

The Beauty Myth in Chicklit: Female Subjectivity and Consumer Culture

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Abstract

The postmodern world is defined by the capitalist order with its philosophy of consumerism becoming all pervasive in every walk of life. This paper explores the region where postfeminism overlaps with capitalism with reference to the emergence of new genre of chicklit. The commercial domain has evinced an increasing interest in the “issues” of women and has emerged as the champion of women rights supplanting the state and public sector as the custodian of women’s rights. This foundational shift in the perception of women and their place in capitalistic society can be viewed as the effect of the long-fought war of the feminists for the social, political and economic rights of the women. The happy coalescing, in the postfeminist thought, of feminism and femininity which were till now considered to be antithetical constructs indicates a maturity in the understanding of the female subject or it may also mean a collusion between feminism and capitalism in the garb of liberating postfeminism. Chicklit is often considered to be a vehicle of postfeminist philosophy and therefore the question will be explored with reference to a close reading of the novel *Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* by Madhuri Bannerjee.

Keywords: capitalism, consumerism, feminism, culture studies, popular culture, chicklit

Sarah T. Connor in her thesis has pointed out that in the twelfth century Andreas Capellanus compared women with melting wax ready to assume new shape and imprint of anyone’s seal (12). Women have from eternity being considered as imperfect who need to be molded. The emphasis has always been on the physical exterior of the women who need to strive constantly to acquire and enhance beauty. The essentialist view of women as moldable creatures was in the yesteryears criticized by the feminists as “male gaze”, the beauty standards set by the patriarchal mindset which reduces beauty as numerical markers indicating body structure and weight. But in today’s world this view has deeper implications connecting beauty with commercialism. The ‘male gaze’ has been replaced by the ‘capitalist gaze’ which stands benefitted from the ‘melting wax’ viewpoint and is dedicated to reviving and strengthening the myth of beauty. This paper is going to explore the renewed emphasis upon beauty in the

postfeminist discourse since it is an essential component of femininity, thereby examining the effect of capitalism on postfeminism.

The second wave feminism viewed sexuality as an instrument of subjugation in the hands of patriarchy. The sexual objectification of women in the media was one of the major concerns of the second wave feminists. Much of the movement focused upon protesting against the women being perceived as sexual objects and protested against women being forced into conforming to certain image of womanhood in respect to their physical appearance (clothing, make up, hairstyles, preference for certain colors and so on) and behavior. A bonfire (literal and symbolic) was lit of the articles considered to be womanly such as pink clothes, make up products, body hugging clothes and long hair. Subsequently women cut their hair, started dressing up like men and rejected make-up. The “feminine mystique” was a construct of the lustful eyes of men and thus needed to be condemned. Feminism and femininity started diverging from each other and with the passage of time grew antithetical to each other.

The postfeminist discourse absolves women from the fear of being women, thereby beckoning the return of pinks and blues, the colorful world of femininity. The chicklit is an expression of this colorful world and the philosophy of postfeminism. It is the story of the fun and frolic of young women and their tryst with destiny. Their cover jackets splashed with the bright hues and sketches of beauty consumer products such as bags, shoes and lipstick invite the readers to enter the world of women which is unapologetically too feminine. And true to the promise that the covers offer we enter a world which is inhabited by women who have one trait in common - they are all good looking; women who are young as well as women who are old; women who are good as well as women who are not-so-good; women who are the protagonists as well as women who just flit and cross. Chicklit is not a place for ugly women, they are non-existent in the universe of chicklit. When the female characters are introduced, they are described in great detail with respect to their physical appearance. In *Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* written by Madhuri Banerjee, one of the most popular novels in the genre of chicklit, in chapter third we find a description of Aditi, the best friend of Kaveri:

Aditi was a conventionally good looking woman. She had long brown hair, a slim figure and dark eyes. She could have passed off as a model if it hadn't been for her very bad skin-she had pockmarks left from a severe case of chicken pox in childhood that no amount of make-up could conceal. (Banerjee 11)

But being naturally beautiful is not sufficient in the postfeminist times and we find another description of Aditi, not very far away, in chapter seven - while trying for another pair of jeans Aditi asks for Kaveri's opinion, she observes,

I had to admit she did look good. Her long, chestnut hair, carefully retouched in the L'Oreal salon every two months and a lean body that was worked out at the gym at least thrice a week made her look like a model in her size 28 jeans. Instead of being an assistant director in Bollywood, she should have been a heroine. (Banerjee 40)

Therefore, what we perceive can be interpreted as a deliberate revival of the glorification of the physically and sexually attractive female. This revival has many implications. The beauty which we find in the pages of chicklit is rarely natural beauty rather it is acquired beauty. So, beauty is not something inherited by the female characters rather it is meticulously cultivated through the use of beauty products and treatments, the art of dressing up and grooming. This kind of ascriptive beauty is democratic in nature in the sense that it can be acquired by everyone or rather we can call it more correctly commercial in nature because there is one condition for its acquisition- one should have the money to spare.

