

## **Indian Chick Lit in English: Adopted or Adapted**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper will look at the short history of the genre as it began in the West and trace how the term ‘Chick Lit’ was ironically adopted in its present context. Further it will examine the genre as it was imported outside its Anglo-American environment, particularly to India. The influence of the two master plots on Indian Chick Lit and its transformation in the globalized Indian milieu or the Indian-isation of Chick Lit will be explored, while highlighting its divergences and overlaps. An assessment of the genre as a Western literary construct modified and embraced by new age Indian writers will also be made.

**Keywords:** Chick Lit, Indian Chick Lit, Masala Chick Lit, Anuja Chauhan, Commercial Fiction, Women’s Writings.

It was in an eponymous weekly column in the newspaper *Independent* (London) where Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* first made its appearance on February 28, 1995. Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* too had its origins in the daily *The New York Observer* where the eponymous column appeared from 1994 to 1996. What these columns had unknowingly given birth to were the source texts of a new genre located boldly at the crossroads of literature and gender. Cheekily titled as Chick Lit, this new writing rapidly became an astonishing commercial and publishing success – with the columns being successfully adapted to bestseller books and top-grossing movies – moving beyond from just being a transatlantic trend, and snowballing into a cultural phenomenon cutting across precincts of age, race, religion, colour, and even sex. Even though *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* are not by any means the only texts to define and comprehensively contain the genre's characteristics, they have, because of their unparalleled popularity and successful screen adaptations, come to be considered as master tropes for the genre. By 2002, *Bridget Jones's Diary* had sold eight million copies all over the world and since, has been translated in thirty-three languages, making it a major British cultural export. This paper will look at the short history of the genre as it began in the West and trace how the term 'Chick Lit' was ironically adopted in its present context. Further it will examine the genre as it was imported outside its Anglo-American environment, particularly to India. The influence of the two master plots on Indian Chick Lit and its transformation in the globalized Indian milieu or the Indian-isation of Chick Lit will be explored, while highlighting its divergences and overlaps. An assessment of the genre as a Western literary construct modified and embraced by new age Indian writers will also be made.

Often confused with the name of a chewing gum, the term 'Chick Lit' first came up in the talks of students of "Female Literary Tradition Course" offered in mid- to late 1980s by Elaine Showalter at Princeton University. Little did she know that the moniker will soon come to embody another type of writing. It was still women's writing, but not quite the same. Chick Lit soon grew out in various directions all over the globe spawning chick protagonists, authors and readers in its wake. The term had come a full circle: from being used as a scoffing term for Princeton's course devoted to female literary tradition, to be appropriated again in literary parlance as commercial fiction for women.

The entry of an Indian protagonist on the Chick Lit scene was made long after the genre had developed and matured in England and America, made its presence felt in Poland,

Italy, Finland, Communist Eastern Europe, and made a cultural and ideological impact on Hungarian chick lit. At its earliest Chick Lit featuring Indian-American protagonists came out of America in the early 2000s with protagonists living a modern life in America. Kavita Daswani with her debut novel *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003) became the frontrunner with a subsequent novel being published each year. On the cover are quoted praises by *Library Journal* calling it a “*Bridget Jones’s Diary* with a distinct Indian flavor” and *Boston Globe* dubbed it as “*My Big Fat Greek Wedding...* with a curry twist.” Daswani followed it up with *Everything Happens for a Reason* (2004), *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2004), *Salaam Paris* (2006), and *Indie Girl* (2007). The last one touted as “a story that combines *The Devil Wears Prada* with *The Nanny Diaries*, but with an Indian twist” was her debut in the Young Adult fiction market. All of Daswani’s protagonists begin their story from a life set in India but soon find themselves living on foreign shores where their stories are hinged on the sole act of an arranged marriage which has brought them there. Arranged marriage is played as the springboard of their Indian ethos. Anjali Banerjee’s *Imaginary Men* (2005) is about Lina Ray - a matchmaker in San Francisco with a very traditional Indian family – who finds an Indian prince before (as the blurb says) - her life “turns into a Bollywood movie gone horribly wrong”. Her next novel *Invisible Lives* (2007) tells the story of Lakshmi who runs a sari shop in Seattle and “was born with a magical ability to perceive secret longings in others” (back cover). She too has to make a decision between a marriage arranged by her father, and her feelings for an American chauffeur. Sonia Singh used the Indian formula in *Goddess for Hire* (2004), *Bollywood Confidential* (2005), and *Ghost Interrupted* (2007), all published from Harper Collins New York’s Chick Lit imprint Avon Trade. Correspondingly, Harlequin’s Chick Lit imprint Red Dress Ink is the publishing house that represents Poonam Sharma – an American of Indian origin - author of *Girl Most Likely To* (2007) and *All Eyes on Her* (2008). Sharma, educated at Phillips Exeter and Harvard University, and an MBA from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, has worked in a private equity firm in New York. She brings a South Asian experience to the imprint’s oeuvre, with her novels discussing similar dilemmas as those of her fellow writers at Red Dress Ink - the everyday struggles of career versus dating, walking the tight rope of expectations and demands of family, and the satisfaction of personal desires – as experienced by an Indian-American. At the sombre end of the spectrum lie novels like Shobhan Bantwal’s *The Dowry Bride*, and Monica Pradhan’s *The Hindi-Bindi Club*—almost too similar to Amy

Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*—both published in 2007. These too present an India that the West has come to love. While Pradhan's book opens with a phonetic explanation of her protagonists' Indian names, Batwal's includes an author's note describing the complex Indian culture to its readers. The novels often come with a promise of vivid descriptions of Indian customs that will enchant readers.

But the most (in) famous Indian Chick Lit is Harvard's sophomore Kaavya Viswanathan's *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, And Got a Life* (2006). The book and its copies were pulled off the shelves by the publisher Little Brown & Co. New York after discerning readers discovered plagiarised sections including dialogues, situations and scenes from books of Megan McCafferty - who is among the most recognised writers of Young Adult fiction. Later readers also exposed similarities between Salman Rushdie's *Fury*, and famous authors of Chick Lit series: Meg Cabot's *the Princess Diaries* and Sophie Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret*. These books' popularity lies in their protagonists' supposed Indian-ness garnering for the works and their authors a solid fan following in the West. Termed as Masala Chick Lit, their titles and taglines often include a hint of Indian exotica meant exclusively for the western audience. The formulaic Indian stereotypes are almost always exploited, with contemporary Indian realities making no appearance at all. The very moniker this genre has earned reflects the exotic and foreign appeal of Indian export to the West.

It was only in the year 2004 that Penguin India Books published Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake*, which was called "a desi *Bridget Jones's Diary*" in a review by *India Today*. Kaushal asserts "At the time I wrote *Piece of Cake*, nothing had ever been written about the single working-woman experience in India" (qtd. in Thottam). But since then, there seems to have been rapid surge of witty and humorous novels chronicling the life of urban women in city. The novel's protagonist, twenty-nine-year-old Minal Sharma, Associate Products Manager at International Foods, has to deal with her mother's attempts to get her married by sending matrimonial advertisements in newspapers; guard her career from a spineless boss, as also from the office's in-house fashionista Lolita who poses a threat to her promotion, and a new colleague who turns out to be a grudge-bearing foe from her childhood on a mission to sabotage her career; choose between a wild and sexy but younger radio-jockey and a boring, brilliant and unscrupulous oncologist. It became a best-selling debut novel, encouraging Kaushal to make her foray into the Young Adult fiction market with *A Girl Like Me* (2008) narrating the travails of an Indian teenager as she returns from Minnesota to adjust to a life in India. After testing the waters

