



**Contextualizing Indian Chick Lit:  
Neoliberal India and the Single Girl in the City**

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Abstract

Following the unprecedented hype in the international market, chick lit as a genre of popular literature was quick to capture the interest of Indian readership at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The present paper intends to look at the 'single girl in the city' narratives (which is one of the most prolific subcategories of chick lit), dealing with young women negotiating with work and love in the urban space, focusing both on the content and the context of these narratives. Post independence in India there has been a simultaneous development of the canonical and popular writing in English by Indian women, with the literary texts undoubtedly claiming all the critical attention. Popular literature, which is often relegated to the realm of the unliterary, can offer an elaborate social documentation if the production history and intended readership is looked at. Late capitalism and globalization were instrumental in opening up the Indian market in the latter half of the twentieth century, which brought about a significant change in the educational and professional scenario of the urban and semi-urban young women: the rise of Indian chick lit is studied against this backdrop of a country in a state of flux leading to a significant conflict between the traditional and the modern. Elements of consumption and consumerism not only reflect a direct legacy of the Western genre of chick lit, but also provide an interesting scope of study when it comes to a 'developing nation' like India. The upheaval caused by neoliberalisation, market politics and urbanisation in terms of personal relationships, family structure and body image of Indian women would be looked at in context of these 'workplace-tell-all' narratives.

**Keywords: Chick lit, globalization, neoliberalisation, consumerism.**





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The year 1996 marked a very prominent literary phenomenon in the global market with the simultaneous publication of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the United Kingdom and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* in the United States of America. Both books took the market by storm, becoming a cultural phenomenon to be adapted variously into popular media and films, making the writers rich with the rising demand of sequels, and introducing the term "chick lit" to popular readership. The next few years would witness a massive influx of novels which would be bracketed as chick lit, travelling the world in the guise of the ethnic subgenres like Hungarian chick lit, Brazilian chick lit, Asian chick lit, Indian chick lit, Chica Lit, Latina Lit, Sistah lit, and so on. Leslie Wainger in her self-help book on how to write a romance writes:

Chick lit focuses on young (mostly twenty-something) heroines navigating the perils of single life. These books are very heroine-focused, and the author tells the story in first-person point of view, which differs from the usual third-person approach of romance novels [...] Key themes include men and how to deal with them, but the heroine's entire life and its travails (often humorous) form the backbone of the plot, and a happily-ever-after ending isn't required and is often pointedly avoided. Most chick lit novels are published in trade paperback. (Wainger 87)

Though many have defined chick lit in many ways, the above definition encapsulates the spirit of chick lit to the fullest – it marks the target readership, defines the central elements of romance and self-deprecating humour, and brings forward the essentially commercial nature of the genre. A series of interrelated sociological phenomena is said to have provided the impetus for the growth of the chick lit novels in the global context. There were definite changes in the Anglo-American social ethos post 1980s and those changes were rapidly adopted by the rest of the world in the times of neo-liberal economy leading to the rapid propagation of genre worldwide. The dominant culture of serial cohabitation, increase in the age of first marriage and the declining rates of remarriage is said to have led to the popularity of 'singleton' lifestyles in the western countries. Women who had already benefitted by the quintessential feminist





demands of economic independence, professional security and sexual liberty, but who intended to distance themselves from the stereotype of the man-hating radical feminists, women who were comfortable with the expression of their femininity and were willing to display their active sexuality, women who enjoyed consumerist choices and vied for a good life were providing the required readership for this evolving genre. More often than not the chick lit protagonist is criticised for upholding neo-traditionalism, retreatism and downsizing by flaunting their insistence on romance and family, by staying content with their feminine non-assertive jobs, and harbouring an affinity towards domesticity. But the opposite can also be argued as oftentimes chick lit heroines are portrayed to emphasize their need for personal space and financial liberty and their desire remains of partnership more meaningful than just a marriage.

