FROM CHANTILLY LACE TO CHANEL: COMMODITY WORSHIP IN CHICK LIT

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the reasons behind the striking success of 20th/21st century popular women's fiction, also known as chick lit, and investigates the genre as a site for cultural globalization. I study questions of consumerism, the global movement of capital, and the global circulation of popular literature and culture as manifested in chick lit. I triangulate chick lit, classics, and commodity in my examination of global Anglophone texts and I maintain a transnational focus in my study: commodity worship in literary and popular fiction; female protagonists in Indian and Indian diasporic chick lit as commodities exchanged in marriage; and the commodification of Jane Austen—the "founder" of chick lit—through the transcultural derivatives of her novels. My project fills the lacunae left by prior research by providing a sociological analysis of chick lit's commercial success in the global literary market, an exploration of cultural politics in an ethnic offshoot of mainstream chick lit, an investigation of the genre's supposed celebration of consumerism from a cultural studies angle, and tracing the trajectory between Austen and chick lit texts in terms of transitions in socio-economic conditions of contemporary women.

Chapter 1 analyzes a two-part survey (web-based and personal interviews) on chick lit readership through Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to examine whether chick lit manipulates passive readers into conforming to the dominant ideology encoded in the genre

about heterosexual marriage, femininity, and consumerism, and concludes that readers exercise negotiated readings of chick lit.

Chapter 2 explores the relationship between consumerism and its importance to self-making in chick lit through a cultural studies framework, and demonstrates that chick lit critiques reckless consumption instead of celebrating it. I discuss the trajectory of consumerism from Edith Wharton and Anita Loos to contemporary chick lit novels.

Chapter 3 examines Indian chick lit where the "Westernized" protagonists of post-liberalisation India need to occupy an Indian traditional cultural realm due to societal pressure. I suggest that Indian chick lit is a site of glocalization of Western principles with Indian culture, where the protagonists attain Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity to enjoy liberal values in conjunction with a sense of the Indian national identity.

Chapter 4 explores the transcultural transpositions of Jane Austen's novels as products of the commodification of the original texts which are used to source chick media plots for the readers'/viewers' consumption, and which glocalise elements of Austen's plots. The use-value of the Austen text to the chick lit writer is its importance as a resource for "raiding" it for aspects which can be extended or accentuated, and thereby produces the exchange-value of the chick media texts.

For my parents, Sushanta and Priti Ghosh

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I wish to convey my endless gratitude to my family for keeping me motivated over the past few years. My sister, Somdatta, gets my heartfelt thanks for having spent long hours reading each chapter as I finished it to offer me her suggestions. I also want to extend my thanks to all my friends—Shaina deserves a special mention for patiently listening to my rants—for their encouragement and support.

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INTRODUCTION

I

A Short History of Chick Lit

This dissertation studies the genre of chick lit, a comparatively new entrant in the field of popular fiction. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is usually hailed as the progenitor of the genre, and it can be described as a genre of fiction that usually centres around the social and professional lives of young—mostly urban—women, and is written by women for women readers with experiences similar to those of the heroines. To date, chick lit is an under-analysed genre with only four major scholarly books which have treated it from an academic standpoint, namely *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2005), a collection of essays on chick lit edited by Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young; Caroline J. Smith's *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* (2008); Stephanie Harzewski's *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011); and Rocio Montoro's *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (2012). These scholarly texts trace a literary genealogy for chick lit and the way it reinterprets the narrative tropes of the popular romance, the bildungsroman, and the novel of manners. They also study chick lit's relationship with other popular media such as advice and self-help books, motion pictures, magazines, etc. Montoro's work provides a linguistic and stylistic analysis of the genre based on readers' comments on blogs and online book clubs, an angle which others scholars have not explored so far. My dissertation seeks to fill the lacunae in the research that has been devoted to chick lit.

First, there is no conclusive research present on the reasons why female readers find chick lit so relatable and whether they might consider it a sort of self-help genre which reflects contemporary realities. A reception study that I have conducted provides fruitful insight into the

psyche of the readers, and examines their consumption of the genre as well as their reactions to the femininity and consumerism that chick lit is often criticised for.

Second, while making connections between the genre and its literary forebears, the existing scholarship does not focus on the socio-political developments which enable contemporary women, unlike the classic heroines, to straddle the personal and professional realms with aplomb. My analysis of chick culture as modernizations of Jane Austen's novels demonstrates the continuity between the literary antecedents of chick lit while simultaneously capturing the socio-economic advances women have made since the 18th and 19th centuries that have made them, like the chick lit heroines, self-sufficient and financially independent.

Third, the current scholarship describes the consumerism which is a central feature of chick lit to a limited extent, but I study it in more depth from a cultural studies perspective. Although there is no single feminist movement, there have been several feminist groups around the world who have lobbied for women's rights and the emancipation of women, and have achieved different levels of success. Today urban middle-class women are reaping the rewards of those feminist movements, and now have the financial capability to not simply yearn for but purchase expensive fashion products. Several designer brands have prêt-à-porter lines that are accessible to middle-class incomes; they are still expensive but more affordable that the impossibly pricy couture. However, the consumer worship is more than a penchant for exercising the protagonists' earning potential but an integral aspect of their self-fashioning: sometimes the clothes and accessories do make the woman. I will examine the commodity worship present in the microcosmic consumer society of chick lit protagonists from a critical standpoint, employing

the principles of cultural theorists such as Thorstein Veblen, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Guy Debord, and others. I will also show that chick lit tends to exaggerate the consumerist tendencies of the protagonists to encourage readers to maintain a sense of awareness about their own shopping tendencies.

Fourth, ethnic off-shoots of chick lit have formed their own separate subgenres, such as Latina lit, Chicana lit, Chinese-American chick lit, Indian-American chick lit and others. These subgenres have not been given much attention from an academic standpoint although they represent cultural aspects which provide a unique flavour that mainstream chick lit lacks. I am personally drawn to Indian and Indian diaspora chick lit which depict features of my own culture and the daily conflicts which women of my generation have to grapple with. I present an ethnic perspective on chick lit to add to the contemporary scholarship. This dissertation is thus a literary sociological study that examines chick lit readership and the reasons for its popularity in the literary marketplace; consumerism in chick lit; the examination of a branch of ethnic chick lit, Indian chick lit; and modernizations of Jane Austen's "literary" novels in the global sphere in terms of transitions in socio-economic conditions of contemporary women.

The academic effort devoted to providing a comprehensive definition of chick lit (Knowles, Ferriss and Young, Gormley) is proof of its complexity. Sarah Gormley, in a special issue of *Working Papers on the Web* (2009), proposed a detailed description of the genre. She argues that chick lit is a form of contemporary popular fiction that

> by the end of the 1990s ... had become established to describe novels written by women, (largely) for women, depicting the life, loves, trials and tribulations of their

> predominantly young, single, urban, female protagonists. ... whilst plotlines are variable, chick lit can be internally defined by the structure of a female central character "seeking personal fulfilment in a romance-consumer-comedic vein." ... By the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, the genre of chick lit was also identifiable by the establishment of "clearly marked jacket designs." Indeed, chick lit's bold, pink or pastel-coloured covers with cursive fonts and line drawings of handbags or shoes seem ubiquitous, at least in the U.K., gracing the shelves of bookstores, supermarkets, railway station and airport shops. (Gormley)

Gormley's definition includes the main themes of chick lit. The genre is underpinned by these elements although they might be implemented in slightly differing ways.

First, the gender of the author as well as the reader is important—chick lit is a genre written "by women and (largely) for women" (Gormley). While the publishing industry would not pre-emptively exclude the male population from the readership of chick lit, the target consumers that the authors and publishers have in mind are female. Second, Gormley echoes Joanne Knowles in her idea of the typical chick lit protagonist, who is always female, and is a very particular kind of young woman who is "seeking fulfilment in a romantic-consumer-comedic vein" (Knowles 2). The prototypical heroine is, thus, interested in resolving her search for a male partner within the context of a consumer society which encourages the protagonists to spend extravagantly. There are industry-related reasons behind this. Women are primarily responsible for necessary household—as well as other—shopping, which makes them the primary consumers. The publishing houses might sell intellectual property to retail companies, which in turn provide tie-ins. These relations of capital produce a firm relationship between

commercial fiction and advertising. Thus, it is not an abstract consumer society in which the chick lit heroine exists, but a network of specific industry relationships.[2] The vicissitudes of a protagonist's life are usually structured as a comedy that lightens more serious issues. Third, Gormley reiterates Gill and Herdieckerhoff's remarks on the bright book jackets of chick lit novels (488) that are carefully marketed by the publishing industry to capture the attention of female book buyers. The colour—usually pastels, such as pink, aqua, yellow—and the graphics that are evocative of consumer culture are first points of contact between shoppers and the novels, and the typographical features function as signifiers for chick lit as a genre. The ubiquity of the prototypical chick lit covers can enable a reader familiar with the genre to identify and categorize books belonging to this genre without having read the blurb.

These basic elements joined together to create the winning formula of chick lit: single, white, middle class, heterosexual, young female protagonist living in a consumerist society; the protagonist is looking for love and having issues at work, both of which lead to comedic situations; the comedy is used as a tool to make the protagonist more fallible and thus more easy to identify with for female readers; the self-deprecating humour used in the comedic situations is also employed to downplay the heroine's foibles as well as the general ups and downs of life. In addition, the physical packaging of the novels with bright jackets, cursive writing, and cutesy diagrams of handbags and stilettos, complete the product.

[2] For example, General Motors Corporation made a deal with chick lit writer, Carole Matthews to feature its Ford Focus in her novel, *The Sweetest Taboo* (2004). The car is described as "She's red, raunchy and drives like a dream." "Literature, Sponsored by...."

While the demise of the genre has been announced in 2012 by Laura Miller in *Salon.com* as well as in *The Economist*, there must be something enduring about the genre which is still flourishing and has been called a "commercial tsunami" by Ferriss and Young (*Chick Lit* 2). Gormley summarises the profitable sales figures of the chick lit industry. Chick lit in the US grossed $71 million in 2002, and in 2005, *Wall Street Journal* anticipated that chick lit sales that year would total approximately $137 million. Marian Keyes's novel, *The Other Side of the Story* (2004), sold 488,508 copies in 2005, giving her a position in the top five of the UK *The Bookseller's Top 100.* She reached third place on the same list in 2007 when her novel*, Anybody Out There?* (2006), sold 585,026 copies (Gormley). Thus, the sales statistics of an individual chick lit writer bears testimony to the popularity of chick lit.

Due to this popularity, several offshoots or subgenres were developed which retain the original formula but incorporate particular themes in order to cater to different clientele. Ferriss and Young also recognise how chick lit has managed to cross boundaries of ethnicity, generation, nationality and gender in the ten years since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (*Chick Lit* 5), and lists the following offshoots: "hen lit" (or "matron lit" or "lady lit"), "chick lit jr.," "mommy lit," "Ethnick lit" (such as "Sistah lit" or "Chica Lit"), the Indonesian "sastra wangi" (meaning "fragrant literature"), "Hungarian chick lit." "Christian chick lit" or "church lit," "lad lit" or "dick lit," "bride lit," and "Southern fried chick lit" (*Chick Lit* 5-7). Yardley in *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* identifies the following subgenres of chick lit: "Chick Lit Mystery and Tart Noir"; "Rise of the Antiheroine"; "Small Towns, Chick Lit style"; "Mommy Lit"; "Lady Lit" or "Hen Lit"; "Widow Lit"; "Bride Lit"; "Full-figured Chick

Lit"; "Young Adult Chick Lit"; "Lad Lit"; "Paranormal Chick Lit"; "Ethnic Chick Lit"; "Christian Chick Lit"; "Chick Lit Nonfiction" (Yardley 17-26).

Stephanie Harzewski writes, "Chick lit's success as a genre lies in its seductive bricolage of approximate dichotomies: independence and a husband, the writing life and married cohabitation, fine accessories and entry-level income" (192). By jettisoning the Harlequin idealistic one man-one woman formula, and offering a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals, chick lit's inherent relatability has struck a chord in readers. This relatable nature of chick lit heroines is demonstrated in Caroline J. Smith argument that "Very often, these protagonists not only mirror the authors of these texts, but they also reflect the demographic of their reading audience, connecting the texts directly to their readers" (2), adding that "the similarities that exist between heroine, reader, and author … [blur] what we might have previously considered a fairly stable distinction" (7).

There is an authenticity which was missing from chick lit's forerunners, such as the ultra-glamorous, over the top "bonkbuster" or "sex and shopping" novels of Judith Krantz and Jackie Collins. While Krantz and Collins established the financially independent, sexually voracious female protagonist, her escapades were so distant from the lives of her readers, that it was difficult to properly identify with these characters. The use of the first-person in chick lit—the "sex and shopping" novels were written in the omniscient third-person—also furthers the pretence that the heroine is directly addressing the readers, thereby enabling deeper reader-heroine identification. It is this relatable nature of chick lit which has made it as lucrative as it has proven to be, because the most celebrated chick lit authors, such as Lauren Weisberger, and

Sophie Kinsella, have used their own experiences as fodder for their novels. Unlike other genres of literature, chick lit attempts to provide an "authentic" approximation of real life, although the "reality" is still idealised.

