Drawing on theories of feminine aesthetics, life writing, performativity, confession and memory, this paper moves from a consideration of the main arguments surrounding the aesthetic possibilities of the Western chick lit novel to the distinctive creative expression present in Indian chick lit to argue that the answer to the question of the genre’s aesthetic value may be found in some of its global transformations.

### Key words

chick lit, women’s writing, post-colonialism, neoliberalism, subjectivity, popular culture

“Feminism and philosophy share an interest in the question of how the nature and boundaries of art are shaped by context,”<sup>1</sup> write Peggy Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer in their introduction to *Feminism and Tradition in*

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<sup>1</sup> P. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, “Introduction: Aesthetics and Its Traditions”, [in:] *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, eds. P. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, Pennsylvania 1995, p. 14.

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*Aesthetics*. Charting the development of an analytic tradition in aesthetics and its similarities to the feminist critique of “patriarchal aesthetics,” Brand and Korsmeyer note a tendency in both schools to move away from a fixed universalist definition of art to attention to “a variety of facets, determined by the historical moment and particular character of an experience”<sup>2</sup> in order to answer the question of what constitutes art. This move is important given that historically, as Richard L. Anderson notes, “‘aesthetics’ refers to theories about the fundamental nature and value of art,”<sup>3</sup> implying a separation between that which is art and that which is not, with the former falling into the domain of “high” culture and the latter into “low” culture. A number of feminist critics have argued that the standards by which these distinctions have been made bar work by women from entry into the exalted artistic canon and preclude women from being tastemakers.<sup>4</sup> Since the turn of the millennium this division between what counts as art and what doesn’t has been starkly evident in the critical reception of the genre known as “chick lit.”

Defined by Heather Cabot as books featuring “everyday women in their 20s and 30s navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships,”<sup>5</sup> chick lit spread to television and film with similar visions of feminine subjectivity and storytelling emerging across the world. The influence of what is arguably chick lit’s founding text, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*,<sup>6</sup> is evident not only in the novel’s commercial success, but also in the outpouring of discussion surrounding Bridget Jones. She became “an icon, a recognizable emblem of a particular kind of femininity, a constructed point of identification for all women.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> R. L. Anderson, “From Calliope’s Sisters”, [in:] *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. C. Korsmeyer, Massachusetts 1998, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> C. Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, Bloomington 1949; C. Korsmeyer, “Gendered Concepts and Hume’s Standard of Taste”, [in] *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, eds. P. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, Pennsylvania 1995, pp. 49–65; E. K. W. Man, “Chinese Philosophy and the Suggestion of a New Aesthetics”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 23, (Spring) 1997, pp. 453–466; R. Parker, G. Pollock, “Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts”, [in:] *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, op. cit., pp. 44–54.

<sup>5</sup> H. Cabot, ‘Chick Lit’ Fuels Publishing Industry, [online] <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=129475&page=1> [accessed: 3.08.2015].

<sup>6</sup> H. Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Basingstoke and Oxford 1996.

<sup>7</sup> R. Gill, *Gender and the Media*, Cambridge 2007, p. 227.

In addition to its cultural implications, chick lit, as a genre by and for women, also merits evaluation as an aesthetic phenomenon. Although chick lit is largely written by women drawing on their own lives and experiences, and using a distinctly feminine style and address, the question of the genre's potential as a form of women's writing and its claim to literary status remains undecided. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young observe that the discourse surrounding chick lit has been polarised, attracting on the one hand "the unquestioning adoration of fans" and on the other "the unmitigated disdain of critics."<sup>8</sup> The critical dismissal is evident in the genre name, which lacks the gravitas and timelessness expected of art, thus relegating work within the genre from the outset to the domain of the popular and the frivolous.