It took less than a decade after its first appearance for chick lit to claim a market in India, with publishers like Penguin India, Rupa and Co., Harper Collins all publishing several titles a year, bracketed as Indian chick lit. Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake*, published in 2004, was the first one to be marketed as Indian chick lit, then came Rupa Gulab's *Girl Alone* (2005), followed by Rajashree's *Trust Me* (2006), Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* (2007) and Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* (2008), with as many as twelve chick lit books published in 2012 itself. Since chick lit is predominantly marked and marketed as the young urban woman's fiction, for the most part single with upward social and economic mobility and modern sensibilities, it would be worthwhile to look at the position of the young working woman in the socio-economic background of present day India in the context of studying Indian chick lit. The concept of modernity in the Indian perspective has forever involved notions of hybridism, mixture and amalgamation since modernization in every context unanimously refers to some form of western import. Priti Ramamurthy notes on the configuration of the Indian 'modern girl' with reference to the women represented in Indian cinema during 1920 – 1930 (this being one of the earliest instances of modernizing influence on Indian women) and contends that this modern girl was not only westernized in terms of her sense of fashion and dressing but also in her values and morals. The actresses and their screen persona were conjoined in a certain sense and both represented a combination of the western and the traditional Indian in their attire and attitude; but everything from college education, to managing business, to economic liberation and sexual freedom as embodied by these women were markedly a western import. The modern glamour girl of Indian cinema was neither the western educated gentlewoman of urban aristocracy (like the *bhadramahila* of colonial Bengal) nor was she the non-violent activist championing nationalism (*swadeshi*) by deploring westernization, rather she was sexual, self-serving, indulgent of luxury and panache, and therefore mostly an alien. After 1930, these 'modern girls'



in Indian cinema who were customarily of Eurasian descent or from families of traditional Indian courtesans, were substituted by the educated high caste culturally evolved new actresses: at the same time the display of the modern ramifications of sexual expression and individual freedom were suitably curtailed in the film productions – they were now much more domesticated and docile, and thereby a more nationalized image of the ideal woman was forged. Ramamurthy's choice of epithets for these Indian modern girls of early cinema, like “[h]easily modern, feminine, sexy, and distinctively global in her multidirectional citation” (Ramamurthy 169) and “cheeky, cosmopolitan, and seductive” (Ramamurthy 170) encapsulates how the very notion of modern femininity was visualized in Indian popular culture. At the same time the study delineates how by the middle of the twentieth century Indian popular media was working towards creating the new icon of the educated, domestic and docile helpmate as the new idol for Indian womanhood. This construction of the ‘modern girl’ has since been always a threat, a specter that has revisited every time the Indian woman has ventured out of her domestic space, claimed her sexuality or dared to be independent. The young working Indian woman, aiming at economic and social autonomy, venturing out of the domestic space, sometimes travelling to the urban setting from her rural/suburban homeland, remodeling her life according to the demands of the city, are the protagonists of Indian chick lit who comply to the definition of the ‘modern’ woman in the twenty-first century.

All Indian chick lit heroines undergo the odyssey of finding love, managing work and eventually learning to live life alone in the urban space, which is on one hand alien and threatening, on the other teeming with new possibilities and promises. Women living and working alone has been sporadically visible in the Indian urban setup but not so much as it became rampant with the growing neoliberalization of the country. Though statistics indicate that women in rural India are far more likely to be absorbed in the workforce, often building independent small scale business and acting as entrepreneurs in cottage industries, the rising level of education among the economically stable subsection of urban and suburban population has gradually led young women acquiring jobs in several professional sectors. With the movement to the urban space to claim professional opportunities, living alone and being single for at least a certain period became imperative for these women. The increasing visibility of single women in India is reflected in the several demographic studies, sociological researches as well as in the growing popularity of self-help books which were written for the single women surviving alone in the city that proliferated in the 1990s. The presence of single women (or men for that matter, though he is a tad more acceptable than his female counterpart) defies the very concept of the orthodox family structure which socially and biologically prefers conjugality. The



presence of single women gradually became predominant in the twentieth century in the shape of single working women, and divorcees and widows also preferring to stay single: a phenomenon which became increasingly evident not only in the western part of the world but also in orthodox societies like India.

