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Chick Lit And Cricketing Nationalism: The Significance of Genre in Anuja Chauhan's
The Zoya Factor

Abstract: Cricketing nationalisms in contemporary India often assume ultranationalist overtones, with popular discourses on the sport implying that it is only 'natural' that all patriotic citizens pay obeisance to this nationalist sport. This essay offers a close reading of Anuja Chauhan's popular novel *The Zoya Factor* (2008), tracing a problematic conversion narrative wherein the protagonist, who is critical of the hegemonic nature of cricketing nationalisms, is transformed into a nationalist cricket fan. The essay argues that in *The Zoya Factor*, both the initial challenge and ultimate endorsement of the hegemonic cricketing nationalisms are enabled by the generic imperatives of the chick lit novel.

Keywords: Cricket; Nationalism; Chick Lit; Feminism.

Cricketing nationalisms in contemporary India often assume ultranationalist overtones, with popular discourses on the sport implying that it is only 'natural' that all patriotic citizens pay obeisance to this nationalist sport. Such discourses of 'compulsory nationalism' are problematic, for the national imaginary constructed through cricket narratives often affords a secondary status to such disenfranchised groups as Muslims, Dalits, and women. This point is

ably illustrated by Anand's (2002) argument that the popular cricket movie *Lagaan* reduces both women and the sole Dalit character to passive roles (n.p.). Another widely discussed instance of disempowering cricketing nationalisms would be the way in which Muslims in India are often expected to prove their patriotism by supporting the Indian cricket team against Pakistan (Guha 2002:409-10).

This essay offers a close reading of Anuja Chauhan's popular novel *The Zoya Factor* (2008), tracing a problematic conversion narrative wherein the protagonist, who is critical of the hegemonic nature of cricketing nationalisms, is transformed into a nationalist cricket fan. The essay argues that in *The Zoya Factor*, both the initial challenge and ultimate endorsement of the hegemonic cricketing nationalisms are enabled by the generic imperatives of the chick lit novel. The essay consists of two sections: The first section of the essay shows that the chick lit's prioritizing of the personal interests of the protagonist enables the novel to resist the political rhetoric of nationalist cricket, thereby defying the 'compulsory nationalist' ideology. The second section shows that the romantic subplot, which forms the crux of chick lit novels, brings about the protagonist's (and hence the narrative's) embracing of the hegemonic ideology of cricketing nationalism.

A brief overview of the novel would be in order. *The Zoya Factor* is a chick lit novel centred on Zoya Singh Solanki, a 28-year-old advertising executive who was born at the very moment in which India won the 1983 Cricket World Cup. She comes into contact with the Indian cricket team led by Nikhil Khoda while working with them for a commercial, and the younger members of the team learn of the moment of her birth. They realize that whenever Zoya breakfasts with the team they are extremely successful, and a theory spreads that she is a "lucky charm". Thus Zoya is drafted to accompany the team to Australia in their quest for the World Cup. The rest of the novel features Zoya's incredible success as a lucky charm, the associated

controversies, and her tumultuous romantic relationship with the Indian captain who does not believe in luck and lucky charms.

Cricket in a Women's Tale: Challenging Compulsory Nationalisms

In Anuja Chauhan's *Zoya Factor*, the 'compulsory' nationalist discourses on cricket are presented and challenged. As mentioned earlier, the novel's challenge of nationalist discourses derives from the nature of the chick lit genre to which it belongs. Sarah Gormley, in her introduction to an issue of *Working Papers on the Web* which focuses on chick lit, has pointed out that the emphasis on career and the problems faced in the workplace is an important feature of the chick-lit genre (2009: n.p.). Along with relationships and motherhood, their career is usually a source of anxiety for the chick lit heroines. Often there is a struggle to balance career and family. In *Zoya Factor*, nationalist cricket affects Zoya's career and causes her to disapprove of (nationalist) cricket.