Most scholars trace the genre of chick lit back to Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) (Ferriss and Young, 2006; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Yardley, 2006; Modleski, 2008; Gormley, 2009):

> In the beginning, there was Bridget. That's not entirely true—there were Chick Lit books in circulation in England for some time before anyone realized a trend was starting—but by all accounts, the Chick Lit wave started with a British invasion, spearheaded by one plucky 'singleton' by the name of Bridget Jones (Yardley 6)

Although Fielding's text is hailed as the "first" articulation of the traits which have now become prototypical of the chick lit genre, as Yardley mentions, there were previous publications and other texts produced simultaneously. Yardley calls Marian Keyes the "godmother of Chick Lit" (Yardley 7) since the latter's *Watermelon* (1996) was already garnering some interest in Ireland before *Bridget Jones* made waves in England. Whelehan claims that Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) already had some characteristics that we now find in chick lit, such as the confessional first-person narration, the comedic style, as well as the relatable fallible protagonist (*Feminist Bestseller* xxvi). Most scholars, of course, mention Jane Austen as the main literary author of influence on chick lit, especially on Fielding's work. However, I feel that Jane Austen has been retroactively co-opted as proto-chick lit, and her only direct relationship with chick lit is through Fielding's modernisation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen was not writing for a female audience, and she certainly did not wish her novels to be treated as popular fiction, but the marriage plot

that is at the centre of her novels has served as the structural backbone for the archetypal chick lit novel. Dating in chick lit is teleological, and a happily married life à la Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy is the coveted culmination.

II

Chick Lit and Postfeminism

The genealogy of chick lit can be traced back to the collection of short stories, *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (2000) edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell. Mazza and DeShell coined the term "chick lit" and Mazza writes that the term "chick lit" was created with an ironic aim: "not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype" (18). The goal was to emphasise the contradictory desires that appear in the works written by young women, and the dual legacies of feminism and patriarchy, which inform their lives. The terms "chick lit" and "postfeminist" were used together for the first time in the title of this collection. The fictional pieces published in two anthologies co-edited by Mazza and DeShell in the mid-1990s (*Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* and *Chick-Lit 2: No Chick-Vics*) declared a denunciation of victimization and an assurance that young women could make sound decisions based on their own aspirations and needs. "What we couldn't anticipate," wrote Mazza, "was that less than ten years later our tag would be greasing the commercial book industry machine" (18). The profitable chick lit genre that took the publishing industry by storm—the most commercially successful the publishing industry has ever experienced (Ferriss and Young, *Chick Lit* 2)—is less characterized by satire than the stories in Mazza's experimental collection, but both versions of chick lit explore the problem of desires that are often at odds with each other. For instance, both versions depict contemporary women's struggles with balancing personal independence and careers with commitment in relationships.

While Mazza and DeShell's volume contained a variety of sexualities and sexual acts, chick lit depicts protagonists who are heterosexual. Both the experimental chick lit as well as mainstream chick lit challenge the idea of the Superwoman, but the latter demonstrates a commitment to gender essentialism, the ideologies of romantic love and married heterosexuality, as well as an investment in extravagance and expensive fashion products. This new avatar of chick lit has reached its high popularity partly due to its closeness to conventions of mass market fiction, such as its formulaic nature. Mazza concludes that the newer brand of chick lit discarded the postfeminist base they had proposed in their first collection, but this claim is contested by scholars (as discussed in Chapter 1) since postfeminist issues are still discussed, but in a different manner from that suggested by Mazza and DeShell.

In *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, Stephanie Genz suggests that since there has never been a monolithic idea of feminism, and it never possessed a single, clearly defined, common ideology, there is "no *original* or *authentic* postfeminism" (20). Since feminism has never been composed around any one organization or political party or even an established rule of collective action, the effort to provide *one* meaning of postfeminism is very difficult. Feminism had working meanings which were based on the relevant socio-political context, and from this standpoint, any formulation of "postfeminism" must necessarily re-define feminism as well as its relation to feminism. The term "postfeminism" is usually used to imply that the project of feminism has ended, either because it has been completed or because it has failed. Genz maintains that postfeminism is a more complex and helpful idea than many of its common usages suggest. She asserts that "the 'post-' signifies reliance and continuity, an approach that

has been favoured by advocates of another 'post' derivative, postmodernism" (Genz 19). She argues that the changing relationships between femininity, feminism and concepts of female victimization should be approached from a postfeminist framework, as that would enable us to alter the current balance between these positions by setting up a negotiating space that reassembles them in a non-dichotomous way (Genz 25). From this stance, a postfeminist femininity presents Genz's idea of "postfemininity"—an idea which can be applied to the femininity of chick lit heroines---as a postfeminist femininity which offers various manifold layers of female identification that alternate between subject and object, victim and perpetrator (Genz 26).

In the same vein as Genz's postfemininity, Stephanie Harzewski presents a concise comment on the different branches of feminism incorporated into chick lit's postfeminist stance:

> Chick lit's affirmation of the individual as an agent borrows from liberal feminism. Its cover visuals emphatically maintain sexual difference and suggest gender essentialism rooted in women's gravitation toward the omnipotent magnet of apparel and accessories. In its pattern of heroines garnering literary recognition through editorial promotions, columns, or book contracts, it extends cultural feminism's attempts to recover and create a literature of its own. These intersections, however, typically operate within the marriage plot's telos, one in which married heterosexuality, specifically moneyed, is held as the prize, a column of one's own a consolation or close second. Novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for instance, present a trenchant examination of heterosexual privilege but nevertheless capitulate into a wedding primer (169)

Bridget Jones's Diary contains what may be chick lit's most famous reference to feminism, and from it we understand that postfeminism endeavours to "improve" some deficiencies of second-wave feminism. Bridget observes that "there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (Fielding 18), a line that Fielding maintains she meant ironically. To Bridget "feminist" seems to be a dirty word which should not be used by hip, urban twenty-first century women because of the stereotypes associated with it. Postfeminism maintains a more ambivalent view on female independence than second-wave feminism, and chick lit records twenty- and thirty-something women navigating the tensions between feminism and femininity. In *Interrogating Feminism*, Tasker and Negra note that "chick lit takes up the consciousness-raising novel's negotiations with the assembling of a unified subject by focusing, often obsessively, on self-presentation and the reconciliation of the creative woman with glamour" (125). Chick lit replaces the stereotype of the "strident feminist" with the unkempt hair, lack of makeup and unsexy clothes with a glamour girl in Jimmy Choos. The perfect fashionable look seemingly represents a put-together personality and real-world success.

Postfeminism is not anti-feminist; instead, it involves an often unconscious internalization of some basic feminist goals—making them "common sense"—but simultaneously depoliticizes and individualizes them. The personal is no longer the political as the personal is inherently the personal. The most remarkable feature of the postfeminist genre of chick lit seems to be the obsession with the female body. Tasker and Negra note that "Postfeminism perpetuates woman as pinup, the enduring linchpin of commercial beauty culture" (3). Femininity now seems to be seen as a bodily property instead of social or psychological construction. Rather than motherhood, caring, or nurturing being given primacy as

vital to femininity (all, of course, controversial concepts) it is the possession of a perfect body that appears to be considered the source of a woman's self-confidence and identity, and thus the body needs to be under constant surveillance to ensure that it conforms to normative standards of femininity. When Bridget Jones smokes 40 cigarettes or consumes too many calories, the reader is made to read this in psychological terms as signifying her emotional breakdown (customarily precipitated by a man). This phenomenon is noticeable in several chick lit texts, such as Jane Green's *Jemima J,* Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed*, and Janice Kaplan and Lynn Schnurnberger*'s The Botox Diairies* to name a few.

Feminism is not ignored or even directly abused in postfeminism, but tenets of liberal feminism are treated as "natural." Postfeminist chick lit heroines treasure their autonomy and view their independence as the freedom to make individual choices. However, they use this empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by second wave feminists as problematic, as they are situated in heteronormative notions of femininity, such as the white wedding, and retreating to a domestic life in the suburbs after having a family of their own. Chick lit does two main things; it creates a link between femininity and feminism through a logic of individualism. One other striking move is that from objectification to subjectification. Chick lit novels demonstrate a move from the woman's body as sexual object of the male gaze as seen in Harlequin romances, to sexual subjectification, where women are portrayed as sexually liberated, desiring subjects. Samantha Jones from the HBO TV series based on Candace Bushenell's *Sex and the City* is a great example of this new voracious postfeminist sexuality.

III

The Content of the Dissertation:

In the globally interconnected world of the 21st century, the circulation of cultural forms and global capital has given rise to new socio-cultural possibilities. What mediations and imaginaries situate these processes? I examine Anglo-American and Indian chick cultural texts—representing the "West" and the "East"—as sites for thinking of cultural globalization. I will study questions of consumerism, the global movement of capital, and the global circulation of popular literature and culture as manifested in chick culture. The chick lit genre is important in the current socio-historical context because it is a commentary on the rise of the "singleton"[3] lifestyle, and is both a product of and a comment on postfeminism insofar as it provides insight into contemporary femininity, gender politics, and women's economic independence. As my contribution to this conversation, I will explore chick lit's relationship with consumerism and commodity worship; study Indian and Indian diaspora chick lit through a postcolonial lens, and the influences that a different cultural perspective has on mainstream chick lit featuring white middle-class women; and examine the re-contextualizations—the "diegetic transpositions" in Gerard Genette's terms—of Jane Austen's novels in the form of chick culture texts. I triangulate chick lit, classics, and commodity in my dissertation: commodity fixation in classics and chick lit; Indian women as commodities exchanged in marriage; and the commoditization of Jane Austen through the derivatives of her novels. The cultural globalisation that is a timely topic underlies the discussion on Indian chick lit and the Austen transpositions.

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[3] "In 2005, 51 percent of women said they were living without a spouse, up from 35 percent in 1950 and 49 percent in 2000. … [I]n 2005 married couples became a minority of all American households for the first time…." (Roberts).

My discussions will be limited to urban and suburban middle and upper middle class women, i.e those who have the background and income to live out—to some degree—the fantasies portrayed in chick lit. It is important to note here that the idea of the "middle class" is very fluid and there are no concrete parameters to define this nebulous concept. In 2001, World Bank economists, Branko Milanovic and Shlomo Yitzhaki, first attempted to zero in on a definition for the global middle class. They suggested the bracket of people with an income threshold of between $4,000 and $17,000 could be termed middle class. In 2002, Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee, two poverty researchers from MIT, suggested a range of $2 to $10 in per capita daily spending. In 2008, Homi Kharas set the threshold *beginning* at $10 per capita daily spending—the mark established by the MIT economists as the global middle class's upper limit (Rosenbaum). In 2005, the poverty line in the United States was set at $13 daily per capita spending (per person for a family of four) ("World Bank's $1.25/per day..."). This means that the global middle class would technically be poorer than those below the poverty line in the US. In the US, based on 2010 census data, the middle class would be the 60% of Americans with annual household incomes from $28,636 to $79,040. However, most Americans believe they belong to the middle class, as was revealed by a Pew survey in 2008. One-third of Americans who earned more than $150,000 a year—11% of Americans overall—identified themselves as middle class. Meanwhile, 40% of Americans who earned less than $20,000—i.e. 25%--considered themselves middle class as well. The median family income in the United States was $49,445 in 2010, which is a lower number than many Americans seem to think (Rohde).

With these statistics in mind, it is better to be circumspect and think of the middle class as not an established concrete socio-economic class based on income levels, but as a concept. The

middle class is that which has a level of income security, and is less vulnerable to economic shocks. The relative financial stability allows the middle class to participate in social activities and politics. While Americans tend to over-identify as middle class, there is no single middle class in India. The difference between the lower and upper middle class is considerable, not only in terms of income but also with respect to education and access to resources. Oza writes, "the middle class have often been defined as the petty bourgeoisie of traders, small businessmen, and those in service occupations—especially in government jobs. In an attempt to suggest this multiplicity, the middle class in India are referred to as the middle *classes*" (12). The idea of the middle class adopted by the White House's Middle Class Task Force might be useful in this instance to conceptualize the middle class. This organization defines the middle class by its aspirations: "Middle class families share an aspiration to own a home and car, to send their kids to college, and to take occasional family vacations, all while maintaining health and retirement security. This understanding of the middle class also helps explain why so many people identify with this group so consistently through time" (Stevenson). While economic situations of the middle class have their ups and downs, the aspirations of the middle class remain more or less unchanged.

Chapter 1 examines a two-part survey of chick lit readers through the lens of Stuart Hall's model of "Encoding/Decoding" to determine whether readers passively accept the dominant ideologies that are encoded in the genre. Although chick lit scholars mention the success of the genre, there is no conclusive research present on the reasons why female readers find chick lit so relatable. I attempt to address the lack of ethnographic data on chick lit readership—are readers the cultural dupes of popular culture that they are often assumed to be?

