



WHAT I LEARNT FROM BRIDGET: READING CHICKLIT

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ABSTRACT :

Chicklit emerged as a sub-genre of women's writing in the West in the late 1990s and was immediately hailed as the new women's writing. Chicklit, which always has a single working woman as the protagonist, makes for light and amusing reading. Nevertheless, it merits serious consideration for what it says about women, and for its relationship with feminism. The present paper takes two texts, the iconic *Bridget Jones's Diary* which may be said to have started the trend, and a recent novel *I Quit, What Next?* as two representative texts, from the UK and India and seeks to tease out its vexed relations with the experiences of contemporary women and feminism



KEYWORDS : Chicklit , corporateliterature , singleton , feminism , post-feminism

INTRODUCTION:

As the Corporate gradually engulfs India and its hyped 'top-down' model fatally infects urban India, among its first casualties are the youth. This English educated and city-bred class of young professionals has now begun telling its own stories, and one of the modes it uses to tell these is chicklit. Chicklit was born in the West during the 1990s and was almost immediately recognised and labelled as a new sub-genre. *Bridget Jones's Diary* launched a new era of women's writing – Women's writing suffused in pink! This new trend has at its centre a young, single woman who is a professional, working either at the middle or the lower management levels of a thriving corporate, a 'singleton' on the lookout for a mate. Since this is also the segment at which chicklit is aimed at, its success in the form of sales figures is assured.

The context from which chicklit emerged is significant. The worldwide triumph of capitalism, and the greying of feminism have a lot to do with it. Most educated women are fairly aware of feminism—indeed, their education and employment are the fruits of generations of struggle—but who now feel feminism is dated. In fact, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the text that kicked off this trend, feminists are caricatured. Bridget's mother and her friend Sharon are ridiculous in their insensitivity, self-centeredness and stridency. All feminism set out to do has been achieved it is implied, and along with several other 'posts', the era of post-feminism is here. Although, the merit of this argument is debatable, implicitly these are the assumptions of chicklit. In fact, Helen Fielding's *Bridget* initiates a dialogue with Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, a name she drops in an attempt to impress the superior Mark Darcy, when she first meets him. Faludi was impelled to write *Backlash* in response to a *Newsweek* article about there being no eligible men for educated young professional women. These professional women were said to be unhappy about their single status, but unable to do anything about it. Faludi contested this and other articles of a similar nature that implied that women were dissatisfied and unhappy because of feminism. However, *Bridget Jones* rather endorses the

Newsweek stance. Bridget is a thirty something professional woman, constantly taunted for her single status. 'Tick-tock, tick- tock' as Una Alconbury tells her, reminding her of the biological clock ticking steadily away. Bridget is in love with her boss Daniel Cleaver. He is a hardened flirt, who immediately recognises the invitation in Bridget's provocative miniskirt. But Sharon, an ardent feminist has already warned Bridget of 'emotional fuckwittage'—commitment phobic men, who are eager for sex but fight shy of marriage. So, despite being in love with Daniel, and being constantly taunted for being single, Bridget refuses to be easily available. Eventually, she finds out that she was right about Daniel Cleaver and that he is two-timing her. Every entry in Bridget's diary is prefaced by obsessive calorie counting, her fluctuating (but generally on the rise) weight, number of cigarettes smoked and similar lifestyle trivia. They suggest her growing insecurity as she negotiates the threatening third decade of her life. She dreads old age and death and is haunted by the fear of being eaten by an Alsatian, (probably a pet and her only companion in old age). However, the 'young professional' status of the protagonist and her friends, the guineas they can afford to spend, the clubbing and partying which characterise them, the fads and fashions they indulge in, all serve to glamorise a certain kind of lifestyle. This is also a niche consumer to be enticed with a plethora of products, goods and services that can then be used to reinforce the image of a successful professional. This wedding of consumerism and feminism underlies all chicklit. A busy professional life and purchasing power is not the only aim however and the pressure to find a man and get married characterises chicklit, both East and West. However, this effort at contextualising chicklit does less than justice to the actual novels which are uniformly frothy, amusing, readable and comic.

Bridget Jones is a confused beneficiary of the feminist movement. She has a university degree, a job and independence but is naggingly aware that this is not enough. She is expected by both by people of her parents' generation and her own peers to be in a long-term relationship with a man. Bridget herself wants Daniel Cleaver. Many friends, 'smug marrieds', have given up well-paying jobs for marriage and have transferred their corporate competitiveness to their babies. They now acrimoniously discuss whose kid passes the biggest turd! Bridget's self-esteem rapidly goes into a downspin, while she has to answer a myriad question on her partner-less status. But then her mother steps in. She has zeroed in on the wealthy and successful human rights barrister, Mark Darcy as the right man for her daughter. Bridget's mother 'Mum' is a caricature of a feminist. From being a suburban housewife with grown up children leading a retired life, she suddenly spouts Second Wave feminist jargon, dumps her husband, gets a high-profile job and dresses glamorously. She has assumed this feminist guise to justify her affair with Julio, a con-man she met abroad. In this domestic upheaval Bridget's sympathy is totally with her father. He is very much a victim and this underscores the post-feminist stance of the novel. However unjust Bridget's mother may be to her husband, her maternal instinct remains very much intact where Bridget is concerned. She steers her into a conducive job, besides finding her the right mate in Mark Darcy. Feminists have always stressed the unique relationship between mother and daughter, where the 'other' is replaced by the extended self.