In a rare article tackling the question of chick lit's literary value, Juliette Wells notes that

[...] perceptions of the genre are affected by entrenched views that women's writing is inferior to men's and that women readers prefer lightweight novels to literary ones. To judge whether an individual work of chick lit, or the genre as a whole, has literary merit is to participate in the long tradition of discounting women writers and their readers.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Wells's opinion of the genre's claim to literary pedigree is not optimistic and she concludes: "Chick lit amuses and engrosses, but does not richly reimagine in literary form the worlds that inspire it."<sup>10</sup> This is an unambiguous answer to the not-oft-posed question of chick lit's aesthetic value, but the standards by which this conclusion was reached are less obvious. Even if one were to accept Wells's dismissal of the aesthetic qualities of the genre in its classic Western form, chick lit has travelled a long way since *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its ilk, both literally and figuratively.

Chick lit and its particular feminine subjectivity in the West emerged at a moment when a number of formerly closed economies around the world were being pried open by structural adjustment programmes designed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In India, the post-1991 economic liberalisation provided increasing opportunities

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<sup>8</sup> S. Ferriss, M. Young, "Introduction", [in:] *Chick Lit: The New Women's Fiction*, eds. S. Ferriss, M. Young, New York 2006, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> J. Wells, "Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History", [in] *Chick Lit: The New Women's Fiction*, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

for educated young women from the middle and upper-middle-classes to find work in the corporate workplace<sup>11</sup> and for the formation of new neoliberal subjectivities whereby individuals are conceived of as entrepreneurial actors.<sup>12</sup> I would argue that relative financial independence and growing exposure to Western ideas of companionate love made the chick lit protagonist a workable model around which a certain kind of modern Indian woman could concretise her identity, expressed in the chick lit novels written by Indian women from 2004 onwards. Further, I would suggest that the conclusions drawn about Western chick lit cannot be seamlessly mapped onto chick lit's "others" – its racially inflected and transnational iterations. In this regard, this paper will move from a consideration of the main arguments surrounding the aesthetic and literary possibilities of the typical Western chick lit novel to an analysis of the distinctive creative and aesthetic expression in Indian chick lit.

## Women's aesthetics

To evaluate chick lit's aesthetic value, it is useful to revisit arguments advancing the possibility of a female aesthetic practice. The idea of a distinctly female form of writing or *écriture féminine* has been closely identified with the group of theorists known as the "French feminists".<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most potent statement of *écriture féminine* comes from Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of Medusa* in which she exhorts women to proclaim the "unique empire" of their own bodies, sexuality and limitless imaginary, so as to unleash what is repressed in the masculine economy.<sup>14</sup> For Cixous, women's writing is infused with musicality, with low defences against the drives, and with proximity to the mother. To write, particularly as a woman is "precisely working (in) the in-between", inhabiting a bisexuality which stirs up differences rather than effacing them.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> P. S. Budhwar et al., "Women in Management in the New Economic Environment: The Case of India", *Asia Pacific Business Review* 11 (2), 2005, pp. 179–193.

<sup>12</sup> W. Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy", [in:] eadem, *Edge-work: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton 2005, pp. 37–59.

<sup>13</sup> J. Kristeva, "Women's Time", [in:] *French Feminism Reader*, ed. K. Oliver, Maryland 2000; L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Ithaca 1985.

<sup>14</sup> H. Cixous, K. Cohen, P. Cohen, "The Laugh of Medusa", *Signs* 1 (4), (Summer) 1976, p. 876.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 884.

Renée Lorraine's conception of a gynecentric aesthetic follows similar lines in proposing artistic activity that adapts rather than dominates nature, that narrows the distinction between intellect and emotion, that expresses the erotic as a vital force, and that is accessible to all.<sup>16</sup> An emphasis on organic and communitarian production of art also permeates Suzi Gablik's proposal of a new aesthetic based on social and environmental responsibility which represents "a shift from *objects* to *relationships*."<sup>17</sup> The *écriture féminine* tradition and the paradigms proposed by Lorraine and Gablik are open to the charge of being essentialist; however, it is important to note that while they propose a paradigm that emphasises certain qualities that have been historically associated with women, they do not insist that only women adopt this paradigm. However, these proposals presume a level of formal experimentation that might not easily be embodied in a popular cultural form, even as some of them argue for the accessibility of art. Nevertheless, their stress on the body, relationality and an ethics of care could find resonances in chick lit and could be explored further.