Chapter 2 explores consumerism as it is featured in chick lit through Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and Lee Tulloch's *Fabulous Nobodies.* I draw a trajectory from Austen to modern chick lit to demonstrate the historical progression of the consumerist zeal in female protagonists, with a special focus on Undine Spragg and Lorelei Lee of *The Custom of the Country* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* respectively. The young, urban women of the new middle class with access to discretionary income enjoy their relatively newfound economic independence by spending their earnings to experience their successes in the material forms of designer clothing and accessories, as well as exotic holidays and other luxuries. The high-end products they purchase also work to reinforce their sense of selfhood and help to buttress the fact that they have "made it". Another strategy used by some chick lit writers is to exaggerate their heroines' shopping tendencies to such an extent that they become ironic figures meant to humorously show the female readers the result of blind consumerism and gently steer them away from a similar fate as that the heroines suffer.

As mentioned earlier, Ethnic lit is one of the subgenres of chick lit, which has cashed in on the global readership of chick lit which was created by Fielding's *Bridget Jones* novels, by producing "local" versions of the Bridget's quirky escapades. The ethnic lit subgenre can also be extended to include the ethnic chick flick, another branch of the chick culture umbrella. Ferriss and Young describe chick culture as: "a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty- to thirtysomething middle-class women. Along with chick flicks, the most prominent chick cultural forms are chick lit and chick TV programming, although other pop culture manifestations such as magazines, blogs, music—even car designs and energy drinks—can be included in the chick line-up" (*Chick Flicks* 1-2). Coupling

prototypical chick lit topics with diverse cultural contexts, social circumstances, and gender roles, these local-flavour cultural texts provide new perspectives to the opposing desires which typify chick lit. These texts illustrate the forces of globalization, as well as shine a new spotlight on comparatively marginalized contemporary women. Within this frame of reference, the ethnic chick lit texts explore the complex network of tensions and desires emerging from the conflict between the median set by the global (mostly Western) consumer culture and that of the alternative modernities in which writers/filmmakers and protagonists navigate their everyday lives.

The aim of Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation is to outline some of the challenges occurring when the popular chick lit formula is moved from its original cultural background and applied to distant socio-cultural contexts, and the ramifications for our interpretation of the cross-cultural work executed by popular culture. By successfully establishing both a commercial and a global appeal, novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, according to Angela McRobbie, mark the appearance of an "ethic of freedom" with young women as its dominant subjects who operate by means of "the language of personal choice" (12). However, it is a freedom founded on individual desire instead of collective politics, and as Anita Harris points out, a "liberation" sold to women through the combination of feminism and consumption (Harris 167). In this vein, the ethnic chick culture texts demonstrate that postfeminist choice cannot always be a viable option. The Indian Bridget Joneses might not always have the cultural freedom to exercise individual choice which their English and American counterparts can, a transnational aspect of the genre that I examine in the last two chapters.

Chapter 3 examines Indian heroines who reside both in India and in the United States, and who experience a conflict between the "Indian" and "Western" aspects of their identity. I focus on the Indian protagonist's struggle with her cultural identity in the conflicts explored by chick lit, such as relationships and love, personal development, and the identification with Indian culture. I also focus on the institution of the Indian arranged marriage which can treat women as commodities that are traded in an economic arrangement, and often denies women agency in the decisions which affect their own lives. The protagonist ultimately resolves her identity struggle by embracing Homi Bhabha's notion of a hybrid in-between space. This hybridity is often achieved through the mediation of the arranged marriage. Indian chick lit is thus shown to be a site of glocalisation where the Indian protagonist's hybridity allows her to enjoy "liberal" values while upholding Indian cultural sovereignty.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how contemporary chick culture derivatives of Jane Austen's novels exploit her work as raw material to produce texts which can be marketed based on the sign-value that the brand name "Jane Austen" provides. In *The Act of Reading* (1976), Wolfgang Iser's discussion of the intrinsic disproportion between a text and a reader demonstrates the desire readers have to generate new adaptations/interpretations of an author's work. Iser claims that a reader's understanding of a text is helped by his/her capacity to negotiate the "blanks," or gaps, in a text by making associations and closing those gaps. Iser cautions that readers should be "controlled" in some way to achieve a feasible interpretation of these blanks. However, the new Austen derivative texts show that readers have turned into unrestrained reader-writers, and have created numerous works to fill in the lacunae in accordance with their own wishes.

The rapid growth of the new media and the resulting maturity of varied forms of broadcasting have hastened a change in modern reading habits, with an immediate impact on Austenian reception. The intimacy once associated with the act of reading has been displaced by a project of shared recovery. The iPod, the DVD, the audio book, the TV and cinema screen have taken over from print culture as major forms of cultural transmission. However, it is print culture which provides the ur-text, and in reformulating its material the new media engage directly with its interpretation. For example, the sharp division between "high" and "low" culture blurs in Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club*, which presents a validation of the amateur reading club, and obtains its ironic punch from the fact that each member of the eponymous club is acting out her own Austen situation. The story works on a variety of levels and is a commentary on the act of reading for a receptive interpretive society, which learns from sharing its individual reading experiences.

Similar to Fowler's novel, the chick culture texts that "update" the plots of Jane Austen into a newer, contemporary, more relatable form represent a commodification of the mother-texts which are used to source chick lit plots for the readers' consumption. In *Palimpsests,* Gerard Genette terms the re-contextualizations of texts as "diegetic transpositions." In Chapter 4 I discuss the modernizations—or "transdiegetizations"—of Austen novels in the form of chick culture. The use-value of the Austen text to the chick lit author is its importance as a resource for "raiding" it for aspects which can be extended or accentuated. The reader identifies and is fascinated with some feature of the new work, and this is the psychological aspect of the commodity fetish by which individuals internalize the general system of exchange-value. I discuss four chick flicks and one chick lit novel in terms of advances in women's rights since

Austen's time. These texts are set in diverse socio-cultural milieus and maintain the local culture amidst cultural globalization, thus proving that cultural homogeneity is not an inevitable outcome of McLuhan's "global village" (1962). Global practices are interpreted differently according to local tradition, and thus, the universal takes particular forms. In other words, there is glocalization, a global outlook adapted to local conditions, a hybrid of globalization and localization (Robertson 28).

In the "Conclusion" chapter, I address the shortcomings of chick lit as it exists, and discuss how the genre can develop in the future so that it can attend to "real" problems. Chick lit needs to become an effective genre to escape to so that readers can find a solution to their real-life problems instead of simply ignoring their concerns through the fantasy-worlds about which they currently read.

IV

The Structure of the Dissertation:

In the four chapters described above, I employ a cultural studies framework to discuss the different aspects of consumption as it applies to chick lit: the consumption of chick lit by real readers; consumption within chick lit; consumption of mainstream chick lit in an Indian paradigm; and chick culture's consumption of Jane Austen—retroactively co-opted as the "founder" of chick lit—in order to increase chick culture's own consumability. Chick lit is a conservative genre and is encoded with the hegemonic ideology. However, there are wedges within the genre which allow for readerly as well as cultural negotiation. Following Bourdieu's

sense of habitus, consumption is class-based, and since class is a cultural construct, negotiation of any kind must necessarily also be cultural.

The first chapter demonstrates that chick lit promotes the hegemonic ideology of consumerism and normative femininity/heterosexual marriage as a goal for women, but readers actively negotiate these ideas while working within the dominant code. They question the relevance of these ideas to their lives without directly challenging the power structures.

The second chapter demonstrates the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism at work in chick lit. However, I suggest that the exaggeration of the shopping tendencies of the protagonists gently cautions readers to be careful of their own shopping in real life. Also, as mentioned above, Chapter 1 demonstrates that readers do negotiate this particular ideology.

Chapters 3 and 4 depict the cultural negotiation of the protagonists—I have not been able to conduct a survey on how readers/viewers react to Indian chick lit or transnational chick flicks. These texts therefore allow the protagonist—and by extension, the reader—to negotiate hegemonic femininity as a woman's profession is given primacy over the desire for love/marriage. The protagonists in both Indian chick lit as well as the chick flicks that I discuss here are professionalised. Although each is looking for love, romantic love is not the driving force of the protagonists' lives, but takes a second position to their ambition to be professionally independent. Even the brides who followed the Indian "traditional" belief that women should not work, start working after they move to the US, and Maya Mehra of *Goddess for Hire* is literally forced into work when she discovers she is the reincarnation of goddess Kali. In the transcultural

Austen derivative texts, it is interesting to note that the transpositions are effected onto more conservative contexts such as Mormon, Jewish, and Indian (Hindu). However, even then, the focus is on the professionalization of the female protagonist. Elizabeth from *Pride & Prejudice* is a writer, Meenakshi and Sowmya in *Kandukondain Kandukondain* is a singer and an office worker respectively, Lalita in *Bride and Prejudice* works on her family farm and desires to be independent, Aisha is an artist as well as an event planner, and Flo in *Jane Austen in Boca* used to be a librarian before she retired.

In Chapter 3, I connect Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity with glocalization—negotiation between liberal "Western" values with traditional "Indian" values—and this negotiation is homologous to the readers' negotiation in the first chapter (as well as the readers' negotiation of consumerism in the second chapter). Chapter 4 also demonstrates similar negotiations between the "local" cultural ideology and the actions of the protagonists within the texts. Jewish, Mormon and Indian cultural ideology is shown to encourage marriage as the goal of a woman's life, but the texts give equal if not more importance to making the women professional or capable of self-sufficiency first. In this way, both Indian chick lit as well as the transcultural chick culture texts negotiate against Western and more "local" hegemony.

I have also tied the idea of cultural hybridity in the protagonists with Marwan Kraidy's idea of hybridity. He suggests that hybridity is the "cultural logic of globalization" and suggests that marketers use transcultural gaps to form strategic bonds between their commodities and the local communities. The cultural negotiation of "liberal" and "conservative" cultures in the texts I discuss is directly related to the negotiation of the global-local nexus or glocalization (Robertson,

Kraidy), and demonstrates that "glocalised" cultural hybridity is the transnational neo-liberal aspiration for triumphing over new markets (Kraidy "Hybridity in Cultural Globalization" 11). Kraidy corroborates Pieterse's claim that globalization should itself be viewed as hybridization since there is no pure "local" or "global" any longer. The local/global polarity can be resolved through glocalisation where each aspect of the binary complements the other to make meaning, but is articulated in a hegemonic field (Kraidy "The Global, the Local, and the Hybrid" 473).

In accordance with Kraidy's formulation of hybridity and glocalisation with hegemony, the chick media discussed in chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate that glocalisation is often strategic micromarketing that sells "diversity" while maintaining the hegemonic structure. Mainstream chick lit, itself a profitable commodity, serves as a lucrative raw material to create localized versions for other communities. The localization of socio-cultural elements dovetails with Genette's concept of hypertextual transpositions since the latter enables both modernization as well as cultural adaptation into a different diegesis. The structural innovation facilitates a transcultural space where the localised figure of the new global woman—even if she is in her seventies as in *Jane Austen in Boca*—can be celebrated. Jane Austen, already a rewarding industry, is married to chick lit in order to produce the chick culture derivatives of Austen's novels—guaranteed to be a box office/literary market success. Austen's use-value creates the exchange-value of the chick culture texts. While I suggest that readers do negotiate the hegemonic ideologies often endorsed by the genre, it should be kept in mind that the resistance is very limited, and underlying tensions are usually recuperated while advancing the ideologies.

The ideological content of chick lit makes it important to discuss the real-life/realistic nexus that characterises chick lit as it is ostensibly shows life "as it is." Cawelti (1976) argues

that the purpose of popular fiction is relaxation or entertainment and escape (8). My investment in moving away from the idea of the implied reader to focusing on myself being a real reader as well as eliciting real readers' opinions is related to the realistic style of chick lit. I am interested in how chick lit serves the dual purpose of providing both entertainment and a sense of escape while purporting to depict reality. I personally read chick lit as an escape from "serious" reading; it is mimetic as well as has elements of fantasy which smooth over rough patches in the "reality" that is portrayed. Chick lit uses mimetic style and not literary realism, which allows for the happy balance of "reality" and fantasy. The cover visuals of chick lit rarely show a face, favouring a body in high heels with shopping bags. Chick lit sometimes lacks well-rounded characters, and there is often a sense of vacuity around the protagonist. This lack in well-formed characterisation as well as in the cover visuals facilitates the projection of the reader's own self onto the protagonist. This imbues the chick lit narrative with an added sense of "realism" which is different for each reader as they each "see" their own self in the protagonist. This second layer or realism and the genre's own verisimilitude coupled with fantasy elements provide a "realist fantasy" for readers. Readers effect an escape from real-life problems through the fantastical resolution of problems within the diegetic world of the chick lit novel, and in the process, get entertained as well.

Since reality is idealised in chick lit with its easy resolution of problems that would be quite worrying in real life, chick lit provides a fantasy of reality. However, this fantasy aspect of chick lit is, to an extent, realistic too. The fantasy aspect of the genre does not involve imaginary worlds or invented languages, or even the distant exoticism that often characterises the Harlequin romance. The gap between the escapist fantasy portrayed in chick lit and the reality of the

readers' lives is not incredibly wide. Chick lit protagonists are able to maintain a better lifestyle than their low- to mid-level salaries should allow, but it is possible to stretch one's imagination to accept that it *might* be possible with vigilant savings. The fantasies portrayed in chick lit can sometimes be ascribed to sheer luck; in other words, it is possible to imagine the fantasy elements as literal forms which *might* happen to lucky people. This enables readers to negotiate between the perceived "realism" of the chick lit novels and the reality of their own lives.

