

Rajashree's Chick Protagonist Parvati Mirrors the Contemporary Young Independent Indian Women

Pamoli Nandy
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Bankura University
Bankura, West Bengal, India

Abstract: In the early 1990s a new type of fiction appeared in the literary scenario and by the late of 1990s it became an established genre known as Chick lit featuring single women in their twenties and thirties, financially independent and trying to balance demanding careers and personal relationships. In India Rajashree's *Trust Me* appeared in 2006 having all those features of chick lit originated in Britain and the United States and Parvati, the female protagonist of her fiction, represents young Indian independent women. My endeavour in this article is to search whether the above-mentioned chick fiction portrays the life style of contemporary women and the Indian societal scenario. Like every Indian woman she has to face many obstacles to get success in her career and she also experiences inequity in this conventional, male-dominated Indian society.

Key-words: Chick lit, Indian women, contemporary life style, metropolitan city, independent life.

The term 'chick lit' was used in print for the first time in the year 1995 by Cris Mazza and her co-editor Jeffrey Deshell as the title of their anthology *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (FC2 1995). In the then time this term appears as a novel one but if we look back at the history of fiction writing we can observe that the genre is not so much new as the term is. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48), and some of Jane Austin's novels can be seen as the roots of this genre called Chick-lit. This genre came into its existence with the publication of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and Fielding frankly admitted her indebtedness for this novel to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Although *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the novels followed it instantly achieved huge commercial success, literary merit of these chick fictions was questioned by contemporary critics. According to A. Rochelle Mabry:

Like their forbears, chick lit and chick movies usually focus on a female main character and use a variety of strategies to make her desires and motivations the focus of the story. *Bridget Jones* and many of the chick novels produced by publishing imprints like Red Dress Ink are written in first person, in the heroine's voice, conveying the notion that these novels, although fictional, are authentic, in-depth accounts of women's experiences. (195)

This first person narrative style and structure emphasize chick fiction's portrayal of women's personal experiences of their own life from their love relation to their professional life. Here, in this article, my endeavour is to focus on how Indian chick lit specially *Trust Me* (2006) by Rajashree portrays the life of a young woman living in Indian society.

Sometimes chick lit fictions are criticized for dealing with trivial matters of women's life like fashion, shopping, dating with boy-friends and dieting. But in this occasion I can remember Virginia Woolf's statements in her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which initiated feminist literary criticism. She opines very clearly:

Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (74)

Although the chick-lit novelists never frankly admit that their fictions are the response against Woolf's calling, they are writing these books which are similar to Woolf's prescription "all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however vast" (107). All these chick fictions are written by women novelists about the life style of women for women readers.

I want to explore how chick-fictions describe the life of the contemporary independent girls and especially here they are the Indian girls. So, I will look into the famous chick lit fiction *Trust Me* (2006) where the protagonist Parvati has come to Mumbai from her birth-place, Amaravati to work as an art director. Like Parvati, now many a girls getting higher education and having independent mindset leaves their native village or small town to get a good job and thus a life of their own choice. But after few days of living in Bombay (now Mumbai) working in an ads production house, her 'Mr. Right' Karan betrays her and she becomes terribly upset and has to do an abortion. It is an enforced abortion as she and Karan are unmarried and Karan does not agree to marry her. She wants to raise the child by herself "It wouldn't have been easy for my child to grow up in Amravati with the stigma of illegitimacy" (28). This experience is very common to every unmarried girl having a pregnancy because it is a typical Indian culture where no single mother can grow her child up by her own self without having a legitimate father.

Like every girl coming from small town or village Paro thinks "when you fell in love, you got married" (29) but Karan breaks her heart when he leaves her helplessly. One day she goes out for dinner with her boss Mr. Bose to whom she discloses the pangs of her heart and cries for Karan but he also harasses her sexually getting her alone and helpless. Like Parvati, many young girls are molested by their boss and they cannot take necessary legal steps because of social prestige and lengthy legal procedure of law system in India. That is why when Saira, her friend who works as a journalist in a daily newspaper, suggests Parvati to go to court to take legal steps against her boss, she argues: 'A court case?' I laughed humourously. 'Are you mad?' I'll be fifty-five by the time it gets settled. Ok, he jumped on my bones, but do I say in court?

That I went out for dinner with him, cried on his shoulder about my heartbreak, got drunk of my own free will, and it's sexual harassment because he's my boss and makes a pass at me? Huh!' (17)

After experiencing this physical harassment from her boss Parvati has to quit her job from this production house. Then she with her two female-friends, Kavita and Saira, discusses what she should do and ofcourse where. Facing Saira's question whether she wants to go back to Amaravati she expresses her hard struggle history like other girls of the contemporary society. In India, if a girl from a small town or village longs for an independent life of her own she has to face various obstacles. Parvati reveals her past experiences to her friends:

None of the girls in my group had believed me when I'd said that I would go to Bombay and become a set designer some day. I'd had to work so hard for it- getting the best marks in my commercial class, saving up my scholarship money, convincing my mother to let me go. I was the youngest in the family, so I'd always been her baby. She had her misgivings, but she'd put them aside because she wanted the best for me. She wanted me to have all the opportunities she hadn't had. She wanted me to soar. If I chucked up my career and went back home, what would she... (21)

After deliberately leaving Bose production house she joins the production unit of the director Jambuwanth Sinha. She starts to work with Manoj, Mr. Sinha's chief assistant director. On the very first day of her working, Jumbo offers her "Have a paan, very nice paans I have, very refreshing. Here, a special Nagina for you" (56). But she boldly refuses hurting him a bit. Talking about the strong effect of the tobacco of that betel leaf (paan), Manoj casually speaks that "Oh, he wouldn't have given you one with tobacco, you're a girl" (57). Then their conversation goes on:

'My first day of work.' I shook my head ruefully. 'I'm still feeling so bad for the continuity mistakes. It was nice of you to take the blame, but Jumbo must be thinking...'