Meanwhile, Marilyn French's argument for a feminist aesthetic, which focuses on writing in particular, could have greater applicability to chick lit and provide clearer standards by which to assess the genre.<sup>18</sup> French is the author of the bestselling novel *The Women's Room* that has been both celebrated for its narrativising of "the personal is political" and critiqued for not being literary enough.<sup>19</sup> She proposes how a popular form might be both literary and political, identifying two fundamental principles of feminist art: "First, it approaches reality from a feminist perspective; second, it endorses female experience."<sup>20</sup> The narrational point of view, she says, ought to demystify or challenge patriarchal ideologies. It may depict patriarchy but should not underwrite its standards. It must endorse and present women's experience wholly, attending to experiences considered trivial in the past, including "the inability to live happily ever after."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> R. Lorraine, "A Gynecentric Aesthetic", [in:] *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, eds. H. Hein & C. Korsmeyer, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1993, pp. 35–52.

<sup>17</sup> S. Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, New York 1995, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> M. French, "Is There a Feminist Aesthetic?", [in:] *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, op. cit., pp. 68–76.

<sup>19</sup> I. Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*, Basingstoke England 2005.

<sup>20</sup> M. French, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

Like Gablik and Lorraine, she notes that “feminist work often focuses on groups, community, people as part of a context, and helps to remind us of a reality alternative to the Western tradition of individualistic, alienated man.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, she argues for accessibility of language and style in a world in which women have been locked out of high culture for generations. While it would be a stretch to argue that chick lit might comprise feminist art as such, it would be interesting to assess the subversive and aesthetic potential of chick lit novels by Indian women using French’s criteria.

### **Autobiographical realism**

Ferriss and Young state that chick lit is both indebted to women’s literature of the past and independent of it. They note that chick lit differentiates itself from its precursor, the Harlequin novel, through its realism, with the writers often drawing on their own personal and professional lives resulting in “the perception that chick lit is not fiction at all.”<sup>23</sup> In writing fiction that allies itself closely with the condition of their own lives, chick lit authors fulfil French’s requirement of art that intimately relates to women’s everyday experiences, even those aspects that have been historically considered trivial. The down-to-earth style of the chick lit novel could be read, as Whelehan suggests, 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.”<sup>24</sup>

The resemblance between the life of the author and the protagonist she creates is evident in Indian chick lit novels when the details of the storyline of the novels are compared with the short biographies of the authors on the back covers. The novels share a strong overlap with autobiographical writing given their chronicling of loosely fictionalised life histories, coupled with the almost ubiquitous adoption of the first-person narrative. Here, feminist studies of autobiography can offer insights into the aesthetic and political import of these novels. While autobiography has been critiqued for its assumption of an individualistic, masculine, bourgeois selfhood, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that women’s

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Women’s Fiction*, op. cit., pp. 3–5.

<sup>24</sup> I. Whelehan, op. cit., p. 65.

autobiography, with its emphasis on “collective processes” has been used by “many women writers to write themselves into history.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that for women and minorities “writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech.”<sup>26</sup> The appropriation of a literary form associated with Enlightenment and colonial masculine selfhood has the potential to be a transformatory gesture in the postcolonial context, but in Indian chick lit, the question of how far the genre goes in shattering the “cultural hall of mirrors” remains. In the more recent neoliberal context that has renewed privileging the unified and empowered self, the “I” claimed by the author of chick lit cannot be simply seen as subversive as the feminist critics above have suggested. A closer look at two Indian chick lit novels – *Keep the Change* by Nirupama Subramanian<sup>27</sup> and *You are Here* by Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan<sup>28</sup> – might provide an insight into the kinds of selves being rehearsed in Indian chick lit. Given these novels’ adoption of a life writing form and certain narrational strategies typical of chick lit, analysing them can also respond to the question of chick lit’s aesthetic merit.