The realist fantasy that is chick lit also does ideological work by distracting readers from issues that worry them in real life and which they need an escape from, and thereby prevents readers from questioning their own lives. The glitz of chick lit recuperates the difficult issues readers struggle with by depicting these issues in a humorous way and providing miraculous solutions for them. For example, Becky Bloomwood suffers through extreme debt through all six of Kinsella's *Shopaholic* novels, but at the end of each novel, she is quite astonishingly extricated from her mountain of debt. Thus, while the very real problems of debt and unbridled consumerism are portrayed in the novel, readers are distracted from seriously considering such issues by the fantasy cures, thereby leaving the hegemonic ideologies in status quo.

The escape factor which is so central to chick lit is mediated by literary style, which is influenced by the tonal and aesthetic style of literary antecedents. There seems to be a distinction between the traditional style of the literary forebears such as Austen and Wharton and the modern style of the chick lit writers. The chick lit novelists' encoding of modern styles is based on the irony and the wry humour that characterised the "traditional" style. While writers such as Helen Fielding have contemporised Austen, they have simultaneously contemporised Austen's

style in chick lit's characteristic postfeminist humour. Postfeminist humour focuses on gender differences; both men and women are the target of such humour; the context is leisure and consumption instead of politics or work; and depicts women as sexually desiring subjects (Shifman and Lemish 874-5). While the measured metaphors and sophisticated diction have given way to colloquial style and slang neologisms (for example, Fielding coined "singleton", "emotional fuckwittage" and "Smug Married"), the irony that characterised Austen or Wharton shows in chick lit's structural irony.

The literary affects of style and irony facilitate chick lit's aesthetic distance from its status as a consumable artefact, and the writers' own styles maintain a continuity as well as an aesthetic distance from antecedents such as Austen. Chick lit with its glossy cover art and its product placement is itself a commodity, and the marriage plot that it revolves around is also depicted as another consumable object. The generic lineaments and templates from the literary antecedents as well as the central trope of the marriage plot activates the generic underpinnings in chick lit. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, readers can self-consciously distance themselves from taking chick lit's messages at face value since they can recognise the structural irony that operates in the genre. Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a smart, satirical take on the vicissitudes of a thirty-something singleton that operates through the use of postfeminist humour. This humour itself is a strategy which ties in with the escape aspect of chick lit. Chick lit's typical humour allows the reader to be lulled away from real-life anxieties and prevents any real resistance to the ideologies at work in real-life. This leads to my suggestions in the conclusion about the ways in which chick lit could be a better form of escape.

CHIC INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES: THE CONSUMPTION OF CHICK LIT

I

Introduction

Ken Gelder writes, "Two key words for understanding popular fiction are *industry* and *entertainment*...—the latter being a particular form of culture, of cultural production...The field of popular fiction is therefore quite literally a 'culture industry'" (1). The term "culture industry" was coined by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944. They suggested that mass cultural forms were manufactured and commodified in modern capitalism and they standardized production and deceived consumers. If we take into account the ideological content of conventional romance fiction and chick lit and the formulaic standardization of the genre for capitalist profit, we might come to the same conclusion as Adorno and Horkheimer. However, Janice Radway's study of romance readers in *Reading the Romance* (1984) challenges this "culture industry" angle of audience deception. She differentiates between the ideological content of the romance novels and the meaning-making of the actual readers, as well as focusing on the importance of the event of reading and interpreting. Following Radway's ethnographic analysis of romance readers, I also wish to question the top-down nature of meaning-making in chick lit by examining the actual circumstances of reception and interpretation.

In this chapter, I will examine the readers' responses to chick lit in order to understand whether the readers passively accept the patriarchal ideologies of heterosexuality, femininity, domesticity, and marriage that are present in the genre. Since the genre is aimed towards women, I have had almost exclusively female participants (just one male) for my "Chick Lit Readership" survey. I have maintained the anonymity of the readers, but their contribution to my research has

enabled me to examine whether their reactions to chick lit endorse the idea that chick lit is yet another means of production which controls the passive mass of readers, or whether they challenge this notion of the submissive consumer. I advertised my survey through social media; classified advertisements in the free weekly publication, *Lansing CityPulse*; and flyers around the MSU campus, in public libraries, bookstores, and coffee shops in the Lansing area.

I have conducted two surveys on chick lit readership—one online and one in-person—and the quantitative and qualitative results I collected through these surveys are valuable sources for a cultural ethnography of the female participants' reactions to chick lit and the issues of self-image, beauty, women's empowerment, and consumerism featured in it. I explore chick lit readership in relation to Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model (1980) to further examine the genre and its relationship to contemporary culture. A discussion of Hall's model follows below. Conducting a survey on chick lit readership was integral to my research project in order to chart the reasons behind its immense popularity, and its relevance to the lives of modern young women. My surveys are inspired by Radway's pioneering sociological analysis of romance readership through a survey of forty-five romance readers she conducted in a town she names "Smithton". I have also used Bridget Fowler's survey on romance readership (conducted in Scotland) as recorded in *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1991) as a secondary source for my survey questions.

Radway's sociological analysis is exemplary in demonstrating how necessary romance novels were to the lives of Smithton housewives (10). The Smithton women "saw themselves first as wives and mothers" (Radway 7), and romance fiction allowed them to find emotional

validation when both men and "women's libbers" denigrated their "woman's work" and dismissed "mothers and housewives as ignorant, inactive, and unimportant" (Radway 78). Although Radway shows that the Smithton readers are not passive readers, they were looking for a specific kind of emotional sustenance in romance that they were denied in their own lives from their husbands and children. Chick lit targets a very different demographic of urban, working, upwardly mobile, middle class women in their 20s and 30s. Although the chick lit heroine is looking for romance, chick lit usually does not give primacy to the role of hero, and he remains in the background. The female protagonist's relationship with her family and friends are brought to the fore, and her struggles in the workplace also receive as much attention as her search for a romantic partner. Thus, chick lit readers cannot be searching for the same sort of nurturance and romantic care-giving that the Smithton readers found in conventional romance novels.

I was interested in studying what chick lit readers are looking for if it was not to compensate for the **"**desire for the nurturance represented and promised by the preoedipal mother" (Radway 14)**.** I expected the element of wish-fulfilment to be present in readers' expectations from chick lit, but wished to learn which areas of experience they want imaginary fulfilment for. Moreover, Radway recognizes that the Smithton group cannot be taken as a "scientifically designed random sample" and thus the conclusions from the study should be extrapolated very carefully to apply to other romance readers (48). My small interview sample is predominantly derived from the suburban Midwest, and therefore, comparable to the Smithton group, but my online survey (122 participants) had global reach. This enabled me to gauge the responses of a truly randomised sample of readers, which can then be extrapolated with comparative ease—although always with caution—to apply to chick lit readers in general.

Additionally, Radway brings preconceived notions of the inferiority of the romance genre to her study, and acknowledges in her new introduction in 1991 that she does not read the genre (Radway 6). I have read a substantial amount of chick lit, and I approach my study through the lens of a chick lit reader. Although I do not personally identify with the heroine unlike the majority of the readers, I am very familiar with the genre and approach it without any prejudices or academic snobbery. I can merge my academic analysis of the genre with my pleasure in reading the genre, and thereby eliminate the fissure between communicating with my survey participants and interpreting their answers.

I adopt a similar ethnomethodology as Radway to examine the cultural phenomena of the way readers receive chick lit. I have had 122 participants for my online survey. The broad base of the online survey allows me a random sample of readers from a wide geographical area instead of fixing the pool in one region, and provides quantitative data on readers' reception of chick lit. The interview-based survey involves a very small sample of twenty readers and provides more nuanced and qualitative responses on questions of femininity and gender roles, consumerism, work and relationship issues as encountered in chick lit. Based on the job descriptions and education of the online survey participants, most of the respondents appear to belong to the middle class, although I cannot make a firm claim due to lack of accurate data. My interviewees were all women from the middle and upper middle classes, i.e for whom the aspirations created by chick lit might be achievable to some extent. Using Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model (1980) of reception theory to analyze the participants' answers to the survey questions allowed me to understand how the target audience of the chick lit juggernaut is

receiving the genre. In addition to the online questionnaire, I have also used online book forums on chick lit to add to my data for my analysis.

II

The Research Methodology

My surveys ask participants some basic questions regarding their tastes in and reactions to central themes or recurring tropes in chick lit, and provide the option to select one of the four multiple-choice answers or provide an answer of their own. The way the readers say that they read or receive the texts was instrumental in understanding the extent of the audience's negotiation with and opposition to the genre. Even as children, women often imagine themselves in the act of reading as occupying that fictional reality where they play a certain female archetype. The interview results help me examine the act of reading where different ideas are raised, different wishes come to the forefront, and different aspects of the texts affect certain conditions of the women's lives. Since chick lit has elements in common with the conventional romance genre, it occupies a complicated position in relation to patriarchy, and the surveys sort out the various lines of subjective interaction which the women have towards the texts to locate a place to start a conversation about the deeper meanings of those reactions.

The relationship between the production, distribution, and adaptation of cultural objects and symbols plays a central role in each analysis of pop culture. Hall's hypothesis is that cultural production does not presuppose determinate meanings in texts, and cultural products, thus, do not inevitably have to move in a unidimensional sender-receiver model. Based on the various backgrounds of the consumers, every response can potentially be different from another, which

is why cultural globalization does not result in a standardized homogeneity of culture, and has the potential to produce difference due to the different socio-cultural contexts of the consumers.

My choice of data demonstrates my interest in studying voluntary contributions by readers; the independent nature and accessibility of the online questionnaire and the book forums I consider has certain procedural advantages, as it liberates these contributors' input from some of the restrictions sometimes associated with experimental work on reader response. I have referred to chick lit forums on goodreads.com, Amazon.com, and chicklit.co.uk. I consider the way readers articulate their feelings in response to the genre, but I also think about how they, in the perspective provided by their contributions to online book forums, become enthusiastic critics of the novels. I am interested in the "untrained" evaluation of "real" readers—not critics or academics. For this reason, I have attempted to collate data from two different sources where I would receive information with none to minimal prompting from me.

One of my findings from my surveys and from the online book forums is that readers always expect a happy ending from the archetypal chick lit novel. Both the qualitative and quantitative approaches show that one of the major appeals of the genre is the "feel-good" factor and the general cheerful mood achieved from reading these novels. In the stylistic study that Rocio Montoro makes of chick lit reading, she also records the readers' interest in the happy ending of the novels. She writes that "their [the readers'] constant references in my data to the way in which these novels should unfold suggest that they vehemently expect the genre to be manufactured in the 'happy-ending-novel' factory. That is, the novels' resolution should leave in

the reader a 'sweet taste', as if they had just enjoyed a nice cup of their favourite cappuccino" (Montoro 137).

Readers understand that they enjoy this "happy-ending-novel" by being invested in the reading process and critically appraising what they like or dislike about the genre. Although many readers confess that chick lit is often a "guilty pleasure" and they read these novels when they are tired and do not wish to read anything too cerebral, they are nonetheless dedicating their time to the novels and can determine the different aspects that they appreciate and those that do not charm them. In "The evaluation of literary texts: A new perspective," van Peer writes:

> The evaluation of literary texts is something that readers almost always, automatically, and spontaneously, engage in. They judge the development of a plot and generate feeling of pleasure or dislike at particular events, they feel that the text does not yield what they had expected, or they find the author's style rewarding or awkward. All of this evaluation usually takes place as an integral part of the reading process. … Evaluating a literary text is an instinctive practice in which we engage both routinely and with fervor. (1)

Since it is viewed as an essential and innate part of the reading process, it seems that evaluative moves are inextricably associated with reading. The reader's act of evaluation is defined by van Peer as "judgement," "appraisal," or "interpretation" of the literary work, and the result of such evaluation is the creation of "feelings of pleasure or dislike at particular events" (1).

The results from my study verify that the kind of emotional involvement that chick lit readers exhibit go together with their wish to be evaluative of the novels; that is, readers convey their feelings and also analytically assess the merit or otherwise of the novels they read. Thus,

chick lit readers do not only express their pleasure, sadness or indifference towards the novels but also engage completely in appraising the reason they feel that way. This arouses expectations regarding what they hope to find in their chick lit books. Michael Burke, in *Literary Reading*, *Cognition and Emotion*, argues that readers of literature have expectations even before they begin to read a text just as film viewers have certain goals. He offers, "My provisional answer to this would be that even though the events are fictive, our commitment as readers to become emoted by the chosen literary work of art most definitely makes literary reading an egocentric process from the level of the readers' macro-goals" (Burke 46). Therefore, Burke asserts that literary works have the potential to give rise to emotional reactions despite their fictional nature because readers get emotionally involved once they engage in the act of reading and even connect the literary themes to their larger life goals. Authors such as Modleski, Radway and Warhol also demonstrate that the fictive nature of the text thus does not rule out the generation of affect in the human experience of reading. They study the commitment of female readers and audiences with forms of popular fiction, mostly, although not exclusively, the popular romance (for instance, Warhol and Modleski also look at the reactions of female audiences to soap operas). Their research validates the hypothesis that consumers do react emotionally to popular fictional forms.