Zoya says:

But the even worse news was that Zing! Co [a fictitious soft drink giant] had obviously gone and signed up the cricketers again. I mean, when were these people ever going to learn? Wasn't the last World Cup — where our 'best batting line-up in the world on paper' had got out right at the very first stage itself — be enough of a lesson for them? They'd sunk seriously obscene amounts of money into an intensely patriotic Zing! Together Now, India campaign, and then they'd had to scramble to take it off the air before the irate public burnt down their trucks and hoardings and totalled [sic] their factories.

All of us at the agency had had to scurry around; creating new ads for them to run on the World Cup slots they'd paid so much money for. . . .

The whole sorry circus had turned me into a cricket cynic for life. (11; emphasis in original)

Thus Zoya disapproves of cricket because the patriotism associated with cricket affects her professional life. The commercial angle of cricketing nationalism is explicitly referred to here.

In this instance, the narrator is not disappointed at the national team's loss per se and is upset by the damage that the loss did to her clients. Boing has pointed out that, in a chick lit novel the first person narration enables the focalization of the story on the protagonist (18). By maintaining the chick lit's focus on the protagonists' professional life and viewing nationalist cricket from that perspective, the novel is challenging the 'naturalness' and the primacy of the nationalist discourses of cricket. Also, the reference to the possibility of the public burning down the cricket team sponsors' properties hints at the ugly face of Indian cricketing nationalism. This challenge of the discourses of cricketing nationalism is repeated in several parts of the novel.

The phrase "compulsory nationalism" used in this essay reflects the fact that popular discourses on Indian cricket often tend to assume that it is the duty of the citizen to support the national cricket team. In the novel, the notion that Zoya is a lucky charm for cricket team results in serious infringement of her personal liberty. In a panel discussion in the midst of the World Cup, somebody suggests that the 'Zoya factor' gave India an unfair advantage and if that is not the case then the Indian team should have no objection to her not having breakfast with the team. The board president Jogpal Lohia's response is significant:

'Fine, so even if she does have some special...um...powers, there's nothing in the Laws of Cricket that disallows it. She's a national resource, that's all! The Saudis have oil, the Africans have rhythm, the English have...um, interesting teeth, and we have Zoya! Legally, you people don't have a leg to stand on'. (402; emphasis added)

The characterization of Zoya as a national resource highlights the fact that within the 'compulsory nationalist' discourse, Zoya is seen as an entity without agency who is at the nation's disposal to be used as per necessity.

The novel, however, does not present Zoya as a passive subject, and she is both aware of and vociferously resists the attempts to curtail her personal liberty. This emphasis on personal

freedom can be attributed to the fact that many works of chick lit have feminist overtones and they are concerned about the freedom of the protagonists. Citing various scholars, Gormley has pointed out that due to the influence of feminism, chick lit protagonists are characters with a considerable degree of autonomy (n.p.). An early instance of this tussle between nationalist cricket and a feminist non-fan can be found when the fast bowler Zahid Pathan wants to test the 'lucky charm theory' by inviting her to have breakfast with his IPL team. However, Zoya is reluctant:

'Listen, it's very sweet of you guys to have so much faith in me, but my job and my privacy are very important to me. You guys have band bajaoed both'.

'Zoyaji! 'Zahid made a dismissive gesture with a large calloused hand.'what is privacy? Arrey, where's your patriotism? You have been especially blessed so that you can serve your country!' (119)

Thus Zoya's supposed ability to win cricket matches intrudes upon her private life and Zoya is well aware that it is an intrusion. However, she is expected to prioritize the interests of the nation above her personal interests.

The biggest breach of Zoya's personal freedom in the name of nationalism is the contract the cricket board wants her to sign. The contract stipulates, among other things — that she has to remain unmarried till the end of the World Cup, that she has no right to fast even for religious or medical reasons, that she has to kiss at least one member of the team on the cheek before every match and that she is forbidden from having any other bodily contact with the members of the team and so on. The wording of the contract presumes that the board has a right to infringe upon all aspects of Zoya's personal life in order to protect the national interests. In keeping with the novel's trend of resisting the 'compulsory nationalist' ideology, she refuses to sign the contract on the grounds that it intrudes on her "personal space" (173).