If the factors leading to sexual liberalization of women are taken into account, it must be remembered that the free expression of sexuality which became one of the major imperatives of single life was further validated by the legalization of the use of contraceptives. Though contraceptive pills were in use in America since 1957 for the treatment of menstrual problems, it was not until 1972 that it became available to all women, married or unmarried, as a provision for keeping away unwanted pregnancy. In India, by 1960s the contraceptive pill had not only gained acceptability but it was already being distributed free of cost as a part of governmental health programmes as well as liberally sold commercially in the market. Legalization of abortion followed, and with the advent of abortive and emergency pills, which led women gaining more authority over their bodies and sexuality. An adult Indian woman needs nobody's consent to choose abortion as long as it is clinically safe according to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, and she can opt for the medical procedure in a government approved clinic under a legal medical practitioner. The right to abortion was undoubtedly a right over one's body and it was revolutionary given the orthodox social context of India.

In the various studies referred to in this discussion the central inference is regarding how the traditional parameters of a woman's life in India have been gradually changing with the impetus of globalization, late capitalism, urbanization and modernization. Like in any other orthodox society, in India too, a woman's destiny had been traditionally limited to her conjugal role and domestic affiliations. The lack of educational opportunities and the social stigma attached to the figure of the single working woman had made marriage the ultimate aim for both urban and rural women in the Indian subcontinent. In post-independence India, education has been one of the pressing causes for the gradual emergence of the figure of the single working woman. The number of unmarried urban women rose from 24.2 percent in 1961 to 29.2 percent in 1971 (Krishna 5). The 2011 census records a 39 percent increase in the number of single women in India with respect to the census data collected a decade back. The mean age of effective marriage increased from 19.3 years in 1990 to 21.2 years in 2011. The rise in the number of women gaining access to education is related to the increasingly popular trend of linking middle-class respectability to the girl child's education. The census reports of 2011 show a meteoric rise in the number of educated women who are professionally trained. In contrast to



2001 census, 116 percent more women were reported to have obtained graduate degrees, 151 percent more women completing post-graduation and 196 percent more women gaining professional and technical degrees. Apart from the number of women gaining teachers' training graduate degrees (122 percent) and degrees in nursing/medicine (157 percent), both being fields traditionally deemed fit for women, the census data shows an unforeseen rise in the number of women engineers (326 percent). This drastic leap in the number of women gaining professional expertise is indeed reflective of how education was forging a group of skilled women ready to enter the workforce and job opportunities in turn led to the influx of skilled professionals in the urban space. In 2015 there were more than 30 percent of all Indian women living in cities, but no data shows that all urban women were working. Statistics show that in 2011-2012 women comprised 14.7 percent of all urban workers, therefore not a huge surge from the 13.4 percent of 1972-1973. But again, in 2011-2012 women comprised 24.8 percent of all rural workers, couple of notches down from the 31.8 percent of 1972-1973. The data reflect that women, with the rising levels of literacy, were moving to the urban spaces to avail lucrative job opportunities: the urban space providing more options than those the rural sectors could present.

The taboo that was once attached to the concept of spinsterhood in India has been gradually diluted in the cosmopolitan milieu as working and earning women have acquired popularity and gained respectability. But despite this, the state of independent singlehood is more often than not accepted as a period of transition which would eventually be terminated with the realization of a marital alliance. The parameters for judging the partner is also in the state of flux as the educated earning woman desire a man with economic and emotional parity. With the choice of the woman becoming determinant to the process of groom hunt, the procedure runs the risk of becoming more time consuming and complex involving elaborate dating rituals, resulting in delayed marriage which is preceded by a prolonged period of singlehood. Also the economic wellbeing of single working women is often beneficial to her parental family thereby providing added impetus on their part to prolong the state. Availability of convenience food and lifestyle products, advancement of communication technology, diversification in the courting rituals are all urging young economically independent urban Indian women to carry on experimentations with the single status. But the constraints of the patriarchal setup render the prospect of matrimony as the preferred option: therefore even though marriage is delayed it is seldom denied. Both the specters of psychological isolation and social stigma attached to un-terminated spinsterhood make women view coupledness as the more viable option. Sangeeta Krishna in her case study of single women, aged thirty and above, from the semi-urban setup of the north Indian city of Benaras, all working professionals, note that