As explained earlier, my analysis here is based on two different but corresponding methodological approaches: one, a qualitative analysis of a small sample questionnaire, and two, a quantitative analysis of a larger sample from an online questionnaire, and some carefully chosen input by contributors in online book forums. Because of the last component, my data comprises of a section of unprompted contributions by chick lit readers. It is a real concern that

the vastness of online forums on the internet makes it difficult to cull valuable sources of data from irrelevant material, especially due to the almost impossible task of reading through and then monitoring these sources. All of my sources use the tag “chick lit”, and most often, the title of the forum has the term “chick lit” in it. This is a reliable indication that matters related to the popular genre of chick lit are being discussed.

The online book forums allow people to freely express their ideas or concerns in the shared realm of cyberspace, and only when they desire to—there is usually no prompting required. This freedom that users enjoy lends a kind of spontaneity to their contributions when used as data for analysis. They are not subject to any restrictions that scholarly research might unintentionally impose. Moreover, since the online contributors post voluntarily of their reading experiences, their posts are evaluative and often analytical (at least those that I analyse here). Personal opinions, judgements, assessments and the reader’s position on whichever topic is being discussed are more than likely to feature. These two aspects turn users’ entries into appealing data for analysis of chick lit audience reactions, especially in relation to reader response analysis.

The online book forums are similar to blogs since they are also available openly on the internet and allow the same methodological advantage of being unprompted opinions of readers about their experiences with reading chick lit. These web users post comments for reasons of leisure, entertainment, or just in the spirit of discussion, and they tend to maintain an informal tone in their exchanges. The accessible online format of the book club forums allows users to exchange views openly about their reading experience of chick lit and also to share their own emotions and moods after reading the novels. The forums seem to provide a community like a

virtual book club where users report on the private emotions they experience in a public way, thereby socializing virtually. Elizabeth Long in *Book Clubs* notes that social and emotional aspects of reading somehow blend together in the institution of the book club because book club gatherings do not exclusively focus on the discussion of the selected book:

> people can use books and each other's responses to books to promote insight and empathy in an integrative process of collective self-reflection. In that sense, reading group discussions perform creative cultural work, for they enable participants to articulate or even discover who they are: their values, their aspirations, and their stance toward the dilemmas in their worlds (Long 145)[4]

Long's notion of "creative cultural work" amongst book club participants, which is given as explanation for the sharing of experiences incited by reading books, also applies to the domain of web-based book forums. When people discuss books, Long suggests that their own personalities are also communicated along with their opinions on the books (144, 145). Thus, web-based book clubs offer an individualistic, subjective take on chick lit reading without having the opinions directly prompted by someone's questions.

Book clubs where people meet and discuss a text jointly agreed upon are gradually becoming important sources of information for scholars since the role of the reader and his/her responses can be viewed without excess intervention from the scholar. For example, Swann and Allington (2009) underline the advantages of these book clubs as generators of data:

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[4] Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* achieves just such a purpose where the six members of the book club re-interpret situations in their own lives while reading and discussing the different works of Jane Austen with each other. Each of these members has "a private Austen"' and sees the books through different eyes. Allegra, a character who is a lesbian, suggests that perhaps Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* was gay, and could therefore tolerate marriage to Mr. Collins.

> Reading groups provide an example of how 'ordinary readers'—i.e. readers other than academic critics and professional reviewers—interpret and evaluate literary texts. While the reader is routinely appealed to in many forms of literary study, including literary stylistics, this is usually an ideal or implied reader (247-8)

Swann and Allington critique what they call the "artificiality" that they feel characterises reader response research because in spite of the efforts researchers make to establish genuineness, the informants give data in their role as research participants and not as "readers." Another point that Swann and Allington comment on is that the informants usually end up being students in the researchers' university, especially in the humanities where scholars do not have access to sufficiently varied demographics and where research grants are limited (248). Although I do not use any book clubs for my data, the web-based book forums are comparable since different readers come together to discuss particular books or comment on questions raised by forum contributors.

My data avoids some of the problems discussed by Swann and Allington. First, the participants of my online survey and contributors to online book club forums are not students enrolled in my doctoral institution—at least not that I am aware of. These research subjects have posted data irrespective of their affiliations in their role as readers. These informants also have not "talked" to me, and their responses have been posted online at their own discretion. This ensures that the informants are not giving responses which they consciously or not think the researcher wants to hear; these readers are not given any compensation for their time. However, I did provide monetary compensation for those survey participants who agreed to let me interview them, thereby introducing a level of "artificiality" into the interchange. Additionally, contributors

to online books club forums often do not read a book that was previously decided upon, like real life book clubs do, which gives their online responses another level of spontaneity. The electronic format of my online survey questionnaire allowed participants to answer the questions at leisure, and each question did allow a slightly more detailed answer than just selecting from a list of options if they wanted. Thus, while I had control over which aspects of chick lit I was questioning my informants on, the open manner of the survey enabled me to largely reduce the possibility of "leading the witness."

The qualitative section of my analysis is based on a survey of chick lit readers in the Lansing area. The basic questions are the same as those of my online questionnaire, but the informants had the ability to elaborate on/discuss their answers in more depth. As mentioned earlier, my questions have been based on the studies of romance novels conducted by Janice Radway and Bridget Fowler, but have been altered to be apt for my criteria in relation to chick lit. First, informants were asked to provide basic details about themselves, and then asked to answer ten questions on the chick lit reading experience. The number of respondents was much lower than I had expected, but this always needs to be factored in when people are asked to devote part of their time to a study without much monetary compensation. Being able to interact with real readers of chick lit and get their subjective viewpoints about the thematic content of the genre enabled me to avoid making assumption about the reading practices of an implied reader. In the interview-based survey, I asked my informants to respond in as little or as much detail as they deemed appropriate since I was making my best effort to not ask leading questions.

The questions on my survey are concerned primarily at eliciting the readers' reactions to the main themes of a prototypical chick lit novel. The questions as well as the multiple-choice answers are kept short in the online version to respect the time commitment of my informants. The majority of my research had valuable qualitative worth.

III

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

The media provides us with hegemonic ideology—stereotyped roles for women, patriarchy, nuclear heterosexual family structure, etc—but, as cultural studies scholars have discovered, consumers have different ways of engaging with the text. They might passively accept the messages espousing patriarchal ideology (accommodation), they might have oppositional readings of the text (resistance), or they might even make very different meanings based on their widely different lives (negotiation). Using Hall's approach as elaborated in his "Encoding/Decoding" (1980) to chick lit, my research will examine the meaning-making by the readers who consume the genre.

As mentioned in the Introduction**,** the structure of chick lit as well as the characters in it represent patriarchal ideology—cisgendered[5] identity, normative gender roles,[6] and heterosexuality, among others. Every reader brings her own "identity" to the reading, and

[5] One whose gender identity matches with one's societally recognized sex.

[6] "Masculine" and "feminine" roles that are societally deemed appropriate for the male and female sex respectively. For example, women are responsible for housework and child-rearing while men are responsible for earning their families' keep; women are emotional while men are stoic, etc.

therefore must interpret the text in widely different ways, in direct relation to her positionality. Myfanwy Franks (2001) describes positionality as:

> …the way in which the individual identity and affiliations we have are positioned by *others*. Specific forms of feminism are situated as a response to specific manifestations of patriarchal relations within any given culture or belief system. The notion of positionality is important as a counterbalance to the possible over-personalisation of standpoint within liberal discourse as if it were always the outcome of choice. We do not always select our standpoint; we sometimes have it thrust (erroneously) upon us (5).

My study uses interviews, online questionnaires, and online book club forums to investigate interpretive positions of the women as they involve themselves with the social themes and connect with the ideologies from their individual subject positions. Based on the socio-economic background of my informants, they will each have positioned themselves slightly differently to questions of feminism, women's rights, patriarchy, and dominant culture, which will in turn direct their reading of chick lit texts.

Since chick lit is a part of popular culture, it is a cultural artefact that is created for women. These artefacts along with their meanings of culture are produced, distributed and consumed within particular material circumstances. In cultural studies research, people engage actively in their uses of cultural artefacts in making sense of their own and others' lives. Thus, the question that needs to be asked is how the text relates to its production and its consumption and what methods have been adopted to examine those relationships. Stuart Hall's model in "Encoding/Decoding" is very useful to attempt at making meaning in the communication process. Hall proposed that the process of textual readings involved at least two connected

instances. First, the process of *meaning production*, which involves all the practices and methods related to the formation of a cultural text. The second instance is that of *reading* when the subject is engaged with the text. While the first instance *encodes* the meaning, the second proposes an active role for a socially constructed audience (decoding). Hall's encoding/decoding process is concerned with power, particularly the notion of encoding preferred meanings into cultural products. These preferred meanings are products of the larger ideological and cultural world and perpetuate the dominant ideology.

Hall's model captures the complexity of the production and consumption of media texts. It accounts for the power of the media to endow texts with meanings as well as the power of the audience to read and react to these meanings in numerous ways. Hall's approach is influenced by Gramsci's ideas of hegemony since his model depicts a constant power struggle over meaning. The media transmits messages but they have to struggle to get the audience's consent. Readers can be critical of particular messages yet media producers privilege certain interpretations over others in the first place and thereby set the framework of meaning with which consumers have to engage. The audience's engagement with the structure of meaning created by the media producers where some meanings are preferred over others is a process of both cultural as well as ideological negotiation**.** While Gramsci locates power struggle between the state and its inhabitants, Hall expands this struggle to the whole sphere of socio-cultural life. According to Hall, negotiated readings still work within the hegemonic code, but the readers accept some and reject other encoded messages.

Stuart Hall's idea of the process of encoding and decoding as it is related to viewership/readership is relevant here:

> The broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of meaningful discourse. The institution-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be 'realized'… Before the message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use'*, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade*, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a 'determinate' moment the structure employs a code and yields a 'message'; at another determinate moment the 'message', via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices. (53; emphasis mine)

The moment of encoding is the creation of the text, when forms, structures, codes and conventions are used to construct a text with an implied meaning. The text comes into symbolic existence at the moment of encoding. The moment of decoding is when an individual with his/her own set of values, attitudes and experiences encounters the text. This is regarded more as the moment of "creation" than the first stage since socio-culturally diverse audiences will interpret messages using different frameworks of understanding.

The main point of the encoding/decoding model is to locate meaning making with the audience (or receiver). The basic assumption is that media messages are capable of polysemy depending on the cultural background of the receiver, and any meaningful messages can have denotative and connotative meanings. The broadcast message must be encoded by the source and

decoded by the receiver so that an exchange is produced. There is usually a preferred or dominant reading that reinforces the producer's original intended message. However, while the producer (encoder) framed (or encoded) it in a certain way, the reader (decoder) can decode it differently according to his/her personal background, positionality, the various social situations and frames of interpretation. Specifically, Hall proposed three audience responses or three distinct reading positions: dominant reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading.

A very basic summary of Hall's three hypothetical positions of decoding is necessary here before applying Hall's model to understand my survey results. The first is **"**the dominant hegemonic position**"** which is described by Hall as "when the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (Hall 515); i.e. the receiver fully accepts the dominant hegemonic code without questioning it. The second is the "negotiated code or position," where the receiver's negotiated version of the preferred reading includes "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements." The receiver recognizes the legitimacy of the dominant code but opposes it to an extent and adapts the meaning his/her own way (Hall 516). Third, Hall identifies the "oppositional counter hegemonic code or position" as: "It is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally contrary* way. He or she detotalises the message in preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference … He or she is operating in what we must call an oppositional code" (Hall 517). The receiver is therefore operating under a "oppositional, counter-hegemonic" code, where he/she is cognizant of the dominant, hegemonic code but does not fully accept it.

It is worth noting the limitations of Hall's theory here, although it is still a useful theoretical framework for analysing my chick lit audience research. Poonam Pillai points out that Hall often uses the terms "preferred meaning" and "preferred reading" in a synonymous way, thereby suggesting that these terms are equivalent and can be applied interchangeably. He assumes that the dominant ideology is repeated in the preferred meaning, which is then reproduced in the preferred reading, although he claims that the encoded and decoded meanings do not have any necessary correspondence (Pillai 222). The "preferred reading" can only occur if there is a correspondence independently achieved between the encoded and decoded meanings in the decoding practice. The preferred meaning encoded into the text does not necessarily represent the dominant ideology, which implies that even if a preferred reading is achieved, it need not be a repetition of the dominant ideology. It is also possible for a decoder to disagree with the preferred meaning of a text but still operate within dominant ideology. Pillai also claims that the same reader might also decode differently with multiple readings of the same text over a course of time (231). The term "negotiated reading" is also limited since all readings are negotiated to an extent. There is no pure reading which fits into one of three hypothetical decoding positions to the complete exclusion of the others, although a reading might certainly favour one position over another. Milestone and Meyer note that the media are not a monolithic whole promoting one preferred meaning at the exclusion of others, but that there is a lot of variety in the types of media and their political outlooks and agendas which represent varying messages (158).