'Hey, don't think so much. Jumbo's cool guy. And anyway you're a girl, so he won't hold these small mistakes against you.' Manoj spat out the paan into a potted plant, and relaxing a bit. (57)

When they are waiting at the bus stop Manoj takes out a pack of cigarettes and asks if she would mind it, Parvati bravely tells:

'Not at all', I said, and took a cigarette. He looked surprised, but didn't say anything. I used to smoke once in a while with Karan, just because I enjoyed the companionship of smoking with him. Even now, I didn't particularly feel like smoking. I was just fed up with Manoj's 'you're a girl' attitude. (58)

This protest against the 'you're a girl' attitude can be seen among most of the urban independent Indian girls who do not want to claim themselves as feminists but do not also want to remain silent to claim their equal rights. Parvati never publicly declares her feminist label but that does

not imply that she would accept the attitude of a male person which underestimates and subjugates her only because she is a girl. Like her now many other independent and educated girls do not accept this inequity of our male dominated society. Here, it is worthy to mention the statement of Stephanie Harzewski in her book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*:

Chick lit is characterized by a vexed feminism, appropriating certain strands as it does narrative traditions. Its embrace of Women's rights but eschewal of the feminist label mirrors the most common response of young women toward feminism today (Scott 8). Chick lit's affirmation of the individual as an agent borrows from liberal feminism. (169)

Saira, one of Parvati's friends, always wears sarees not because of that she is traditional but because of that it helps to hide her fat belly. She claims that "she could even climb a tree in a saree" (19). One day she comes to meet Parvati in the production house. Looking at her Parvati expresses "You're looking very pretty in pink", I said, looking her up and down. "Pink saree, pink bindi, my God, even your sandals are pink!" (66). It shows clearly that like every ordinary girls she also loves pink, though she is an independent girl who wants empowerment and equality. Traditional myth-making system always tries to represent the colour of pink as docile femininity and it is a symbol of feminine fashion which is subordinating in nature. At this point of discussion I want to quote the ideas of Stephanie Genz in her book *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*:

Girlies are adamant that they can compete successfully alongside their male counterparts and attain equality without sacrificing all forms of "pink-packaged femininity". In fact, their empowerment and assertiveness are directly linked to their feminine identities and their ability to resignify feminine signifiers and languages. Girlies insist that they are not trapped by their femininity but they can gain control by acknowledging and using their insider position within consumer culture. (93)

Like the Girlies, Saira and the young generation girls of India frankly embrace femininity and at the same time they are trying to achieve equality and freedom in Indian society. So, it can be argued that in today's Indian society, the concept of femininity and feminism has changed slightly into a new one where femininity and feminism co-exist amiably.

The narrative of *Trust Me* makes its opening with the description of Parvati's feelings and observations in Bombay. Coming to the big metropolitan city, Bombay she divulges her inner feelings and sensations. Perhaps her expressions have some similarities with every young Indian girl who has come from a small town or village and now lives in metropolitan city to get success in their high profile job and thus an economical independence and emancipation from the stereotypical life style prescribed for women by traditional Indian society. Their silent observation sometimes gets expression which is very important to get a picture of the metropolitan cities. The narrative describes that "Bombay. Coming back to Bombay felt like an assault on the senses. Thud. Thud. Thud. The coolies started jumping into the train even before it had come to a halt" (01). Her feelings are described further "Everybody was in a hurry, but in typical Bombay fashion, nobody was getting anywhere. The roads were flooded and a bus had

stalled in front of the station, blocking the traffic. It was March, it wasn't supposed to be raining. It wasn't supposed to be so hot so soon, either. But it was" (02). Here, Harzewski's comment should be noted:

Chick lit protagonists are a composite of gendered presents associated with the modern city and, in particular, the working girl and female shopper. As observers of urban life, protagonists share salient characteristics with flaneur. Although protagonists, however bourgeois, do not necessarily possess the unqualified leisure that is by definition the flaneur's, as a producer of sociological commentary on city life, they have characteristics that David Frisby (2001) has identified in the work of Walter Benjamin as allied with flanerie. (126)

From the above discussion it can be argued that Parvati, like other chick lit protagonists, represents the young Indian urban girls who exist in contrast to the stereotypical image of traditional Indian girls. They break many rules of the traditional Indian society. Actually, they belong to a new class of women who have come from small or middle sized town to big town to achieve something big. They possess a mind of their own that always craves for a space in this society. They are a kind of woman who wants to have it all.

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