### **Confession in *Keep the Change***

While almost all Indian chick lit utilises a first-person narrative or point of view, *Keep the Change* explicitly employs the epistolary/diary format. Tracing the origins of the adoption of the diary form by women in the nineteenth century, Catherine Delafield 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.<sup>29</sup> As it is taken up by chick lit, the diary turns confessional under the cover of fiction, allowing the writer to articulate thoughts that cannot easily be publicly voiced. In this,

<sup>25</sup> S. Smith, J. Watson, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices”, [in:] *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. S. Smith, J. Watson, Madison 1998, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> S. S. Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice”, [in:] *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> N. Subramanian, *Keep The Change*, Noida 2010.

<sup>28</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, *You Are Here*, New Delhi 2008.

<sup>29</sup> C. Delafield, *Women’s Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Farnham 2009, p. 6.

the novel allies itself with the women's movement which Rita Felski 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 together.<sup>30</sup> This is evident in chick lit novels, most classically in *Bridget Jones's Diary* where the protagonist has come to be seen as a twentieth-century Everywoman. However, in comparison to what Whelehan terms the "consciousness raising novels" of the 1970s, which politicised the personal, chick lit novels are less overtly political.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, the use of first-person narrative and the diary format could be seen as breaking away from being the object of the male gaze as signified by the use of third person narrative. On the other hand, writing the self could signal a move from external to internal surveillance, from, as Gill argues, objectification to "subjectification."<sup>32</sup>

Drawing on Foucault's work, feminists have noted how the "postfeminist" subject in many chick lit texts is exhorted to continuously engage in self-surveillance through body and fashion policing, discourses of career advancement and regimes of sexuality.<sup>33</sup> Their work situates chick lit amid a rising tide of neoliberalism, which Wendy Brown has argued "involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*" and which "normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life."<sup>34</sup> Anthea Taylor has suggested that postfeminism is "neoliberalism gendered feminine"<sup>35</sup> and Gill has pointed out that "to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are

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<sup>30</sup> R. Felski, "On Confession", [in:] *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, op. cit., pp. 83–85.

<sup>31</sup> I. Whelehan, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> R. Gill, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> L. S. Kim, "'Sex and the Single Girl' in Postfeminism: The F word on Television", *Television & New Media* 2 (4) 2001, pp. 319–334; A. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London 2009; P. Thoma, "Romancing the Self and Negotiating Consumer Citizenship in Asian American Labor Lit", *Contemporary Women's Writing* 8 (1), 2014, pp. 17–35.

<sup>34</sup> W. Brown, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>35</sup> A. Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*, London 2012, p. 15.



constructed as its ideal subjects?"<sup>36</sup> Two aspects are prominent here – the responsibility of individual women to construct themselves appropriately and, in doing so, to make the “right” choices.

In the Asian context, however, the neoliberal pressure on women is complicated by the difficulty of attaining a fully individuated selfhood, resulting in what Youna Kim terms “precarious selfhood.”<sup>37</sup> While female individualisation in Asian societies faces limitations that prevent it from being fully implemented, it plays out at the level of self-reflexivity.<sup>38</sup> As it is embodied in diaries and self-narration in chick lit, reflexivity offers women the chance to reflect upon and sometimes critique the social order, a process facilitated by the consumption of transnational media.<sup>39</sup> In *Keep the Change*, the epistolary/diary form is used to draw attention to the precarious processes of subjectification and particularly the pressure to conform to neoliberal standards of success, both in career and romance. While some Western texts, most famously *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, also do so, *Keep the Change* makes its critique of and resistance to this pressure explicit.

The novel opens with a letter from the protagonist Damayanthi addressed to “Dear Victoria,” who only at the end is revealed to be an imaginary friend; the one-sided letters to Victoria thus function analogously to a diary. What Damayanthi imagines as the life of the glamorous Victoria who “changes her boyfriend and designer handbags every week and lives a wild bohemian life in London” is counterposed to Damayanthi’s own bland and manless existence in conservative Chennai.<sup>40</sup> In her first letter to Victoria, Damayanthi, 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.”<sup>41</sup>

The opening of the book thus showcases the kind of selves an educated young urban Indian woman might aspire to. Damayanthi’s intermittent fantasies of the ideal life are reminiscent of those of Ally McBeal,

<sup>36</sup> R. Gill, op. cit., p. 443.