Even with these limitations, Hall's model is useful for my research since chick lit propagates dominant patriarchal and capitalist ideology, and readers are accused of a passive

dominant-hegemonic reading. In this genre, the preferred meaning is usually the dominant ideology, and if readers operate in the same code that was used in the encoding process, the preferred reading will entail the victory of the hegemonic discourse. In that case, the audience, despite their meaning-making, will be passive. The three hypothetical decoding positions enables me to situate my survey participants in three broad categories to understand their reading practices and critical skills, and interpret how much they negotiate with or oppose the encoded messages when they consume the genre of chick lit. A purely preferred reading of chick lit would be to accept the hegemonic ideologies of normative femininity, heterosexual marriage as the goal of a woman's life, and unbridled consumerism without demur. A negotiated reading would then entail working within the hegemonic code while still questioning the relevance or application of the ideologies in real life scenarios. An oppositional reading would be one that rejects outright such ideologies as social constructs which should consciously be expunged from one's life. Hall's model challenges the *Screen* theory's idea of the subject who is always already effectively interpellated by the text, and Milestone and Meyer suggest that the Encoding/Decoding model is "the most sophisticated of any grand theory developed to conceptualize the relationship between media producers and media audiences (158).

I analyze the contributions of my informants by using Hall's model for the themes related to gender, consumerism, and femininity that were mentioned earlier. Stanley Fish's idea of an 'interpretive community" explained in "Interpreting the Variorum" (1976) and Janice Radway's (1984) study of Smithton's romance readers are my bases to argue that my informants compose a community interested in chick lit and also form an interpretive community. Fish argues that the

interpretation of a certain text depends on every reader's different subjective experience in one or more communities, each of which is described as a "community":

> such community-constituted interpreters would, in their turn, constitute, more or less in agreement, the same text, although the sameness would not be attributable to the self-identity of the text, but to the communal nature of the interpretive act (*Doing What Comes Naturally* 141).

Also, in "Interpreting the Variorum," Fish asserts that while a reader might attempt to establish the author's intended meaning, only the author can know the meaning that had originally been intended. Thus, Fish's opinion is that irrespective of how much the reader tries, the reader's interpretation of the author's intention will simply be an interpretation prompted by the interpretive community the reader belongs to (475-476).

In Radway's study of the romance readers in Smithton, very few of Dorothy Evans's customers knew each other, but Radway uses Fish's idea of an "interpretive community" for her study. Radway writes that women unintentionally "join forces symbolically and in a mediated way in the privacy of their individual homes and in the culturally devalued space of leisure activity" (212). Radway's readers thus created their own "interpretive community." Radway questions why romance fiction, one of publishing's most profitable genres, fascinates millions of female readers. She sees romance reading as an escape for her informants and an insight into how they view their own lives:

> … while the act of romance reading is used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture, the discourse itself actively insists on the desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that role by portraying it not as the imposed

> necessity that it is but as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice (Radway 208)

In a similar manner, my survey respondents can also be seen as an interpretive community since they unwittingly come together as a group to enjoy and analyse chick lit in their leisure time.

Radway's readers, according to me, favour the so-called preferred reading although they see their *act* of romance reading as a "declaration of independence", of securing privacy while at the same time providing companionship and conversation. They cite escapism as their main reason for reading romances, but for them it is literally a literature of "escape" since reading gives them the scope to leave their household cares behind (11-12), as well as functions as an act of defiance against their role as wives and mothers. It is not the textual content of the novels but the event of reading which they seem to prioritise. They prefer intelligent and independent heroines since they feel like being intelligent and independent themselves will make them more attractive to their men (102). They do not question the patriarchal construction of the centrality of marriage, the nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and heterosexuality encoded in romance, but simply voice their dissatisfaction with their roles as wives and mothers. Radway remarks that readers prefer to support those texts that "advance the ideology of romantic love, insisting thereby that marriage between a man and a woman is not an economic or social necessity or a purely sexual affiliation but an emotional bond freely forged" (170). Thus, Radway's readers do not challenge the power structures in place, but accept them as natural. They read romances just to reassure themselves that the choices they had made are the right ones, although there is a gap between their real lives and the ideal happiness portrayed in their favourite fiction.

Based on my interpretation of Radway's readers' consumption of romance, I want to explore if chick lit readers also lean towards the preferred reading or approach a more negotiated interpretation. I therefore approach my surveys of chick lit's audience with the assumption that readers employ negotiated readings of the texts. In that case, Hall's Gramscian idea of negotiation demonstrates that the readers' self-conscious interpretation of the hegemonic ideologies of chick lit mean that they knowingly consent to some ideas while they challenge others.

IV

The Surveys

This section examines the reactions readers have to the dominant themes of chick lit novels based on the responses readers themselves have contributed in my questionnaire and in some online book club forums from which I collected data. The different geographical locations and age groups of the research subjects demonstrate welcome variation. My online questionnaire could be accessed anywhere in the world with an internet connection and the ages range from 18 to 45 and over.

In my online questionnaire, out of 122 participants, an overwhelming 121 are female (although this is expected from a genre written for women) with only 1 male respondent. The majority of the respondents are within the age range of 25-31 (40.16%), while there is approximately equal representation from the age ranges of 18-24,[7] 32-38, and above 45. While most (50.82%) of my respondents are married, approximately a quarter each are single (25.59%)

[7] The participants had to be at least 18 years of age to take part in the survey

and in a relationship (22.13%). With regard to the education level of the survey respondents, the majority (40.98%) have a graduate degree while 36.89% have a four-year college degree. 9.84% and 12.30% respectively have graduated high school and have an Associates degree. Most of the participants are working professionals; among those who mentioned their professions, there are educators (4), librarians (4), and writers including a chick lit author (4). These demographic details demonstrate that these chick lit readers are mature, educated consumers, capable of making informed decisions. The educational background of my respondents is important because, following Bourdieu, I can equate their higher education with access to cultural capital, and the ability to bring a sense of social and cultural awareness to the reading of a text which is inscribed within similar social and cultural contexts since chick lit is mimetic.

The reading tastes of the survey participants demonstrate the popularity of Jane Austen with 40.18% selecting her as their favourite female author. The other options were Edith Wharton (5.36%), Charlotte Bronte (8.93%), Virginia Woolf (4.36%), and George Eliot (0%). This being a survey for chick lit readership, I selected these five female authors as choices for the first question on "Favourite female authors" since several chick lit authors have mentioned the first four authors as having influenced their work. George Eliot was the "control" author for this question since I have not encountered any chick lit writer who mentioned her as an influence.

George Eliot is the author of the manifesto "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" where she lambasts what she sees as the ridiculous and trivial plots of contemporary fiction written by women. As a literary stalwart of realist novels, she saw contemporary feminine fiction as "frothy, prosy, pious, pedantic," and must have been in agreement with Nathaniel Hawthorne's

judgement of female authors of popular women's fiction. In his letter to his publisher, William D. Ticknor, in 1855 Hawthorne called those authors "a damned mob of scribbling women" (qtd. in Pattee 110). Since chick lit is a genre which is celebrated for depicting the lives of contemporary women in a somewhat realistic way [Gormley, Yardley (151), Ferriss and Young (*Chick Lit* 3, 4)], I was interested in researching whether readers of chick lit appreciated the realist literary narratives of Eliot in the same way that they enjoy chick lit. Chick lit authors speak of their admiration for Austen, the Bronte sisters, and Wharton, and several chick lit novels are transdiegetizations of the works of these authors,[8] but Eliot does not figure as a forebear of any influence. In response to the Eliot-esque negative comments about the "frothiness" levelled at chick lit, Helen Fielding voiced her surprise:

> It's good for women to be able to be funny about women and not to be afraid to be funny …. Sometimes I've had people getting their knickers in a twist about Bridget Jones being a disgrace to feminism and so on. But the point is, it's good to be able to represent women as they actually are in the age you're living in when you're a writer (Fielding, qtd. in Jones).

This underscoring of the realist aspect of chick lit—an aspect discussed in the Introduction—especially by the unofficial progenitor of the genre herself, reveals chick lit's aim to present an approximation of real life situations.

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[8] Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* are the most popular modernizations of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* respectively. Candace Bushnell's *Trading Up* is heavily influenced by Wharton's *House of Mirth* as well as *The Custom of the Country*. *The Nanny Diaries* co-written by Emma Mclaughlin and Nicola Kraus is influenced by Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey*.

The survey participants had an option of entering their favourite author if she were different from the given choices, and a large percentage (40.18%) chose to provide their own answers. The second question in my survey asks for the reader's favourite chick lit author, but many readers provided the names of chick lit authors as their answer to the first question on their favourite female author: Cecilia Ahern, Marian Keyes, and Sophie Kinsella are mentioned twice each, Emily Giffin features three times. Romance novelists Danielle Steele and Jodi Picoult are also among those mentioned as favourite female authors. Among "literary" authors, Sylvia Plath, Louisa May Alcott, Emily Bronte, Kathryn Stockett, Amy Tan, and Margaret Atwood appear more than once.

Among favourite chick lit authors, the options included the most popular authors: Helen Fielding, Sophie Kinsella, Marian Keyes, and Candace Bushnell, with readers having the option of entering any other name not on the list. Kinsella tops the given choices with 30.97% voting for her, while of the other authors the readers mentioned, Emily Giffin (6), Jill Mansell (3), Jane Green (4), Jennifer Weiner (3), and Jodi Picoult (4) seem to be popular favourites. While Fielding might have given a running start to the genre of chick lit with her hugely successful *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the high percentage of readers voting for Sophie Kinsella shows the readers' appreciation for the shopping-dependent heroine, Rebecca Bloomwood of the *Shopaholic* series. Chick lit is criticized for its celebration of consumerism, because it is popularly feared that the genre—as a representative of popular culture—must be a vehicle for patriarchy and channels capitalist ideology into the passive masses. I will follow up on this point a little later with question 8, but I would like to emphasize here that apart from Kinsella, the writers Keyes (*Watermelon*), Green (*Mr. Maybe*), and Giffin (*Something Blue*) all portray

heroines who enjoy high fashion and shopping either to compensate for personal insecurities or as a well-earned outlet for their financial independence.

My third survey question asks, "Why do you like to read chick lit?" The two answers most picked by the respondents are "For distraction or pleasure only" (47.54%) and a slight variation on the former, "Distraction or enjoyment along with other reasons" (33.81%). These answers belie the common critique mentioned earlier that readers of popular fiction like chick lit are undiscerning and unquestioningly swallow the ideological messages fed to them by the media. The other options asked if the readers believed in the "true to life" aspect of the genre or the fantasy offered by it: "It portrays life 'as it is'" was selected by only 4.92%; "Interest in an account of a lived experience" was chosen by just 3.28%; and "Interest in a fantasy world of harmony" was selected by merely 4.10%. Once again, the readers are astute and understand that the genre offers an entertaining tale of an everywoman who might be similar to them but the narrative of her vicissitudes is mostly for pleasure or distraction and not to be taken at face value.

The survey participants are thus shrewd readers—and most have more than high school education as noted earlier—and consume the genre for the function that popular fiction is meant to provide: entertainment. Since this question also allowed readers to note their own answers, the readers' answers develop more on the choices I had given for the question, but they clearly demonstrate the cognizance that they are reading fiction and do not "believe" the tale:

- Mostly for distraction or pleasure. Usually when I need to turn my brain to mush after a semester of reading hard theory. So yes, mostly as pleasure-gratificatory fluff. But I do love well-portrayed, fleshed out and complex characters if/when they appear.
- For entertainment

- Distraction, the humor, as an 'escape'
- The same reason I'd read any other fiction (prose, plot and character development), but from a woman's perspective
- Distraction and enjoyment primarily, especially because sometimes I can see myself and my friends in a few of the novels

The only answer that is supplied where the reader speaks of a real-life application or extension to what she reads in chick lit is:

- The chick lit girls usually go through the same problem my friends and I encounter in our lives, and I like how their problem are sorted out effectively. Makes me hope that maybe my love life and work problems might get solved in a similarly happy manner.

However, even in this answer there is simply the hope of being able to have the same sort of neat resolution in real life as in a chick lit novel without the reader believing that that will necessarily happen. It is more of a feel-good wish-fulfilment angle that the reader is taking.

One contributor, "LizzieAnn" on a Barnes and Noble forum writes that she enjoys chick lit because of its humour. She says, "Most of the chick lit I read is funny – that's what makes them most enjoyable – laughing and recognizing the characters and their situations….I read all types of genres, from fiction, history, mysteries, romances, classics, and science fiction to chick lit. What I read all depends on my mood of the moment; but, when I want something warm & cosy or something to make me smile & laugh, I find myself reaching for the chick lit" ("Chick Lit Controversy"). Another contributor on the same forum enjoys chick lit because it helps her to unwind when she feels unhappy as well as relax in her downtime; thus to her the genre is a "necessity." She writes, "'Chick-Lit' is the woman's answer to 'guy' books, I mean come on

how many different women has James Bond slept with? It's a way you can sit, unwind and breathe without having to kill anyone. ...'Chick-Lit' books are wonderful and funny and can even be powerful to some people, they are a necessity" ("Chick Lit Controversy").