So, has the wheel come full circle for women and marriage the only answer after all? There are no simple answers as *Bridget Jones's Diary* emphasises. Bridget's married friend Magda discovers that her husband is cheating on her. Despondently, she sums up her life for Bridget, while advising her to make most of her single status. She gave up her job opting for marriage and kids. Looking after a toddler and a baby is hard work. At the end of the day, Jeremy, her husband wants to put his feet up, relax and be pampered. But Jeremy thinks her life is one big holiday and that she splurges his hard-earned money. 'I know it for a fact it's much more fun going out to work....' she tells Bridget who wonders what the answer is for [us] girls?

While earlier Chetan Bhagat may have successfully capitalised on the dreams and frustrations of Young India slickly packaged in a 100 rupee format, chicklit and its alter ego, *ladli* have successfully somersaulted Indian writing into a new phase of corporate literature. Arriving in India about a decade after being the fad in the West, Indian chicklit has its own successful authors like Rajashree (*TrustMe*) and Anuja Chauhan (*The Zoya Factor*). Also termed '*Ladki lit*', there is a sisterly resemblance among the heroines. Nimisha Arora, the protagonist of *I Quit! Now What?* lives in Delhi and works in '...Gurgaon, the city of skyscrapers. Or the closest India can get to Manhattan.' She is group product head for Toddlerz Arts and a 'corporate slave'

who works long hours and over weekends, and even when away from office, is haplessly attached to it via a mobile-laptop-text messages umbilical cord. Clearly, she is no suburban, upper-upper housewife longing to fulfil herself through work and wealth, so dear to Betty Friedan. She is a single young urban woman, caught in the corporate grind and unhappy about it—in fact, the very opposite of the feminine mystique. Her dissatisfaction with the corporate way of life is the burden of the first half of the novel. She would like to get away, do her own thing even though she is unsure of what that ‘own thing’ is. And when she comes to know that Nivedita, the other group head in Toddlerz is proceeding on a sabbatical, she decides to risk going on one too. The title and the cover—and covers are important in chicklit—emphasise this point. Part of the charm of the novel is Nimisha herself. The confiding and personal style of the novel makes sure we come to know Nimisha well. She is charmingly flawed, warmly human and vulnerable. In the hyped-up corporate world where everyone looks like a super-achiever, effortlessly balancing work, home and personal life, plus managing to look like a model, Nimisha finds herself floundering. Despite desperately trying to meet deadlines and working most weekends, Toddlerz Arts lags behind, her appraisals are poor and her salary-hike minimal. The only time that she is really happy is when she is with her two nieces, Yamini and Somya. She knows it in her bones that she needs a break, her concerned mother and successful sister repeatedly suggest it, and her ‘group’ hesitantly support her. But when she applies for a sabbatical, her request is met with total incomprehension—she’s not getting married, she’s not pregnant, she is not joining another plum job, so why does she need one? Eventually Nimisha ends up quitting Toddlerz and then start her hilarious efforts at occupying herself. As G.B. Shaw pointed out in the 19th century itself, the greatest casualty in the brave new industrial world would be leisure. Before quitting her job, Nimisha works out an extensive excel sheet laying out all she would do once out of the corporate grind—hobby courses like pottery and baking, losing weight by trying out Yoga and Zumba and travel, but nothing really works.