<sup>37</sup> Y. Kim, *Women and the Media in Asia: The Precarious Self*, Houndmill, Basingstoke 2012, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> N. Subramanian, op. cit., p. 353.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

the protagonist of the eponymous TV series. The incorporation of day-dreams and fantasy sequences into the TV series has been both lauded as a revolutionary means of endorsing the female sensibility and critiqued as a representation of female incompetence as Ally's fantasies often occur during her work, including important court cases, and notably centre around her wish for romantic fulfilment and consciousness of her biological clock ticking.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, Damayanthi's fantasies are more varied, largely encompassing visions of career success as well as romantic experiences. *Keep the Change* then employs the trope of the interior monologue to enable its protagonist to envision a variety of non-traditional futures and narratives of self.

While self-fashioning has many nodes, for young women career and romance appear to be the focal points, with an emphasis on the latter. The genre of chick lit might be seen as an attempt to work through the anxiety surrounding women's capacities to achieve the two normative neoliberal targets of career and reproductive, or at least partnered, success. Damayanthi's journey in *Keep the Change* traverses these two planes, but it is the quest for a husband that dominates. Damayanthi's first letter to Victoria is written amid a pall of gloom in her household due to her unmarried status on her twenty-sixth birthday. Under pressure to get married, a fairly typical scenario for an Indian woman her age, Damayanthi critiques marriage as "always a losing proposition for a girl. You give up freedom, independence and full control of the remote for a life of subservience under a man who is never worth it and in-laws who never appreciate you," but she also wants a man. Damayanthi's articulation of her need for "the perfect man – who now appears to be a creature as mythical as a flying unicorn"<sup>43</sup> and her invocation of romantic heroes such as Mr Darcy echoes the dominant discourse that insists that highly educated young Indian women are being excessively choosy, evoked in her mother's accusation that she has "become spoiled by all those English books you have read and all the silly English movies you see."<sup>44</sup> Damayanthi's resistance to the traditional marriage route resonates with Kim's observation that young Asian women embrace, "a 'do-it-yourself' identity" which includes the quest for a marriage that does not entail sacrificing their independence.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> L. S. Kim, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> N. Subramanian, op. cit., pp. 6–7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Y. Kim, op. cit., p. 42.

While she herself is implicated in patriarchal standards, Damayanthi is not entirely complicit. In describing the experience of being emotionally blackmailed into marriage, she adopts a humorous and self-deprecatory tone that is typical of chick lit. More crucially, her portrayal of the expectations of good Indian womanhood is satirical and her rounds of the Indian arranged marriage circuit are peppered with subversive commentary. For example, having been harried by her mother into attending a wedding clad in a sari and a satisfactory amount of gold, she writes of being appraised by two older women: "Vision of myself with a large sticker on my forehead saying 'Bride Available,' and a cardboard sheet listing my golden virtues around my neck."<sup>46</sup> She describes one prospective husband as "a specimen who deserved to spend the rest of his life in a jar of formaldehyde on a laboratory shelf."<sup>47</sup> While Damayanthi is treated like a commodity whose virginity must be preserved, "a precious gem to be gifted to your lawfully wedded husband on your wedding night,"<sup>48</sup> her fantasies reveal her to be sexual being. In the Indian context, where the majority of marriages are not companionate but rather are arranged by families, the romance narrative in chick lit takes on a different inflection from its Western counterpart. In satirising the traditional marriage route and giving voice to her own desires, Damayanthi is offering a critique of patriarchy as she experiences it most immediately and oppressively.

While singleness in Western chick lit novels is a problem to be solved, in Indian chick lit, this is ostensibly so, but close reading reveals that here singleness is a window of opportunity that allows space for self exploration. Significantly, the Indian chick lit heroine recognises that the first step towards accessing the option of choosing her own spouse is economic independence. Kim notes that "work identity is a central feature of women's modern life" whereby "work satisfaction can build a renewed sense of self."<sup>49</sup> In this sense, the goals of the young woman and neoliberalism coalesce, as the protagonist seeks to gain the room to evade the traditional fate of the good woman. The pursuit of a career takes Damayanthi away from her hometown to the bigger more cosmopolitan city of Mumbai and affords her a degree of agency. Noting the trend of young women in China, Japan and Korea leaving their countries for studies or tourism overseas,

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<sup>46</sup> N. Subramanian, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> Y. Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Kim terms these women, who veer away from traditional marriage via transnational mobility, “a knowledge diaspora.”<sup>50</sup> Damayanthi’s move is not transnational, but mirrors the growing numbers of upper-middle-class women in India moving away from their hometowns for work, which offers them a measure of autonomy.