that produced favourable results, Penguin Books came out with Rupa Gulab's *Girl Alone* in the subsequent year. The novel introduced the particular feminine angst that is displayed by Arti, its emotionally insecure, intellectual snob, cough-syrup junkie protagonist, who is a firm believer in the healing properties of T. S. Eliot's poetry and rock bands' nerve-soothing effects. As she struggles to find professional satisfaction, she has to find a decent man in Mumbai who shares her appreciation for Woody Allen and D. H. Lawrence, and with whom she can live happily ever after; or else she has to marry a man hand-picked by her mother in Kolkata. The book claims to contain saucy tips on surviving single in the city. Overwhelmed by the success of her debut novel, Gulab came out with a matron/hen lit novel *The Great Depression of the 40s* in 2010. In 2006 Rupa publications also jumped into the market with Rajashree's *Trust Me*. Priced economically at INR 95, it cost less than half of Penguin's Chick Lit novel, and remains a best seller, with its twelfth impression out in just three years. Set like its predecessors in the city of Bombay, it narrates the experiences of Paro – a girl from Amravati – as she works in the film industry gaining first-hand knowledge about black money, casting couch and immoral actors.

After setting up a successful Chick Lit imprint Avon Trade in the West, HarperCollins too dived headlong in women's commercial fiction market in India with Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* (2007). The novel was a joint venture that HarperCollins Publications India shared with The India Today Group. The successful partnership between them will no doubt see many successful Chick Lit novels minted out in the consequent years. With the tagline that asks "Is there any such thing as a perfect relationship?" Kala scored with all women in, or looking for a relationship. The book has since been translated in Hindi and is into its eleventh impression within three years. Centred on Aisha Bhatia, twenty-nine years old Guests Relation Manager at the Grand Orchid Hotel, Delhi, the novel records the dilemmas of the young, hip girls and their gay friends as they look for love in Delhi. The novel turned into such a hit that Kala landed a lucrative deal as a scriptwriter for Yash Raj Films. Next year saw another publishing house strike gold with a debut Chick Lit novel by Smita Jain who has written scripts and screenplays for numerous television soaps. Self-deprecatingly titled *Kkrishnaa's Confessions*, it is the story of Kkrishnaa - impulsive, gutsy and unapologetically ambitious primetime scriptwriter suffering a writer's block - who, while looking for inspiration, witnesses a murder, then steals, seduces, and spends a night behind bars to avoid losing her job to her ex-flame. Apart from Westland, Penguin, Rupa and HarperCollins-IndiaToday – after having captured the market successfully – launched more novels in 2008. Penguin asked Meenakashi Reddy Madhavan to

launch her popular blog *The Compulsive Confessor* as a book entitled *You Are Here* (2008) recounting fictional character Arshi's life at twenty-five, with its innumerable entanglements, including an American stepmom trying too hard a task of finding correct labels for men in her life, a cheating ex-boyfriend, and a heinous boss; all this confounds her as she wonders - can there ever be enough alcohol and postcoital cuddling? HarperCollins-IndiaToday came out with Anuja Chauhan's over five-hundred-pages long *The Zoya Factor* (2008) about an advertising executive Zoya Singh Solanki's journey with the Indian Cricket team to the ICC World Cup Championships as its official goddess of lucky charm. Anuja Chauhan has been a known name in Indian advertising for over fourteen years. Priced not so thriftily at rupees three hundred, it is the longest among the Indian Chick Lit novels. It proved to be a first in many other fields too. Not only did it win the *Cosmopolitan* magazine's Fun Fearless Female award for Literature, thus acknowledging, validating, and establishing the genre - with an identifiable and set features of narrative practices with a rom-com emphasis - and its popularity; it also marked the entry of Indian Chick Lit into Bollywood as the novel became the first in the genre to have its movie rights sold. Chauhan's second novel *Battle for Bittora* (2010) was inaugurated by Saif Ali Khan. Since then the market has been flooded by debut novels telling stories of twenty-something women as they juggle their careers and wait for Mr. Right. These titles jostle for space with second and subsequent novels of the afore-mentioned writers as they play their next innings by venturing into markets created by subgenres of Chick Lit.