Even though Nimisha opts out of working, her attitude to women who don’t work is ambivalent. When out to buy a party dress for her niece right after quitting her job, she is genuinely shocked to realise that now she has joined that class of women who spend their days shopping in malls, and meeting friends at restaurants—like Akansha, her friend Arjun’s rich and pampered girlfriend—‘so vela’ as her friend Meha pithily comments. Being ‘a corporate slave’ has altered her. She feels not working is not quite right, but she also feels a misfit in the corporate world. What then is she to do? Nimisha does not know what to answer when asked what she is doing during her sabbatical? Apparently, if she has quit working, it is to do something that will prepare her to work more efficiently or earn more money. Nimisha starts feeling left out when she meets up with her group. They talk of work, dress fashionably and have money to spend, while she feels sloppy, overweight and redundant. Added to all this is the pressure to get married now that she cannot hide behind the facade of a career girl. Everyone, from her grandmother to her childhood friend Arjun counsel her to get married. But Nimisha has a dream, a craving for romance that makes her indignantly renounce all suggestions that she marry Arjun. Arjun, who after his break up with Akansha, comes over often and takes her out is a childhood friend. Everyone including her friends, her mother and sister are sure that Nimisha will now marry Arjun. Nimisha herself comes to feel that she shares a unique relationship with him—after all they have grown up together. Her sister points out that Nimisha’s consistent denigration of Akansha has something to do with jealousy, but when she meets a heartbroken Akansha in a mall and comes to know the only issue dividing Arjun and Akansha is his commitment phobia, she goes all out help them come together again. Obviously in matters of the heart the easy option is no option.

Perhaps Jane Austen had the right formula for romance after all. Her reworking of the Cinderella myth, of a poor girl marrying a wealthy and powerful man for love never seems to fail. Any wealthy man won’t do either—Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* does reject the wealthy Henry Crawford—but only the man the heroine has given her heart to. High moral worth is as important as high net worth. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* frankly acknowledges the Austen model. The hero is called Darcy, he is sought after and wealthy, and finally he proves his desirability by getting Bridget’s mother out of the criminal mess she finds herself in. The Mills and Boons series exploited the poor girl/rich man binary, and its name is synonymous with the genre of romance, but chicklit is different. The highroad and the by-lanes of romance, the final destination of the

coming together of the hero and the heroine is not the only preoccupation of chicklit. It meticulously evokes the ambiance and the challenges of the workplace and work, as it also enmeshes the protagonist in a web of relationships, with friends and colleagues but especially with the mother. While the romantic novel narrates the story of victory in love, chicklit also highlights the significant others in the protagonist's life—her friends, colleagues, relatives, siblings and parents. Nimisha's relationship with her nieces, her mother and her 'gang' define her.

The popularity of chicklit seems to lie in the 'believability' of the protagonist. Her victories and defeats, her challenges and tensions, her pleasure in the daily compensations of life, and her eventual romantic triumph make for delightful reading. A similarly placed reader can see herself reflected in the protagonist. While a serious feminist novel would probably grow around the challenges of the workplace, sexual harassment, or the difficulties of balancing the demands of work and home, chicklit skates smoothly over these vital issues. Bridget Jones has a lascivious boss, but it is she who leads him on. Nimisha's boss Mahesh looks at nobody, growls or barks his orders and is scarcely sorry to see her quit, her home front is taken care of by her mother and the domestic help Savita, while the pressures of work, its deadlines, recalcitrant colleagues, exhausting long hours and its compensations of finance and friends is the focus. In fact, in novels of this genre the work the protagonist does is never left vague. It is defined and detailed, and finding the right job is as important as finding the right mate. At the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist finally finds both—congenial work and compatible mate. She can now join that group of professionals who have both husband and work before the dreaded third decade of life fades into the fourth. Bridget gets her Darcy and Nimisha, her Aman Gupta.

Despite the fact that work, workplace, friends and co-workers are supremely important in chicklit, marriage remains a desired and desirable goal. As the protagonist approaches the age of thirty, her insecurities regarding her future become increasingly pressing. Bridget Jones is increasingly conscious that she is thirty plus. The older generation, all married, conspire to remind her that that she is growing older—'How does a woman manage to get to your age without being married?' her parents' friend Brian Enderby roars at her, she herself enviously calls young married couples the 'smug marrieds' and notes they are all popping babies and bragging about them, while Valentine's Day and Christmas serve only to remind her that she is still single. Eventually, as Bridget drives away with Darcy or Nimisha takes 'centre stage' after Aman has made his proposal, the reader is left with a vicarious sense of triumph.

One does not read literature for a 'meaning', but reading between the lines chicklit does seem to convey that for women, the more things change, the more they remain the same. The anxieties which plagued Austen's women, fears of being 'left on the shelf' and other such commercial metaphors, haunt women still. Even though economically independent, women face the same expectations as their mothers and grandmothers. In an Austen novel the surface polish barely conceals the underlying desperation of the women characters. It is marriage or a lifetime of neglect. Chicklit seems to suggest that economics was not the only reason for that desperation. It is not as though the only reason was that women felt that they would become a burden on their natal family, if they did not find a husband. Rather, it is societal expectation plus fear of loneliness and old age. Bridget, for example, has a recurrent fear of dying alone and being eaten by an Alsatian! If women are indeed from Venus, the planet (and perhaps the goddess) has laid a heavy burden of expectations upon them. If these be the assumptions underlying chicklit, no wonder it is accused of essentialism. And what of men? Is Mars as resistant to change as Venus? That is a question to be explored in another paper.

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