Towards the end of the novel, Vikram Goyal, a young cricketer tries to force himself on Zoya in order to gain luck in the cricket field. At that point, Zoya realizes the extent to which her personal freedom has been compromised:

Oh God, I was so sick of cricket! I felt suddenly, violently, homesick. What was I doing here? I didn't even like this game; I used to have a life, a good one, one that I was perfectly satisfied with. What did I really hope to achieve out of this whole idiotic circus? (427)

The cricketer trying to force Zoya into having sexual intercourse with him is symbolic of the nature of 'compulsory nationalism' which strips the citizens of their sovereignty. As with the case of the other passages, Zoya both recognizes and deeply resents the infringement upon her personal rights. In all these instances, Zoya dismisses the nationalist rhetoric associated with cricket and thus defies the 'compulsory nationalist' worldview as per which one has to accept the nationalist rhetoric of cricket.

Another significant way in which *The Zoya Factor* resists cricketing nationalisms is by Zoya's appropriation of cricket for her personal interests. While the nationalist cricket 'uses' Zoya —demanding that she accept the nationalist interpretation of cricket and thus insisting that she should prioritize nationalist cricket over her personal life — Zoya too 'uses' cricket for her personal advancement. Since the chick lit novel focalizes the narrative on the protagonist, the events are interpreted from her point of view and according to her priorities. In many parts of *Zoya Factor*, this results in cricket being seen only as a means of personal advancement for Zoya, and this reading conflicts with and counters the nationalist rhetoric of cricket and by extension, the 'compulsory nationalist' worldview.

Even though Zoya does not believe in the 'lucky charm' theory she enjoys the importance that she receives as a result of the whole issue. Thus she was uneasy before a match in the mini World Cup:

I didn't have the stomach to watch the match in the stands. Though my Standing-in-thee-Society[sic] had moved up a lot since the last match (VVIP enclosure passes lay on my dressing table now!) I didn't fancy seeing my Lucky Charm status being ground to dust lives in the Sher-e-Bangla Stadium. . . . (81)

During the same match when India's position is shaky, Zoya (who is the narrator) confesses: "Because even though I knew it was idiotic I had been getting a bit of a cheap thrill out of maybe being a lucky charm" (83, emphasis in original). The 'compulsory nationalist' worldview would consider the national team's fortune to be of the highest priority and in that perspective, Zoya's personal life is less important than the nationalist cricket. But in the above passages, Zoya interprets cricket not in terms of its importance to the nation, but in terms of what it means to her personally. For her, cricket is a means of personal advancement, and the other meanings of cricket are of lesser significance.

Another instance would be Zoya's refusal to cooperate with Zahid Pathan's plan of testing the 'lucky charm' theory by making her have breakfast with his IPL team. After she calls and informs him about her decision, she is extremely sad: "I slammed the phone down, a crushing feeling of anti-climax sweeping over me. My innings as an important person, as a national lucky charm was going to be over before they ever really began" (123; emphasis in original). Again, the events are interpreted from an intensely personal point of view. Later on, Zoya decides to go have breakfast with the team not because she changed her mind about the invasion of privacy but because for her, the association with cricket is a path to a more exciting life. The change of mind is triggered by a dinner date with a relative that she attends at her father's insistence. It is the prospect of being stuck in an 'ordinary' marriage that makes Zoya changes her mind (130-131). She is thus concerned solely with what cricket can offer her, and this perspective serves to counter the widespread valorisation of cricket.

Zoya's personal stake in cricket makes her reject the nationalist interpretation of cricket. After a dinner date during the World Cup, Nikhil Khoda drops Zoya off back in her hotel and tells her that he may not be able to spend such an evening again soon because he has spent his entire life preparing for this tournament and he can't afford any distractions. Zoya's mental response is interesting: "I somehow managed to suppress the urge to say it's just cricket, you know and nodded understandingly" (250; emphasis in original). For Zoya, cricket is less important than her personal life. Both here and in the passages cited above, Zoya challenges the nationalist cricket by interpreting cricket solely on the basis of its significance to her life. If in the earlier passages cricket was something positive that added 'glamour' to her life, here cricket is something that intrudes into her romantic life.