Beauty in the world of chicklit is associated with social values such as friendship, popularity, love and so on. If a woman is beautiful, she shall never be alone. And most of all beauty is essential for acquiring a husband. When the heroine of *Losing my Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas*, Kaveri directs her inquisitive gaze on herself she finds that she is beautiful, still she is not popular among men - she turns towards Aditi, her best friend and a 'men magnate', for some advice. Aditi explains to Kaveri that she looks "too intellectual", which is good but not attractive to men. Even if a woman is beautiful her beauty needs to be accentuated by the use of make-up and dresses to make her look like a diva and to attract men.

The heroines are very similar to Cinderella in this other perspective also. They undergo a magical physical transformation with the help of benign and astute mentoring of their friend/friends who act as fairy Godmother and help her in the sculpting of a new self that is more confident and good looking. Suddenly the Cinderella who had been cleaning and mending and had been a victim of the cruelty of her step-mother and step-sisters transforms into a beautiful fairy like figure - confident and enchanting. The Prince looks at her and is never able to forget her again. This is a supreme example of a woman achieving what she desired with the help of beauty and embellishment. The women in chicklit also succeed in achieving their desired goals – attention and love of a desirable man – through their metamorphosis.

Kaveri 'looks' intellectual in high collared 'Fab India' kurtas. Intellect is no more only a mental attribute but is also a physical attribute which can be acquired by being associated with a particular brand. After a haircut and a wardrobe refresh Kaveri succeeds in turning the heads of men and eventually finding the one great love of her life. For these women the malls are their churches- full of shiny glittery consumer products where they can spend hours and choose to be whatever they want – intellectual or hot or simple – by selecting the appropriate accoutrement. The search for self-identity for the heroines of chick lit begins and ends in salons and malls

where they can pick up whatever personality they desire? Postfeminism thus seems to be benign marketing allure for the confused women. Is this the meaning of the promise of postfeminism to women that they can be anything in their lives or is it just a misinterpretation of the ideas of postfeminism?

Chicklit is popular among the young women because it sells the dream of a good life for a woman living alone in a city. The idea of good life as presented in the chicklit is based on consumption and expenditure. Somehow the idea of a liberated woman seems to be connected with the idea of unfettered expenditure on luxe living; where women spend without guilt upon their own selves and are not burdened with familial responsibilities and social concerns. The acquisition of consumer products not only provides them happiness but also seems to make them feel more confident in dealing with the outside world. This seems to be a new kind of hedonism; a hedonism marketed as emancipation for women and as a blueprint for happiness and social elevation.

Chicklit is, no doubt, a product of mass culture, and as evident from the above discussion, it can be seen as a tool of manipulation – propagating the new feminism which does emphasize upon the importance of being materialistic and acquisitive by presenting it as a well-deserved feminine indulgence and disguising the consumption as a form of empowerment and good life. But there is always the other side of the coin too and chicklit no doubt is a carrier of the streaks of simmering rebellion and dissonance that reflect upon the inadequacy of the popular way of living. Rivkin and Ryan state that: “Culture comes from below, and while it can be harnessed in profitable and ultimately socially conservative ways, it also represents the permanent possibility of eruption, of dissonance, and of an alternative imagination of reality.” (qtd. in Cooke M. 8)

Yes, economics is everywhere. Heroines of chicklit too are guided by the economics of the relationships but more than often it is not the economics that influences their life choices. One very important aspect of being a power woman is to look the part but it is just an aspect. The heroines of Indian chicklit are thankfully more self-aware than their western counterparts; they indulge in emotional spending but they also possess a clear perception that they cannot replace human relationships with the pleasure and comfort offered by inanimate objects, they invest in beauty but aspire to be more than just a beautiful face. The above contention can be explicated through the example of the heroine of the selected chicklit.