This relaxing, upbeat attitude that readers ascribe to chick lit is enforced by Yardley. Her definition of chick lit succinctly summarises the main elements of the genre:

> Chick lit is a subgenre of the larger classification of women's fiction, generally a coming-of-age or 'coming-of-consciousness' story where a woman's life is transformed by the events of the story…. They're usually fairly upbeat, too…. For those writers who take offense and reviewers and critics who call Chick Lit 'fluffy,' 'frothey,' or 'dumb' and who want to counter by making Chick Lit novels literary heavyweights, I have one piece of advice: *switch to decaf.* Seriously. As Chick Lit authors, we'll have messages, themes, and insights, of course. But our primary job is to entertain. (Yardley 4-5)

Apart from elements such as the age group (20s or 30s), ethnicity (generally white), sexual orientation (mainly heterosexual), social class (middle class) and professional occupation (usually something glamorous such as public relations, editorial jobs) (Gormley) present in typical chick lit novels, Yardley mentions that these novels are "fairly upbeat" and that their "primary job is to entertain". This suggests that the cheerful nature of chick lit novels is a trademark for the genre. Moreover, Yardley claims that chick lit authors should focus on the entertaining aspects as the main function of chick lit notwithstanding whether that compromises the literary potential of the novels. My survey respondents as well as the contributors to forums echo Yardley's idea of the function of chick lit; i.e. that chick lit should be amusing and upbeat and entertaining overall. For my readers, chick lit is a genre that is not just a passing trend but an

easily recognizable genre that features elements that are different from other kinds of women's fiction.

Expectations from the text at hand are a strong element of the chick lit reading experience where readers expect certain themes or issues for the heroine to go through and they also expect a positive feel-good ending for the story. Montoro writes, "readers keep coming back to the genre because of a sense of familiarity with the 'classic "girl" elements' in Chick Lit, but also because of the comforting effect that this familiarity and total absence or, at least, small presence of, unexpected events, generates in them." She claims that some chick lit readers criticise the formulaic nature of the genre, but they must find some kind of comfort in the conventionality itself and that is the reason they like the genre (Montoro 172). If they see the genre as an alternative to feeling deeper emotion through "literary" fiction, there must be a level of emotional solace that they encounter in chick lit. However, this issue should be investigated further and perhaps on a larger scale to reach conclusive results.

In addition to a liking for the general cheerful mood established by chick lit, six of my interviewees said that they also got involved in the storyline due to the narrative mode. They mentioned that the first-person mode of narration which most chick lit novels adopt made it easier to step into the shoes of the heroine and "live" her life. S.G. said, "I like knowing the thoughts of the girls as they are thinking them. Without something being edited out, you know? Like I'm in their head somehow. It's easier to connect with the story that way. The first-person brings me closer to the book in a way." M.A. echoed, "I like the diary novels best. It puts me bang in the middle of the story. I know how the girl looks, what she thinks, how she feels right

away." E.B. said, "The first-person narration makes me feel like I am reading about someone very much like myself. I really identified with Rachel in *Something Borrowed* because she seemed to be just like me. I even had a pretty best friend in high school who was much more popular than I ever was." The expression of the intimate thoughts of women which further facilitates the character-reader identification is closely associated with the diary format that is employed by many chick lit authors.

The diary format was established by the "first" chick lit novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), and has proved to be a successful narrative style for the archetypal chick lit novels. If the diary style is not adopted, then a homodiegetic narrator uses various discourses such as letters or emails instead of there being an omniscient third-person narrator. These styles enable the characters to present the readers with a first-hand account of their own situations whether the writer uses emails, a first-person narrator, or the diary, without having to rely on the third-person narrator to *tell* things to the readers instead of *showing* them. Thus, most chick lit novels adopt the confessional style of narration. Ferriss and Young note:

> Fielding's novel suggested spontaneity and candor with its use of the diary form. Others exploit the confessional style of letters and e-mails, or simply employ first-person narration to craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers. These narrative techniques not only appeal to readers but also link chick lit significantly with a large body of women's fiction from earlier generations. (*Chick Lit* 4)

Ferriss and Young's remark about the popularity of the first-person point-of-view is corroborated through my survey (question #10) where I asked the participants to name 3-5 of their favourite chick lit novels. My results [Appendix I] show that 80% of them use a female homodiegetic

narrator. These "character-narrators" as Montoro calls them (131) succeed in creating a sense of intimacy with the reader because they seem to send their messages directly to her without the presence of an intermediary.

Popular romances are characterised by third-person narration where the reader is told what the heroine said or thought, but chick lit narrators have more agency as they are the actors of their thinking processes. In her essay, "About a Girl," Mabry comments:

> Like their forebears, chick lit … usually focus[es] on a female main character and use[s] a variety of strategies to make her desires and motivations the focus of the story. Bridget Jones and many of the chick lit novels … 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. This move toward first-person narration is an especially significant change from the third-person narration employed in most traditional romance novels (195-6).

Mabry thus asserts that the first-person technique used by chick lit narrators constructs an aura of authenticity around the issues that chick lit heroines discuss. The production of the "real" thoughts of the characters is, of course, impossible; however, the reader can be lured into believing that the thinking and feeling processes that they witness are authentic if they are presented in a convincing manner. Mabry adds that the reader can evade the ontological impossibility of listening to a fictional character's thoughts narrated by a third-person narrator of the traditional romance when the writer chooses to adopt a first-person perspective.

The functional importance of the third-person narrator in romance fiction has been commented on by Tania Modleski in her *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies*

for Women (1984; 2008). She writes that the third-person perspective is mandatory for romance fiction: "The publishers offer the following guidelines to prospective authors: Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending. They are told from the heroine's point of view and in the third person" (Modleski 28). She explains her understanding of the necessity for third-person narration in popular romances:

> It is easy to assume, and most popular culture critics assumed, a large degree of identification between reader and protagonist, but the matter is not so simple. Since the reader knows the formula, she is superior in wisdom to the heroine partly because she is intellectually distanced from her and does not have to suffer the heroine's confusion. (Modleski 33)

Modleski therefore believes that the reader's interaction with popular romances has two levels: the reader is at once distanced from the heroine due to her superiority as well as emotionally engaged with her.

Modleski's remark refers to the guidelines for Harlequin romances in effect when the first edition of her book was published in the 1980s. Harlequin no longer makes it compulsory to use a third-person narrator. Mabry comments further on the move from third- to first-person narration:

> The move toward first-person voice in most contemporary chick lit novels not only strengthens the heroine's voice and increases the reader's opportunities to identify with her but also offers at least *a temporary escape* from the feeling of constantly being watched or controlled by a male-dominated society. Of course, this doesn't mean that a female author or main character, or even the use of first-person narrative voice,

> guarantees that a particular … novel is a "real" representation of female experience. More significant here is how hard these texts work to present themselves as authentic stories of women's lives and feelings. (196; emphasis mine).

The frequency of use of the first-person narrator or the homodiegetic narrator in the list of favourite novels shows chick lit allows the female heroines to have more agency and express their voice more than many other conventional genres of popular fiction. The mediation of an omniscient third-person narrator often distances the reader from the female characters in traditional romance novels, but the candour of chick lit heroines, who freely like to share their innermost concerns and secrets with the reader allows for a kind of "closeness" with the characters. By reading in the first-person pronoun, the reader is always already identifying with the character and the character is acting as a placeholder for the reader's own thoughts and feelings**.** Mabry also mentions the element of escape that I suggest readers enjoy though reading chick lit. Thus, while chick lit is certainly essentially connected with its sister genre the conventional romance, the first-person perspective, free direct speech/thought, and stream of consciousnes**s** give chick lit a distinctive position.

Moreover, the candid portrayal of the thoughts and desires of chick lit heroines as mentioned by Ferriss and Young (*Chick Lit* 4), as well as the authentic nature of the genre as discussed by Mabry (196) gives chick lit the quality that facilitates character-reader identification, the "that's me" factor that has been mentioned by Whelehan (*Bridget Jones: A Reader's Guide* 55). Bernard (1999), Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), and Smith (2008) argue that the self-identification with which real-life women accepted chick lit marks a break from other kinds of modern romance novels. My survey respondent, E.B says, "I find it hard to

identify with romance heroines. They're so goody-goody. Chick lit makes me feel like I am reading about someone very much like me. It's much easier to get into the story." Also, chick lit heroines, unlike the glorified heroines of traditional romance novels, are presented in a more realistic way, and they frankly portray themselves with their faults and foibles in their own voices. They not only speak of their desires to succeed at their jobs or win the man their heart is set on, but also do it in a humorous way. This supposed "genuineness" of chick lit as a way to speak of real-life twentieth- and twenty-first-century women is a central reason behind making it such a successful genre.

My fourth survey question asks the readers, "Do you identify with the heroine?" While 44.63% said that they "Identify and get emotionally involved in the book," 32.23% participants said that they identified to an extent but did not get emotionally involved. Less than 15% claim to be detached readers. The respondents who provided their own answers only slightly varied from these choices because most claimed that it depends on the novel whether they get involved and feel a sense of identification or not. For example:

- It depends on the book, but yes i tend to identify at least a little bit with the heroine, and i do get emotionally involved [all sic].
- If I like the heroine's personality, I do get involved emotionally. There is always a level of identification though.
- Depends on how good the book is, if the author is good then will connect emotionally with characters
- Sometimes identify, laugh out loud & cry at occasion, depending on the story

Most of the interviewees voiced similar opinions. They unanimously agreed that there is always some extent of identification with the female protagonist but most said that they felt an emotional attachment only if the heroine's personality was similar to their own. If the heroine was too "flaky" or too nerdy, then they were able to maintain a level of distance. Five interview participants mentioned that identifying with the protagonist allowed them to have an "escape" from their everyday lives. S.G. said, "I am so busy with work that I rarely have time to myself. When I get some time to read chick lit, I enjoy the escape from my own business that it brings me. I have fun because the girls in the books seem to have a lot of fun. The next day I go back to work." H.C. shares the former's opinion. She laments her hectic job and the little time she can spend with her family, but adds that chick lit gives her an "escape into a better world where people have better jobs and make more money. I know a 25-year-old in a PR job can't make enough money to go on foreign vacations and buy all that designer stuff, but it's still nice to read about it." G.B. laughingly said that chick lit was an escape for her because the heroines have a much better love life than she does: "All the men I have been out with this year have been horrible. It's not only chick lit where a girl has a series of bad dates. But, at least, you know that the last person she dates will be the right man. I have been waiting and waiting, and still, nothing. I usually identify with the heroines and after a while, the books just give me hope, y'know?"

Two respondents of the online survey specify the limitations to their extent of involvement and identification:

- I tend to identify with their [the heroines'] reaction but not so much with the sort of dreams of an ideal life that they tend to have.

- Identify sometimes, but rarely so. Depends on the book. When I DO identify, I tend to get immersed and somewhat emotionally involved (this happens to me no matter what the genre). Most often, usually with the more fluffy and absurd chicklits, I'm just a detached and often VERY snarky reader who enjoys it nevertheless.

I placed Question #4 on identification and emotional involvement right after the question locating the source of the readers' pleasure in chick lit to examine the nature of personal imaginary participation that occurs while readers are engrossed in a chick lit novel. Although it follows from the previous question (#3) that readers are able to maintain a distance from the novels where they do not believe that the plot is "reality", the answers to #4 clarifies that the distance is not equivalent to being a detached reader for the majority of chick lit consumers. Approximately 80% of the survey participants confess to some level of both emotional involvement as well as identification in their reading experience of chick lit. While Radway concluded that the reading of romance fiction by the Smithton group of housewives had a compensatory function that provided them with a kind of emotional release that their everyday lives deprived them of, chick lit readers appear to enjoy the genre mostly for entertainment. Only one reader mentions that it is an "escape" for her. Once again, as mentioned in the demographic information of the survey participants, the majority of my respondents are professionals in some field, and thereby must have a certain level of personal and financial independence. They do not fit Radway's model of "desperate housewives" who need romance fiction to provide them with "emotional gratification" (Radway 95). They do not require the same kind of escape that the housewives needed. This is apparent in the reduction of the role of the hero in the chick lit novels because the reader/heroine no longer needs the tender love and care the neglected housewives

did. Instead, the chick lit novels increase the work problems in the heroine's life as well as present a more realistic portrayal of kissing some frogs before finding Prince Charming which the traditional romance's one woman-one man formula eschews.

Although chick lit is a genre geared towards providing entertainment, it can be argued that it goes beyond the escape offered by other genres of popular fiction because the kind of escape that it provides for the target female audience can be therapeutic in a way—a sort of affective reading-cure. Stephanie Harzewski asserts, "In its readerly functions and in its social implications, chick lit is not progressive but operates as affirmative bibliotherapy: its self-help functions impart a sense of calm, optimism, and identification, if only temporary and half-grounded in the pleasures of fantasy" (173). By calling chick lit self-help, Harzewski seems to be comparing its function to that of the "consciousness-raising" novels of the 1970s, such as Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying.* Though tangential to organized feminism, chick lit can be seen as promoting individual female empowerment, thereby reworking the second wave idea of the personal also being political. In Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club*, six readers of Austen apply the author's perceptions to mend failing marriages and relationships as well as to forge new romantic bonds. Reading Austen as a group seems to ultimately function as self-help for each member as they each go through a self-realisation process, connecting with different aspects or characters of the Austen novels.