Damayanthi’s “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.”<sup>51</sup> 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”<sup>52</sup> – that is polished by a resume consulting company which creates a new persona for her. Having embarked on singleton life in the big city, however, Damayanthi proceeds to satirise 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. While feminists have criticised the chick lit heroine’s career incompetence epitomised by Bridget Jones’s fumbling in the workplace and the fact that it is usually the (male) hero who saves the day, Damayanthi’s narrative can be read not so much as failure to succeed than as a rejection of neoliberal corporate culture. It is significant that at the end of the novel, having shown up the seamy underside of corporate India, she opts for a more meaningful role in microfinance, working under a female boss.

While *Keep the Change* ends with the protagonist suitably partnered and thus does not challenge heteronormativity, the satirical tone applied to both traditional demands of womanhood as well as the capitalist workplace can be seen as a defiant stance. The Indian chick lit heroine is adopting the Western model for her own purposes, a chance at life with a partner who she believes is compatible with her own interests. That this is a constrained and imperfect choice is acknowledged in *Keep the Change*; however, dating and choosing a life partner oneself is perceived by these young women to offer greater possibilities for emancipation. In this sense, then, while the novel does not fulfil French’s demand that feminist writers exhibit characters who do not crave the typical happily-ever-after, *Keep the Change* does demonstrate a limited agency within the constraints of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> N. Subramanian, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

the desire for a happily coupled ending. The use of epistolary confession combined with satire and social critique in *Keep the Change* can be seen as an emerging literary aesthetic in the expression of precarious selfhood.

### Memory in *You Are Here*

A more experimental approach to self-construction through life writing that jettisons the conventional happy ending can be found in Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's *You Are Here*.<sup>53</sup> Madhavan's widely read blog The Compulsive Confessor chronicling her adventures as a singleton in the city, including her sex life, earned her fame and the title of India's Carrie Bradshaw before she published her first novel *You Are Here* loosely based on the blog. In a sign that the novel follows the confessional ethos of the blog, its protagonist Arshi writes: "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."<sup>54</sup> Thus, from the first chapter, the narrative exposes itself as an exercise in self-reflexivity which scholars have pointed out is characteristic of subject formation in late modernity.<sup>55</sup>

Although confession might be the obvious lens through which to view *You Are Here*, the novel can also be usefully analysed via the paradigm of memory, which Linda Anderson employs to understand autobiography. Citing Freud's and Breuer's diagnosis of hysteria – "hysterics mainly suffer from reminiscence"<sup>56</sup> – Anderson suggests that the preoccupation with memory that characterised the female (according to Freud and Breuer) condition of hysteria could be a form of nostalgic longing, not just for a past but for an imagined future. While Freud and Breuer read the obsession with memory as a pathological failure to detach from the past and develop heterosexually, Anderson highlights Elizabeth Grosz's proposition that the appeal to memory could be a defiant gesture towards a symbolic system that denies women a subject position.<sup>57</sup> Anderson suggests that

<sup>53</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> S. Budgeon, *Choosing a Self: Young Women and the Individualization of Identity*, Westport, Connecticut 2003; Y. Kim, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> L. Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*, London 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

“it might still be possible to rescue memory from nostalgia and to think about home as a destination – something yet to be constructed – and not as an origin we can only ever desire in retrospect.”<sup>58</sup> Drawing on Luce Irigaray’s writings on memory, she argues that “memory could also provide a space in which the subject can create herself, or that it contains a future we have yet to gain access to, could also change the knowledge we already have.”<sup>59</sup> Given that young women today face the neoliberal exhortation to create a self entrepreneurially, the semi-autobiographical medium offers them the opportunity to blend fact and fiction while mining memory. Indian chick lit novelists, for whose protagonists the creation of a modern, individualised selfhood is “precarious,” make explicit the process of creating a self through the ordering of memory.