Zoya is extremely disappointed when she is unable to accompany the team to New Zealand for a World Cup match because someone has torn out the visa from her passport. She is afraid that India might win the match without her presence, and people might start believing that she is not a 'lucky charm' after all. She wishes Zahid Pathan good luck over the phone and the narrator says, "I hung up, frowning a little, hating to admit it to myself even, the way the ugly, world-famous Indian Crab Mentality had suddenly risen up and tightened its slimy pincers around my erstwhile patriotic heart" (286).

Zoya's attitude is spelt out even more clearly:

I wanted India to lose the match.

Why? Because — and this is pretty gruesome stuff to know about oneself — if they won they would start thinking they didn't need me anymore.

No more special status.

No more Agarbatti contract.

No more Nikhil Khoda.

So much for a patriotic girl whose whole family has served in the army and whose uncle had got a Mahavir Chakra in the '71 war. (287; emphasis in original)

For Zoya, the team's fortune is important only to the extent to which it affects her. Throughout the course of the match, Zoya wants India to lose and it is only when a little boy starts crying, heartbroken at India's lose, that Zoya starts to feel ashamed. Again, when Zoya's personal interest clashes with the nationalist interpretation of cricket, the former is prioritized.

All About Love: Embracing Cricketing Nationalism

While the elements of the chick lit genre present in the novel enable Zoya Factor to challenge the discourses of 'compulsory nationalism', the features of the genre ultimately bring about a reversal of the cultural politics of the text. The previous section has shown that the emphasis on the personal interests of the protagonist counters the nationalist rhetoric of cricket and thus resists 'compulsory nationalism'. The following shows that the novel ultimately endorses the ideology of cricketing nationalism, as the romantic subplot, the most important element of a chick lit novel, fuses the nationalist interests with the protagonist's personal interests.

In the novel, Zoya's instant attraction towards Nikhil Khoda, the Indian captain, enables the fusing of the nationalist and Zoya's personal interests. Thus Nikhil's suggestion that Zoya should accompany the team to the World Cup is problematic: Zoya ends up allowing her life to be interrupted to 'serve the nation' but in the narrative, it gets transformed into a romantic invitation. Khoda's visit to Zoya's locality and the walk they take around the Karol Bagh market simultaneously draws Zoya to Khoda and the 'lucky charm' to the Indian team (184-194). Nikhil's invitation is not as coercive as the terms of the contract offered by the cricket board. Nevertheless, the strand of romance disguises the fact that Zoya decides to leave her life and career in order to accompany the team. At the same time, this incident cannot be read as a straightforward endorsement of 'compulsory nationalism', since even though Zoya is serving

the cause of nationalist cricket, she does not accept the nationalist rhetoric of cricket. She accepts the invitation to go to Australia due to personal (romantic) reasons and this can also be read as another instance of the 'personal' interpretation of cricket that was discussed in the previous section.

Zoya gradually becomes a genuine supporter of the cricket team and her support for the team can be interpreted as being motivated by personal reasons. The romantic relationship changes the protagonist's attitude towards nationalist cricket itself. While Zoya dislikes nationalist cricket at the beginning of the novel and has little nationalistic qualms while wanting India to lose against Bermuda in New Zealand just because she could not accompany the team, her attitude is different when fever prevents her from having breakfast with the team before the match against Australia. At this point, the romance between Zoya and the Indian captain is well underway. Even though they were in the middle of lovers' spat, Zoya had reasons to believe that Nikhil was interested in her, having run into him the previous night and having discovered that her photo was on the screen of his mobile phone. Hence at this point, Zoya's personal interest in Nikhil makes her support the team. At the beginning of the match, the narrator says, "The great Indian Crab Mentality surfaced in my heart, but only half-heartedly" (354). It can be argued that Zoya's 'crab mentality' is half-hearted because she wants her 'boyfriend' Nikhil to win and thus her agenda matches overlap with that of nationalist cricket. She, therefore, gets agitated when a commentator predicts that India would lose.