though some women do plan to continue the state of singlehood forever, but most want to get married eventually and enter an equal, unhindered, fulfilling marriage which would satisfy the emotional needs of companionship, the social need of forming a functional family and leading a life marked “normal and respectable” (Krishna 51). The linking of heteronormativity with the notions of normalcy and social respectability mirrors the prevalent thought of a major cross section of Indian population. At the same time it reflects the social tuning which makes women consider marriage as the most viable end to the journey of self-development. In a country where postponement of marriage earlier pertained to the indifference of parents, difficulty in arranging for dowry and adverse family circumstances, the very transition to personal choice for Indian urban women as one of the determinant factors for remaining single is a revolution in itself. Several sociological studies reveal that with the prevalent trend of single existence on an increase, the concern about the feeling of loneliness has stepped up. Sometimes read as signs of autonomy and independence and despite the claim that being single does not necessarily mean being lonely (since the singles are supposed to have more time, hence a better social life, increased association with friends and more time for community interactions), singlehood has its own troubled and dubious implications. Chick lit aims to address the issue of the perks of singlehood in conflict with the contradictory impulse of gaining meaningful coupledness. It is therefore most obvious that in a decade when the number of single women in the urban space was multiplying, when they were living alone, being independent and self-sufficient, and they were faced by the challenge of procuring a suitable companion, the trend would get reflected in popular literature.

Self help books are often associated with the form and content of chick lit novels, because they are confessional and instructive, trying to appeal to a specific sisterhood and having a definite contemporary appeal. Despite the shoddy production and often low quality research, there have been a number of books which aim to provide self-help guide to the young single women surviving in urban India. Self-help books have been an integral part of modern living because shared experience is often taken to be the path to wisdom and better understanding: such books have been in circulation in America and Britain for a long time and by the late 1990s such books found their way into the Indian market to guide women regarding how to sail through the perils of singlehood. Sunny Singh's *Single in the City: The Independent Woman's Handbook* (2000) intends to instruct the single Indian woman about everything from economic prudence to road safety, from travelling to partying, from office affairs to dating hazards, from self sufficiency to everyday health and hygiene, reflecting the plethora of challenges faced by the



young urban modern Indian women. The most remarkable feature of this visibly voluminous book is that it treats young women as a separate species which needs special guidance. This was a book published a good five years before Indian chick lit made its first appearance, but the target readership is equivalent to that of chick lit. The front jacket of the book is matter of fact, with a pair of denim clad legs on a brisk walk, lugging a bag behind. Singh notes that single Indian women do not need to look out to the west for inspiration, rather they can find precedence closer home where both urban and rural women have fought alone to make ends meet in their preceding generations. But the issues addressed are mostly of cosmopolitan single women living on their own thereby limiting the intended readership to city based working women. The all inclusive nature of the book somewhat reflects the author's intention of providing a comprehensive guideline to the ever-increasing number of single women in urban India. Asha Kachru in *Single Women: No Problem – Challenging Indian Realities* (2006) tries to instruct young people on how to live a more fulfilling and less consumerist happy life, alone, but at the same time in close relation to the society. She shares her own experience as a single mother and the experiences of a number of single women who she knew since the 1960s. Incompatibility with partners, broken marriages, widowhood, career and sometimes just the desire to be autonomous are cited as reasons for women to be living alone. Though these women do not populate a major section of the demography, their presence marks the emerging trend of singlehood being treated as an option by many women. Kachru, in her own dissipated style, tries to drive home the fact that the condition of single women in India is significantly different from the plight of those in western nations where feminism has had its sway for a while, and therefore the single Indian woman must fight her own innovative battle to win against the odds. Later books like Amrita Sharma's *What Did I Ever See in Him?: The Modern Woman's Guide to a Perfect Love Life* (2011) are dating manuals designed for city women battling relationship woes, and shows a definite transition from the earlier books in terms of presentation and intent. Now the cover turns visibly chick lit like – pink in colour, with a billowing heart and cursive font – therefore intending to put the book in the same bracket and ensuring better sale banking on the rising popularity of the chick lit novels. These self-help books intend to voice special instructions which would be applicable for women in a semi-traditional yet neo-modernist society, bringing out the personal, humourous, conversational tone of doling out wisdom: once again a convention akin to the chick lit narratives.