Madhavan’s project in *You Are Here* could thus be read as the reconfiguration of memory towards the articulation of a future selfhood. The novel, while billed as fiction, is a memoir of a certain period in the author’s life based on the real-life details in her blog. This reconstruction, however, is undertaken in a whimsical and non-linear mode in which time moves back and forth with the tense switching between the present of narration to a number of different pasts and the first-person voice spiralling into ever-deepening circles of interior monologue. 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.

The self constructed through these reminiscences is a bricolage that readers (and the narrator) are invited to cohere. More importantly, the self that emerges is a relational one through which Arshi situates herself within concentric circles of relationships. Arshi considers her propensity to see herself through other people as a weakness, and while this does pose challenges for subject formation, relationality need not be a problem. Rather, the relational self that emerges in the novel offers clues to chick lit’s preoccupation with romance. As she views other people’s romantic relationships from the outside, what resonates with Arshi is the sense of belonging they evoke:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

If we are put on this planet with the aim of figuring out who we are, and the only way we can figure out who we are is through someone else – either the person we wind up with or the person we create – then what hope does my generation, my we-don't-need-nobody-dude generation, really have?<sup>60</sup>

Arshi thus points to the anxiety created in an individualistic society, where the traditional support systems have declined or are required to, and the only permitted dependency for an adult is on one's chosen romantic partner.

The self expressed by Arshi might embody what Cixous calls "desire-that gives."<sup>61</sup> This ability to give of oneself is most cogently expressed in chick lit's portrayal of female friendships. *You Are Here* chronicles three strong female friendships – between Arshi and her oldest friend Deeksha, with her roommate Topsy, and with a relatively new friend Esha. In fact, Arshi comes close to elevating friendship to greater significance than romantic partnership when she asks: "Why do we save our best, most childish, most impetuous love 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."<sup>62</sup> It is thus fitting that at the end of the novel, the typical chick lit happy-ever-after is granted not to Arshi but her friends. Deeksha gets married, but at one of her wedding ceremonies, another important ritual is re-enacted and the pact of friendship reaffirmed, when the two women deliberately let themselves get soaked in a downpour and Deeksha's wedding make-up is washed off. The novel does not end with the chick lit heroine pledging her love to the hero, but with Topsy, a Hindu woman from a conservative family, opting to have sex with her Muslim boyfriend, a deeply transgressive choice in the Indian context. It is rare that a chick lit novel does not end with the protagonist suitably partnered, but the newness of the form in India and Madhavan's status as a popular blogger seemed to have allowed for this.

On her blog, Madhavan gained both acclaim and censure for her frank discussions of sex and the single life. The novel's focus on relationships could be read as a continuation of this project, whereby Madhavan chronicles the existence of the sex life of the young urban Indian woman. Arshi's unabashed enactment of desire could be seen as answering the French feminists' call to write the body as a subversive gesture. While critics have

<sup>60</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> H. Cixous, K. Cohen, P. Cohen, op. cit., p. 893.

<sup>62</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, op. cit., p. 215.

pointed to the commodification of sexuality in chick lit,<sup>63</sup> Madhavan's depiction of sexuality is more intuitive; her descriptions of early sexual awakening and the awareness of sexual difference have an innocence that is absent from the worldly-wise enactment of sexuality in chick lit that Stephanie Harzewski has termed "late heterosexuality."<sup>64</sup> In Arshi's description of losing her virginity, 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."<sup>65</sup> It is notable that Arshi is conscious of herself as being both "surveyor and surveyed."<sup>66</sup> By foregrounding her protagonist's own act of self-surveillance, Madhavan heightens its performativity and thus defamiliarises it.