But can the sudden growth of Chick Lit novels in the Indian market or the abrupt interest of publication giants in this paperback industry of women's fiction be considered a sheer co-incidence? After all Indian Chick Lit took almost a decade since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* to grab the attention of the publishing industry and to enter the popular-fiction market. One of the reasons can be the hugely successful big-screen adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 2001. Or the six-year television series run of *Sex and the City* that ran from 1998 to 2004, and the commercial jackpot the directors hit at the tenth anniversary movie adaptation of the same which went on to earn 50 million US dollars in its first six-months run. There is no denying the fact that it has definitely helped in creating a market. These are legitimate and most influential reasons for the genre's popularity not only in India but in other global and regional markets too. It is in the early 2000s that home-grown Chick Lit novels debuted in most non-English speaking countries. But in India, Chick Lit's ingress in the popular fiction market was aided by another reason. Around the

same time, the English publishing industry in India was going through an explosion – a phase which is attributed to a sole man who goes by the name of Chetan Bhagat.

Bhagat's debut novel *Five Point Someone* was published in 2004, and has sold more than a million copies since then. It has been made into a multi-million grossing Bollywood movie with a superstar cast under a stellar direction house. Says fellow writer Anirban Bose: "Chetan Bhagat's success demonstrated that there was a huge market for Indian fiction, with everyday Indian characters acting out everyday Indian stories". Like fellow writer Gulab's decision that she wanted to write a fun book, Bhagat confesses, "I didn't have the baggage of other Indian authors," he says. "I just wanted to write a fun book" (qtd. in Thottam). Amitabha Bagchi - whose debut novel *Above Average* was one in the line of many that have followed in the wake of Bhagat's literary success – says, young Indians want to read about themselves "not entirely as an act of narcissism but also as part of a process of adapting to, and learning to live in, a social milieu that is evolving faster than most people can comprehend" (qtd. in Thottam). Accounting for the cause of the stupendous success of pop fiction, novelist and publisher Namita Gokhale explains that in the recent few years everything has undergone a steep change suddenly "so people use these books to try to find where they're located in all this. And that has made the new pop fiction a runaway success" (Thottam). This fresh discovery of the market for popular fiction for the urban professional Indian witnessed a surge of novels with new voices. The issues and themes were not only identifiable and contemporary – including college-life, looking for a job, finding love – but the English used by the characters too was unpretentious and hit the right spot with students and call-centre cubicle executives alike. The market was tapped by Penguin Books India which launched an imprint MetroReads in 2010 under whose banner popular commercial fiction was published. Claiming its books as fun, feisty, fast reads for the reader on the go, it entered the market with a fuchsia pink covered *Where Girls Dare* (2010) about a group of Lady Cadets training at Officers' Training Academy. The author is Bhavna Chauhan who had earlier written for magazines like *Femina*, *Women's Era*, and *Cosmopolitan* among others. Till date it has launched eight titles, out of which two are Chick Lit. The other is Madhuri Banerjee's *Saving My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* (2011) which became the first Indian Chick Lit novel to appear on 'Chick Lit Is Not Dead', an international Chick Lit fan site.

The seeds of Indian Chick Lit were, like its Anglo-American source texts, sown in periodicals first. Rupa Gulab's *Girl Alone* is loosely based on the articles she wrote for the section called Dating Diary for the Indian edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In 2011, former columnist

for *Hindustan Times*, Sushmita Sen came out with her book *Single in the City* which is a compilation of the weekly articles she wrote under the eponymous – though named as a knock-off of the *Sex and the City* – column heading in 2006 featuring a by-line photograph of the author. Her column recounts her rendezvous as she embarks upon her life as a single girl, living alone in the city of Delhi after having lived in Kolkata all her life.

Interestingly enough, Daswani's *For Matrimonial Purposes* is the only novel in the Indian context which has more in common with Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, the rest of them are closer in plot lines, character and situation to the other source text, namely Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. *Bridget Jones's Diary* is in turn, by its author's admission, based on the mother of all Chick Lit, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Says Rupa Gulab, author of *Girl Alone* in her e-article "Ms Bridget Jones in a House near You":

Also, I'm a staunch Austen-phile. I love her comedy of manners treatment of middle-class life. I have always suspected that the origins of chick-lit spring from the theme of Jane Austen's sparkling novels: single women looking for love. I found Helen Fielding especially appealing because of the delightful parallels she drew between Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* and her book, *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