When reading chick lit, one cannot fail to notice how compelling the rhetoric of body image is for the protagonist and how she insistently links that to her romantic (and sometimes even







with her other personal and/or professional) failures. Bridget Jones, the chick lit grand dame, with her obsessive calorie counting and weight woes permeated the sentiment to most of the novels to come in the tradition, but the critics most of the times happily overlook the way Helen Fielding chose to portray her obsession: Bridget's neurotic fascination with her weight has been repeatedly shown as nothing but an fixation, with her confidence level fluctuating according to the calorie count. Critics of chick lit harp on how much space in the narrative is devoted to body weight, its measurements, diet and slimming practices but they mostly overlook the factor that the narrator is using this unnatural insistence of the protagonist to mark the tendencies of an entire society to judge the female body. Along with the concerns regarding weight, the necessity for following the proper fashion codes and ensuring the right display of the body is often big for the chick lit heroines. When one cannot overlook the extent of narcissistic impulse that delineates the efforts of these women to beautify themselves, one cannot also possibly undermine how such behavior is treated by the narrator: the characteristic irony in chick lit narratives avoids direct condemnation but amply imply that such behavior is juvenile, shallow and ultimately unrewarding. Beauty and youthfulness which is so desperately pursued by the majority of the chick lit heroines is treated with thinly veiled disapproval, if not blatant censure, by the narrator. But the question that should be addressed is why concerns regarding beauty and youth dominate the consciousness of these educated, working, liberal women to such great extent? Looking into this query, along with exposition to the politics of promoting such draconian rule for women, is instrumental in the reading of chick lit novels. The following section intends to specify how a particular body image took hold over the consciousness of the women in the west and how it has gradually permeated the eastern countries.

The culture of controlling the body, of shaping it through surgery, drugs or rigorous exercise, has been the part of western culture sourced from the overt body consciousness of women who find themselves lacking according to the conventional standards in some way or the other. As Susan Bordo has noted in her insightful study on feminism and body politics, this cultural emphasis on the perfection of the female body affects women from their girlhood, leading to unhealthy dieting and eating disorders. This propagation of the ideal body image has its own commercial impetus where an entire industry of cosmetic corrective procedures has been forged on the myth. Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund write on the prevalence of the Barbie doll figure which has been designated as the yardstick of perfection for the female body in America since the late 1950s. The Barbie doll became not only the new symbol of teen culture but was also the new icon of consumerism and femininity luring the young minds with her sprawling wardrobe and lifestyle accessories. Barbie has long been held to be instrumental in infusing





specific consumer demands in the post-war middle-class consciousness and for promoting a girl culture which was a heady mixture of femininity, fashion and luxury, where being attractive is the way to be popular and therefore the prerequisite of having a fulfilling social and emotional life. Barbie not only as a doll, but as a whole industry of comics, storybooks, autobiographies, fan magazines and the related merchandise was instrumental in upholding a girl culture that highlighted grooming, money and fun as markers of a good life. Despite her sometimes shunning the image of a fashionista and taking on the persona of the progressive professional woman, Barbie essentially remains the symbol of “leisure and consumption, not production” (Urla and Swedlund 404) and her “*hyper-slender, big-chested body has remained fundamentally unchanged over the years*” (Urla and Swedlund 406) (emphasis original). The study broadens up to consider how several anthropometric studies conducted since the late nineteenth century have been instrumental in popularizing an average body weight and a standardized body shape for American women: this average being more precisely an ideal which most women would fail to meet, but driven by the popular trend would ceaselessly try to achieve. But still the vestige of physical fitness as underlined by these anthropomorphic studies had certain positive impetus until popular media resolutely forwarded thin to be the new fashionable. Imposing such an image over popular psychology, that too from a very tender age in the shape of toys, had to have its effects.

During the late nineteenth century, notes Bordo, the earlier spiritual impetus for fasting gradually was replaced by the urge to control food intake with the aim of regulating body weight and shape and it increasingly became a middle-class concern. She enumerates in detail how women suffer ceaselessly to attain the perfect shape and how they cannot get over blaming the “enemy flab” (Bordo 187) and thereby forever fighting the inner devil. Slenderness becoming the key to social acceptance and status provided a substantial push towards rigorous exercise regime, diet control as well as corrective surgical procedures in order to be in shape. Though both men and women were battling body flab, for women being thin became the ultimate mark of being socially deemed as beautiful and youthful, and most importantly properly feminine. The major challenge in the late capitalist economies is therefore to regulate consumption when the market is overflowing with consumable products, which is a veritable challenge to self-discipline. Consumerism and body image are undoubtedly the two major thematic loci of chick lit novels: the protagonists struggle ceaselessly to curb their desire for food, drink and smoke to attain what for them is the ideal lifestyle but miserably fail in their efforts. The censure for not being able to discipline the self and the guilt pangs of the chick lit heroine are exaggerated to the point of being ludicrous. The prevailing lure of consumerist delights versus the overpowering demands of