Towards the end of the novel, Zoya comes to India during the gap between the semi-finals and the finals to shoot for an Agarbatti commercial. This decision to use cricket to her personal advantage is motivated by her suspicion that Nikhil Khoda does not actually love her and that he was only pretending to like her so that she would accompany the team to Australia for the World Cup. At the shooting spot, she learns that the script venerates her as a lucky charm while simultaneously degrading the Indian cricket team in general and Nikhil in particular. She also

realizes that the cricket board's patronage of her is part of a conspiracy to make the team lose their confidence and underperform so that the board President Jogpal Lohia can appoint his protégé as captain in Nikhil Khoda's place. She refuses to do the advertisement. This refusal to be part of a conspiracy to weaken the national team's morale is at least partly motivated by her love for Nikhil.

At this point, Zoya is faced with a dilemma as to whether she should go back to Australia in time for the World Cup finals. She realizes that going back to Australia and thus allowing the 'lucky charm theory' to continue, she would actually be weakening the self-confidence of the team. Eventually, her love for Nikhil plays a major role in her decision to stay back in India and to thus forego some lucrative financial opportunities that had been offered to the 'lucky charm'. She asks her brother Zoravar for advice: "He opened his eyes very wide. 'Nothing,' he said. 'I mean, if you cared about Nikhil Khoda the smartest thing to do would be to refuse to go to Australia. Let him win it on his own if he can'" (466, emphasis in original). Soon afterwards Zoya takes a walk and she mulls over her future course of action:

I'd told Zoravar and Dad that I didn't give a damn about Nikhil getting shafted, but of course, I did. And if I believed what Zoravar said, which I did, especially after the way Jogpal had reacted to it, I would have to believe that Nikhil really didn't give a damn about my luckiness; which of course made me start to hope that he gave a damn about me. (467-68; emphasis in original)

Thus Zoya's love for Nikhil plays a major role in promoting her to do what is good for the national cricket team. Her mind is made up by a game of street cricket that she witnesses during the course of her walk. One of the boys, who pulls off a heroic catch, reminds her of Zahid Pathan. The whole street, Zoya and the street vendors included applaud the effort and the narrator says:

And that's when I had a sudden splendid revelation. If I was a Goddess of the Game, born at the greatest 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 in the Final, all I'd end up doing was erode their faith in their own ability. (470; emphasis in original)

This passage is crucial because at this point Zoya accepts the nationalist rhetoric of cricket on its own merit, rather than to further her personal interests. Here, Zoya is shown as instinctively connecting the cricket played in the streets to 'nationalist' cricket. The very fact that this incident that triggered Zoya's epiphany that she should 'protect' Indian cricket on her own terms indicates that she has internalised the nationalist interpretation of cricket.

It is significant that Zoya gains two strands of affiliation almost simultaneously: In addition to becoming a votary of cricketing nationalism, she also becomes convinced of the sincerity of Nikhil Khoda's affection for her. From that point onwards Zoya supports the Indian cricket team unambiguously and wants the team to win. She passionately backs the Indian team during the World Cup Final and prays for both Nikhil and the team. The Indian team go on to win the World Cup and in true chick-lit fashion, Zoya and Nikhil are reunited. The plot of the novel thus ensures that it is impossible to separate Zoya's personal interests and her 'genuine' emotional investment in nationalist cricket. Thus the dynamics of the chick lit genre completely fuses the nationalist interest and the personal one, thereby resulting in the conversion of a non-fan into an ardent nationalist cricket fan.

The above analysis has established that in *The Zoya Factor*, chick lit form has diffused the counter-hegemonic potential of the narrative. The novel reinforces the widespread notion that it is impossible for Indians to remain sceptical of cricket and cricket nationalism, and thus devalues the very identity of a 'cricket cynic'. In the current climate of bellicose — and often

exclusionary — cricketing nationalisms, such a narrative negation of dissenting voices contributes to regressive cultural politics.

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