In fact all of the Indian Chick Lit novels share – in their characterisation, situations, narrative, and plotline - more with *Bridget Jones's Diary* than with *Sex and the City*. The opposite is true when it comes to Masala Chick Lit where American-Indian heroines are more brand-savvy than their Indian counterparts. Indian Chick Lit – with the exception of *The Zoya Factor* - features imperious mothers always bent on getting the protagonist married, usually through the matrimonial columns of a newspaper. The protagonists are always flawed and acutely aware and critical of themselves in a light-hearted and endearing way. And the most common characteristic, to which there has been no exception and has almost become the rule, is sometimes pride and often prejudice on the part of the protagonists when it comes to judging men who will eventually be their Darcys. Sometimes there is a Wickham/Daniel Cleaver-figure lurking and inciting the protagonists. It is after the heroine's failed attempt at her relationship with the last man in her life which leads her to the next one. The friends too are divided among the Smug Married ones and the Singletons. The female friends are not simply the same number as Bridget's, but are thinly-disguised Indian versions of Jude and Shazzer: one undergoing a problematic relationship because of too much devotion for and dependence on the insensitive/already-married man, the other playing the part of a feminist. As opposed to the hook-

up culture of *Sex and the City* (SATC), leisurely romance and courtship can still be witnessed in these texts. The women with their talk of Oprah, GM diets, Woody Allen, *Cosmopolitan*, and Madonna, share the same media icons with their Anglo-American counterparts. They go on blind dates but only after consultation with *shastriji*. For the Indian Chick Lit *Bridget Jones's Diary* remains an undeniable influence. On its journey from Anglo-American beginnings to Indian popular fiction market, the broad conventions defining Chick Lit remain the same but the genre is stretched and adapted according to the realities of the country of its adaptation.

Hailed as an “engaging form of satire . . . a witty parody of your life”, it also doubles up as a self-help manual for young women (‘Ms. Bridget Jones in a House Near You’). According to Namita Gokhale, “There are a huge number of anxieties floating around young women. It’s very reassuring to read a funny and well-written novel in which you can see your own problems reflected” (qtd. in Thottam). The fact that the reader identifies with the protagonist, laughing with her - than at her - and at her own flawed self, provides the genre with an air of intimacy associated with self-help guides. It chronicles the experiences of one woman in a book form which are shared and understood by many others. As a permutation of the sentimental novel, it attempts to validate the readers’ feelings as normal and part of a collective group. Many blogs, forums, and sites devoted to Chick Lit record fans’ (almost all women) reasons for the overwhelming popularity of the genre, supreme amongst which are the sense of identification with the protagonist and the genre’s ability to reflect their everyday reality. The Chick Lit novels continue doing what novels have always done: serve as guides in a confusing world.

From its use as a students’ tag to describe women’s writing, to the avant-garde writing it was first used to define, the term with its chewing-gum reminding phonetic connotations, Chick Lit finally came to describe a genre of popular commercial fiction that is written for women. With Jane Austen’s works as the common acknowledged foundational text, the genre appropriates an extensive source of writings including women’s fashion magazines and *Mills and Boon* romances. Chick Lit’s huge success leads to its import beyond its Anglo-American origin to women across continents and countries. Masala Chick Lit – about Indian protagonists holding onto their culture while living in America - became a subset of the genre. However, Masala Chick Lit, as a genre directed exclusively at the West, failed to give a true picture of life in contemporary Indian metropolis. Indian Chick Lit debuted in 2004 when the genre’s popularity was aided by a growing market for new-age writers, chronicling the lives of urban young people in modern-day India. Indian Chick Lit’s inception as an

imported genre adapted to an Indian milieu, exhibits an interesting amalgamation of generic conventions of Chick Lit within the Indian scenario. While the basic defining characteristics of the genre are intact, Indian Chick Lit differs vastly from its mother genre in its treatment of commodity culture and consumerism. The change is symptomatic of the reality of the Indian woman whose world, though informed and influenced by the same media and sources as her western counterpart, but whose Indian social-cultural milieu puts her in just not the same position as her counterpart.

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