social norms to deny the self in order to be the owner of the perfect body is the contention the chick lit heroine struggles with. And it is the impossibility of meeting the unreal standards of perfection that the narrator repeatedly hints at resulting in the underlying message of chick lit narratives. Chick lit heroines are undeniably the victims of what Sandra Bartky calls “relentless self-surveillance” (Quoted in Urla and Swedland 419) with their obsessive calorie counting and it is the vanity of it all that the reader is intended to perceive and learn from.

In the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo admits finding eating disorders to have permeated Asian countries: a finding which was different from her initial research a decade back. The inevitable byproduct of globalization of culture and liberalization of economy in India was the massive import and acceptance of the western female body image into the Indian imaginary. Popular television, movies, music videos, periodicals and other print media have become active agents of regular traffic of cultural impressions from the west, especially Hollywood, which has had its effect of cultural neo-colonization of the Indian mind. Since English for a very long time has been a language known to the majority of Indian urban population in varied capacity (both due to the colonial legacy of British imperialism as well as the fact that English has been accepted as a common language of urban communication in a linguistically diverse nation like India), the penetration of the imports from the west was easy and rapid. The effects of globalization, as delineated in several sociological studies, has been held responsible for several modifications in the Indian ethos including the increasing preference of nuclear family units over the traditional elaborate families comprising extended kinship. Women entering the workforce empowered by school/college/university training – a process which demands ample social exposure from an early age – were also a perceived aftereffect of globalization of Indian culture. Meenakshi Thapan notes in her study of gender identity of the adolescent elite woman in the contemporary Indian society: “She is simultaneously a part of tradition, ritual and customary practices, and yet she experiences the more contemporary world through both the education she receives, the diverse images and texts presented by the visual and print media and the peer group culture she is a part of” (Thapan 361). Thapan’s study, which considered the cross-section of urban adolescent women aged between sixteen and seventeen in two schools – one located in Delhi and the other in the southern part of India – brings out how the perception of being overweight (which almost all the interviewees considered themselves to be despite their varied body weight) is linked to social acceptability, especially by the members of the opposite sex in the peer group. A constant threat is that of not being able to live up to the expected body image: Thapan notes that even the girls who are underweight and are conscious of it, also desire to be thinner (Thapan 367). Thapan also



points out how the process of following the norms of grooming and fashion, and thereby conforming to the accepted dictates regarding femininity, has become a part of peer group culture among the Indian urban adolescents. As an inference to the body image as perceived by the girls in late 1990s, Thapan notes:

The young women's understanding of their own embodied selves is also shaped by contemporary global media culture. The plump and even voluptuous female body associated with physical well-being and a deeply sensual sexuality and fertility in classical Indian thought, and reflected in popular art and cinema until the 1960s and 1970s, does not find any place in the idealisation of embodiment by young women in contemporary India. This earlier imagery has been replaced by a re-colonised version that, although grounded in Western cultures, is adapted to acceptable norms and representations in Indian culture. (Thapan 368)

While trying to infer why such western body image dominates teen imagination in urban India (and this is not only the female body, but also the white male lean body that is desired by the same group of girls who were interviewed), Thapan refers to what these girls predominantly read: popular romantic fiction especially Harlequin, popular fashion magazines which are setting up dramatically globalised standards for beauty and fashion, and what they watch: popular Hollywood cinema and American sit-coms. Another overwhelmingly powerful medium of indoctrination is the advertisements appearing on Indian television which has been increasingly opening up to international presentations with the rapid privatization of the sector since the 1990s.