Madhavan's choice of metaphors, such as the twisted bra strap to signify life, while not exactly literary, also serve to underscore her representation of womanhood as a bodily experience, as do her descriptions of menarche and menstruation. Even as Arshi bares her own bodily and sexual experiences, she acknowledges that these experiences are confined to a certain India. The lifestyle that she enjoys, which involves smoking, consuming alcohol and sometimes drugs, partying all night and dating, is not available to all women, and when it is, it often has to be performed in secret. Thus, Arshi says: "Sure, we're second-generation liberated and all that, but there are still people among us who talk about rape victims in the most uneducated way [...] it's not really the twenty-first century in parts of India, and it's not just the small towns I'm talking about."<sup>67</sup>

Arshi is conscious that she belongs to an elite group of Indians, usually people who use English as a first language, who share common cultural references, and who she describes as "my tribe." The white relatively wealthy viewpoint in Western chick lit translates into an upper-middle class English-speaking one in Indian chick lit, although Madhavan tries to counter this by depicting women outside her own milieu, albeit through her own lens. Sidonie Smith suggests that in the confessional text, there is a reciprocal relationship between audience and author: "An audience

<sup>63</sup> S. Harzewski, *Chicklit and Postfeminism*, Charlottesville 2011; R. Gill, op. cit.

<sup>64</sup> S. Harzewski, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>66</sup> J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972.

<sup>67</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, op. cit., p. 31.



implies a community of people for whom certain discourses of identity and truth make sense. The audience comes to expect a certain kind of performativity that conforms relatively comfortably to criteria of intelligibility.”<sup>68</sup> The self that is being performed in *You Are Here* is an aspirational subjectivity, an imaginable future reconstructed through fragments of the past for the author and her readers, albeit one that might be out of reach for the masses of Indian women. What is significant about the self Madhavan presents, despite its limited applicability, is its refusal to conform entirely to neoliberal subjectification even while adopting some of its tropes.

## Conclusion

To return to critics’ dismissal of chick lit from the field of literature, Wells notes that chick lit lacks literary elements such as “imaginative use of language, inventive and thought-provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure” and “only in its deployment of humour 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.”<sup>69</sup> Why humour should be dismissed so easily though satire remains an important literary form when wielded by men is not clear. As the analysis of *Keep the Change* has demonstrated, chick lit does perform a satirical function, especially in the Indian context where it is used to critique patriarchy in its recently neoliberalised form.

Moreover, while the writing in *You Are Here* may not meet high literary standards, Madhavan’s disjunctive and fragmentary memorialising makes evident the work of self-construction. Her writing of the body and desire in ways that evade neoliberal subjectification can be seen in line with the *écriture féminine* tradition. Her avoidance of tying up all strands of the plot neatly, particularly that of the protagonist, fulfils French’s demand for women’s writing that does not conform to the patriarchal diktats of the happy-ever-after. Rather, the novel ends with the protagonist’s discovery that she was done being one of the victims who “thrive on having

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<sup>68</sup> S. Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance”, [in:] *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> J. Wells, op. cit., p. 64.

our minds messed with, our hearts constantly in a drum of adrenalin.”<sup>70</sup> The novel is, then, a manifestation of Harzewski’s contention that “chick lit novels are ultimately romances of the self,”<sup>71</sup> but here a self that plays with the boundaries of its becoming. With its deviation from the strict conventions of the genre through experimental writing, Madhavan’s debut novel indicates the potential of chick lit to expand as a genre.

Shari Benstock argues that “contrary to claims that chick lit has run its course, the genre still has room to grow, to enhance its cultural relevance and acknowledge the complexities of women’s changing lives and experiences.”<sup>72</sup> She questions the verdict on chick lit in literary studies, leaving it to subsequent generations to judge whether it is “literary junk food” or has “literary significance.”<sup>73</sup> While the time-will-tell approach might provide the definitive answer to the question of chick lit’s aesthetic value, Indian chick lit, and other chick lit novels on the margins of the global publishing industry, might be indicators of where this value can more fruitfully be sought.

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<sup>70</sup> M. Reddy Madhavan, op. cit., p. 255.

<sup>71</sup> S. Harzewski, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>72</sup> S. Benstock, “Afterword: The New Women’s Fiction”, [in:] *Chick Lit: The New Women’s Fiction*, eds. S. Ferriss, M. Young, New York 2006, p. 256.

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