Kaveri, the heroine of Madhuri Banerjee, in the novel *Losing My Virginity And Other Dumb Ideas*, is one of the most intelligent and introspective heroines of the chicklit but, unfortunately, she is also one of the most confused heroines of the chicklit. The story of Kaveri begins on her thirtieth birthday. We find her struggling with the same issues as her

contemporaries, relating to weight, age, looks and men. She confesses, “I had actually spent tens of thousands of rupees on different slimming centers and dieticians to curb the expanding waist that I had inherited from my mother”. (Banerjee 10) On her thirtieth birthday she decides that finally it is the time for her to lose her virginity and in her search for the suitable partner she decides to take the help of her friend Aditi. As the conventions of the chicklit goes this friend is always the metrosexual urban queen – a votary of the packaged happiness and the bubble of good life created by the consumerist philosophy. Her conversation with Aditi regarding the drought of men in her life makes her realize that her expectations with respect to a life partner are not only too idealistic, her looks are also inadequate for the love market. She finally surrenders to Aditi’s repeated advice and agrees for a makeover with new hair style and a better wardrobe, although it meant to burn a deep hole in her pocket. To curb her reluctance Aditi reasons out with her, “You can’t get something if you don’t sacrifice something in return”. (Bannerjee 23) So, in order to bag a man Kaveri sacrifices her individuality, her financial integrity and her sanity, to enter a rat race that sinews through the streets of glamour and alleys of high fashion. The rebellious streak in her nature gets overpowered by the tutored proclivity for conformism.

The relationship of Kaveri with Arjun makes her realize that the quotidian existence is not for her. She wanted, she needed, she dreamed to be more than just a pretty, ordinary woman with a job and a husband. Kaveri finds the path to self-growth once she realizes that she needs to get rid of her naivete and step out of her comfort zone to explore the different sides of her personality with the help of new experiences and new people in varied places. We find the heroine shake off the blanket of expectations and conformity, leaving the path of humdrum life of running after allure and appeal, breaking the shackles of comfort and discover a whole new life, alone. After her break up with the one great love of her life, she participates in a reality show, becomes a tour operator with a difference and moves on to New York on a paid internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Every new adventure makes her more self-aware and confident in carving out a path for herself that leads away from a life of compromises and sacrifices towards a life of self-fulfillment and emancipation. In the end of the story we find her sitting in a café in Barcelona celebrating her thirty second birthday with a cup of coffee in her hands yet again alone, but not lonely. She discovers that the only sustaining form of love is the love we have for ourselves that does not mean that all the other relationships especially a relationship with a man are meaningless, the relationship with oneself imparts the ability to enjoy other relationships free of the fear and anxiety of being left alone if the relationship does not work.

Chicklit, as discussed earlier, is criticized of promoting consumerism by glorifying frivolous and irrational spending behavior of women. The chicklit in fact celebrates the financial ascendancy of women and frees the expenditure of a woman on herself of the guilt by

normalizing it. We find a new kind of relationship emerging between women and money; which is not based on greed or a hunger for power, money acts as an agent for personal transformation imparting a sense of self-reliance which frees women from the psychological dependence on men and providing a medium through which they can fulfill their desires and dreams – whether it is a desire to look beautiful or to travel or simply to shop and shine- without the fear of judgement or retribution from society.

Therefore the picture of the women deriving pleasure from shopping, wining and dining is not a part of any conspiracy promoting commercialism in the garb of postfeminism, on the other hand the focus of the critics solely commenting about the spending behavior of women in such novels is undeniably unjust treatment rooted in the general disapproval of the commercial domain of literature. Female indulgence in the patriarchal set up was tied up with cavalier and sinful sentiments. Even the feminists were not too charitable about the female desire for beauty. In the romances we have always found self-indulgent men who love to throw balls, who love to dress, who love to collect exotic objects and so many sharing the love for tropical cigars and exquisite wines and they were never discussed in the literary circle as frivolous or affected the literary worth of the book.

The women in chicklit are neither the barbie dolls nor are they Cinderellas anymore. They love to shop, they like to dress well, they like to dine out and enjoy their lives but they also want to work and work hard, they want to get married and married to an equal, they speak out firmly when they feel ignored or cornered and above all they are not scared to tread upon a path that is difficult to navigate. They enjoy money. They reclaim femininity and subvert it to redefine it. They are a proud votary of the philosophy of acquisition and material happiness but they are also quite aware of the fact that the pleasures provided by the consumer products are skin deep only which can never replace the warmth of a real connection with a human heart. We find them immersed in the alluring world of consumer delight but they successfully manage to retain their individuality and this is the message that inspires admiration in the young readers for the heroine.

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