The notion of beauty, which is largely culturally defined and therefore remains in a state of flux with respect to time and place, has undergone rapid changes in India with the onset of globalisation during the 1990s. The occidental concept of beauty has since dominated the Indian mind: Indians already had a fascination for fair skin – once again a colonial legacy with a penchant for the *memsahib's* white skin merged with an age old deep-rooted Aryan-Dravidian conflict of fair and dark skin tones – and now it added slenderness to the prescribed parameters of beauty. Megha Dhillon and Priti Dhawan in their study of dissatisfaction regarding weight among adolescent girls and young women refer to “body surveillance”<sup>(540)</sup> and the constant mental anxiety and the sense of shame that ensues with not being able to comply with the established standards of body perfection and beauty. Beauty pageants which idolised the slender fair well-groomed women became increasingly popular after both the Miss World and Miss Universe titles were won by Indian women in 1994 and the legacy continued in the following years with many more Indian women claiming titles in global beauty contests. Gymnasiums, diet



food and cosmetic procedures for weight reduction and body correction gradually found an elaborate market in India as more and more women tried to fit the bill. In Dhillon and Dhawan's study, the young interviewees reflect a constant anxiety regarding their body image which is correlated to their eating habits, level of confidence and desirability to the members of the opposite sex: the young girls voice a constant dissatisfaction regarding not being able to eat what they want to eat for the fear of gaining weight and not being able to wear what they want to wear for the fear of attracting ridicule. Only 30 percent of the total number of women interviewed related weight loss to better health, for the rest it was only to gain social acceptability and appreciation.

Moving forward from the adolescent girls, Jaita Talukdar researched regarding the dieting and slimming practices of the urban professionally trained and/or employed women in India. Talukdar places emphasis on the process of globalisation combined with commercial expansion of the western market which made the western standardised slender body the norm during the 1990s: she points out that the international brands of clothing which were in the process of gaining entry in the Indian market and gradually becoming the mark of fashion for the urban working women, were specifically designed for that particular idealised body type. Indian feminists have ever been vocal about the disruption caused by the incorporation of a foreign body image through the fashion and film industry which were leading Indian women struggle to obtain an unnatural ideal and leading them to acquire eating disorders. But the negotiation with weight for Indian women assumes a complex dimension (as it does for other western imports) and Talukdar argues that it inhabits a middle position between westernised ultra thin bodies and traditional demands which constitutes Indian womanhood. Both Talukdar and Dhillon and Dhawan note that the respondents clearly avoid terming the process of controlling their food habits as 'dieting': which no doubt has a cultural implication since dieting as a practice is held to be alien and such a reference produces discomfort, presumably because dieting evokes the popular imported image of the anorexic white woman which is not the anticipated result that Indian women strive to achieve. Indian women, notes Talukdar, strives to maintain the thin structure but regularly camouflages it as an attempt to stay healthy, since acknowledging their attempt to lose weight to satisfy male gaze or social expectations would undermine the progress these professional women are aiming to achieve by being able to enter the workforce by countering the orthodox binaries. Despite the varied impulses behind the ceaseless efforts for attaining the right body, the end result is deemed as a manifestation of "*modern identity* – to express themselves as thoughtful and motivated workers, efficient managers of their families, and purposeful participants in public life" (Talukdar 116) (emphasis original). This constant negotiation with weight is very much a central aspect of the construction of the modern identity



of the Indian chick lit heroine. Social expectations definitely play a role in crafting the body image of the Indian chick lit heroine and the process comments on the negotiation of Indian popular culture with its western counterpart, thereby together providing a joint social commentary on the politics of body image as negotiated by the cosmopolitan Indian woman at the turn of the century.

Through the course of the present paper it has been attempted to trace the factors – social, economic and cultural – which prepared a rich market for creating the demand for Indian chick lit. The trend gained momentum in no time, with more and more women writers catering to the popular demands and coming up with these sassy girl heroines, conflicted and confused, distressed with the modern – traditional conflict, negotiating with the home – work balance, dealing with the alien space of competitive professionalism, but ultimately learning to negotiate with the new way of life. The city girl now needed to have an alternative to Harlequin to tell her own stories, and Indian chick lit came across as an excellent medium of communicating that shared experience. Frowned upon as commercial cheap paperbacks, not attracting enough critical attention and oftentimes just relegated as copy-paste versions of Western chick lit, Indian chick lit novels indeed provide a comprehensive overview of the changing times in the context of a globalised neoliberal India.

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