Although chick lit readers usually do not occupy the same psychological and economic zone as that of the Smithton readers—the housewives who found a psychological outlet in their reading of romance fiction—readers of chick lit also require similar "exercises in extrapolation"

(Radway 168) to identify with the everydayness of the issues represented in chick lit. They apply the same kind of rueful humour and understanding of the heroines' follies and flaws which they would use in their own lives. This "compensatory literature" (Radway 95) allows chick lit readers to effect an imaginary entry into a world where the heroine is as flawed as they are, but there is the guarantee that everything will resolve itself satisfactorily in the fictional parallel of their lives. For this reason, chick lit can be seen as an alternative self-help genre, one which creates a sense of solidarity amongst readers through their mutual identification with chick lit heroines, an emotional outlet that works as necessary compensation because they know that at least their fictional alter ego will effectively deal with the real-life problems they encounter and live "happily ever after".

This identification with the heroine to any extent is an important factor in the enjoyment of chick lit. When chick lit readers interpret the heroines in the novels, they are already aware of the specific formula or dramatic role that these heroines conform to, and recognize the generic attributes of the women. These dramatic features/roles which enable readers to flesh out chick lit heroines establish the distinctive character of the genre. The genre is positioned within the umbrella category of popular fiction, and therefore emphasizes the entertainment aspect over social or ideological issues. As Smith (2008) argues in *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, like other genres, chick lit reflects the cultural zeitgeist of the society that creates it:

> I argue that this literature is adept at revealing and/or reflecting the society that produced it, interfacing with the dominant ideologies of the time period, and challenging, rather than deploying, the ideologies transmitted by women's magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and domestic-advice manuals. (Smith 16)

Smith is particularly concerned with the manner in which chick lit portrays the "Cosmopolitan culture and consumerism" of the genre and also its relationship with popular texts such as romantic comedies, fashion magazines, and self-help books. Because readers are already aware of the values present in these manifestations of *Cosmopolitan* and consumer culture, they can rely on this prior knowledge of the social world generated by the contemporary social realities that they experience, to flesh out the heroines in chick lit novels.

Question #5 follows directly from the previous question: "Do you read chick lit the same way as you read other romance fiction or even other genres?" Radway's respondents expressed their belief that romance fiction was the only genre which allowed them to experience the sort of pleasure they craved as the romance heroine served as a placeholder for the reader and allowed the reader to have vicarious pleasure through the care and attention lavished on the heroine by the hero (84). Since chick lit is related to romance fiction, I was interested in exploring whether chick lit readers consciously or unconsciously attempt to find some sort of psychological release which only chick lit can give them or whether they find similar pleasure in reading other genres.

My results for this question show that 63.33% of readers feel that chick lit gives them the same pleasure that they get from other genres. Just 17.50% of the respondents give precedence to chick lit over other genres because they feel that only chick lit allows the heroine to be a placeholder for the female reader. 19.17% of readers (23) give their own answers to this question, and out of these, nine people have lesser expectations from chick lit than from other genres. These readers believe it is a genre for "light" reading:

- It's lighter and less profound than many of the very literary books I read, but it's great to read something funny, emotional and not so demanding (opposed to eg. Rushdie, Pamuk or Pascal Mercier)
- I usually take chick lit far less seriously […] It's more like a guilty pleasure…
- I tend to be more distant from chick lit […] Chick lit often serves as a placeholder in that it's something to read […] without too much attention (at an airport, for example). On the other hand, I often find it easier to envision the characters from chick lit than from other genres
- No. I read it with more cynicism, and with more detachment from the main character.

Other readers attempt to trace the source or element in the chick lit novel that gives them pleasure. As for the element of "escape" that Radway's readers find in romance fiction, and I am suggesting that my survey participants find in chick lit, one reader writes:

- No, I think of 'Chick Lit" as "light" reading—less serious than literary fiction or nonfiction. "Chick Lit" is a genre I can read quickly, just for fun. It's not something or spend a large amount of time studying or pondering over. However, I don't think I use it as an "escape." More as a way to be entertained.

Yet, two other respondents of the online survey mention the "escape" factor in their own reading experiences as a reason for their pleasure in chick lit:

- Escapism, fun, entertainment
- I enjoy the modern fairytale, an escape to a world I can imagine living in yet a little too good to be true

Another survey respondent doesn't mention "escape" but the tenor of her comment implies the potential of escapism offered by the genre:

- I would've answered Yes to the first option, but it's different from other genres, so the pleasure is different. It offers more of *an element of wish fulfilment*, without having to think too vigorously. It's different from straightforward romance fiction because the thrust of the narrative is usually not as singleminded (and consequently, limited) as it is in romance novels. [emphasis mine]

As mentioned earlier, five interview participants declared in answer to question #4 that chick lit provided them with an escape from their own busy yet often humdrum lives. In answer to #5, six readers mentioned escape or a related idea as the reason they prefer chick lit over other genres. C.A. said that although she read all genres and enjoyed them equally, she was able to "move into a different world more easily with chick lit." She felt that while all fiction allows one to imagine different worlds, "the heroines are so like me and people I know that it is somehow easier to see myself in their shoes, or living their lives." M.A. complained: "there is no fairy tale ending to my life. I have huge debt due to student loans and living expenses. I cannot have an auction of my nice clothes like Becky[9] did to magically make my debt go away. Chick lit lets me escape my work and life worries for a short time." Apart from my survey respondents, on a chick lit forum post titled, "Guilty Pleasures in Reading," "Alice Rose" writes, "I enjoy all different genres but sometimes I love a good old predictable romance… I like a bit of escapism now and again" ("Guilty Pleasures"). "Karen1" on a different forum also lists escapism as a reason she likes reading chick lit: "I like escapism and chick lit is easy to do just that" ("What is Chick

[9] Becky Bloomwood of Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series

Lit?"). Another contributor ("Tina") to a different forum writes, "I luv [sic] books that make me laugh, books with amazing characters that I'll adore, and worlds that I can easily escape to" ("What Do You Look for in a Book?").

Besides escape and wish-fulfilment, relatability is mentioned as a key reason readers like chick lit: one reader writes that chick lit gives her more pleasure than other genres of popular fiction since genres such as "science fiction do not offer any realism or identification for me, while chick lit deals with common issues women face in their lives." Another reader agrees with this relevance to contemporary women's lives: "Any woman-centered novel might allow the heroine to a [sic] "placeholder" for the reader, but chick lit makes it easier to identify with the heroine since it is written in accessible language and features characters of my age and background." S.G. said, "I feel good after reading a chick lit novel when stuff works out for the girl at the end of the story. It is therapeutic in a way—without going to a shrink!" C.R. answered, "I don't know if I feel different after reading a chick lit novel than the way I feel after finishing any other genre. If the book ends on a positive note, I feel pleased. If it ends badly, I am a little sad. Mostly, I would say I am entertained by the chick lit books, even amused. They usually put me in a good mood. I can't always be reading serious stuff, like Julian Barnes."

Some scholars feel that chick lit attempts to present a pseudo-faithful reproduction of certain social elements and values that are pertinent to women which would then invite the female readership of chick lit to identify and commiserate with those real-life manifestations of the same. Such an opinion is given by Gill and Herdieckerhoff:

> [There] was the veritable explosion of discourses about Bridget Jones. She became an icon, a recognisable emblem of a particular kind of femininity, a constructed point of identification for women. Newspapers set out to find the "real" Bridget Jones or sent "genuine Bridget Joneses" to review the films. Bridget generated instant recognition among many young heterosexual women; as Imelda Whelehan (2002) has argued, part of the success of the book lay in the "that's me" phenomenon whereby Bridget Jones became regarded not as a fictional character but as a representative of the zeitgeist. (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 489)

Gill and Herdieckerhoff and Whelehan are not the only scholars who stress that the success and popularity of chick lit depends on the female values, attitudes, and issues that strongly resemble the issues faced by contemporary women in the real world. Smith asserts that "characters, readers, and authors are so similar that often, in defining the genre, critics collapse the genre's characters, readers, and writers" (Smith 7). This recognition of the reader in the Everywoman character is what for some critics, like Whelehan, is where chick lit's success lies.

The chick lit novels depend on readers not just recognising the social messages by activating their prior knowledge of the same, but identifying with them in the "that's me" way (Whelehan, *Bridget Jones* 55). The readers' comments on my survey that I have quoted above corroborate Whelehan's idea. S. B. uses the "that's me" catchphrase in her comments. She said, "I find it much easier to lose myself in chick lit than in other genres although I read everything with equal enjoyment. *That's me* I'm reading about in chick lit novels. I cannot connect as well with protagonists in other genres, although there is still some sort of involvement, of course." Thus, readers feel a kind of self-recognition when they read about protagonists in chick lit

novels, which might be due to the mimetic nature of the genre, but this ease of identification imbues a special kind of pleasure in reading chick lit.

Since chick lit is framed around the main character's vicissitudes and all the other characters and sub-plots are secondary to her, the creation of this main character is the principal task for the writer so that the readers can identify on some level with her. In *See Jane Write*, Mlynowski and Jacobs elucidate:

> The single most important element of your chick lit novel is your main character. No matter what kind of story you are aiming to write …. What readers love about chick lit is that the heroine is them—but with more attitude, more courage, or maybe just more shoes. She is Everywoman, with quirks and problems that are believable yet larger than life. She's confident yet insecure. Smart but naïve. Lovable yet flawed. (64).

Mlynowski and Jacobs also propose that creating the perfect female protagonist involves the transposition of some of the readers' own characteristics onto the page to facilitate character-reader identification. This would, in turn, also assist in the readers' interpretation of the heroine since they would, according to Smith, Bernard, Whelehan, and Gill and Herdieckerhoff, just need to activate their prior knowledge of their own realities. Mlynowski and Jacobs give the potential writer a list of suggestions:

> You have to create a character sketch that will work for you …. To get you started, here are some preliminary details. … Name; age; physical description; education; five words that describe her personality; where does she work? Is she good at her job? Why? Or why not? Her dream job, or dream life; Things that annoy her; Her bad habits; What people like about her; Her roadblocks to happiness; The person she trusts most (and why); The

person she should trust most (and why); Her dream guy; What she does to relax; Before the book began; The best day of her life, the worst day of her life. (70-1)

Thus, such careful detailing of personal characteristics and dreams creates the everywoman which the general reader can easily identify with.

Apart from the identification aspect of reading chick lit versus other genres, respondents also comment on the linguistic aspect of chick lit. They evinced a tendency to expect less of chick lit's linguistic capabilities. Respondents to my survey were eager to answer whether the style of a certain novel affected their reading experience overall. They answered that the structure of the novel, both linguistic and stylistic, is certainly a factor that influences the general reading experience, even in the case of a popular genre. M.A. laments that "poorly executed metaphors annoy me. Badly written prose is unforgivable. When an author repeats a word several times without finding a good synonym for it, I find it bad writing. If the repetition is done for a certain effect, I understand, but it is terrible if it is out of sheer laziness." C.B. said, "When novels are written well, I start paying attention to the language itself instead of simply following the plot. I get much more involved in the novel emotionally and can see myself in the place of the protagonist. Badly-written novels do not engage my attention in that way. I barely notice the language and just follow the scheme of events." S.B. echoes the previous informant: "Good writing is everything. There is good chick lit and really bad chick lit. There are several chick lit authors who write very well. I enjoy Marian Keyes's style. Jennifer Weiner is also good. Sophie Kinsella is also a very good writer—she maintains humour throughout her novels. Well-written books can really draw you in. You start feeling much more engaged and respond emotionally. The authors who just write a novel because it's a fad but can't write a proper paragraph…well, I

don't know how they get published. But, there are badly-written novels in every genre, not just chick lit."

These answers show how readers do care about the linguistic potential of the novels they read, and are not simply interested in the formulaic plots. Many readers mention the importance of "good writing," "beautiful language,' and "well-written novels," but they do not describe these terms further. What, for instance, do they think is "beautiful language"? Is it the use of several poetic metaphors? Is it the use of "difficult" words? While it is interesting information for my research that readers value good writing, they are providing answers to my questions as "real readers" and not academic specialists. However, while chick lit is frequently disparaged for being unoriginal texts concentrating on formulaic plot development and endings, the readers' answers verify that they do not deem linguistic creativity as unimportant, and can appreciate "good" writing from "bad" writing.

In response to question about how they choose the books they read (#7), many readers responded that they like the cover or the blurb or both if it is an impulse buy, or like to read all the novels of a particular author whose books they enjoy. The value of these answers lies in the fact that readers are involved with the genre and often make the effort of reading through book groups, newspaper or magazine reviews or even just word of mouth from friends before they buy or borrow a book to read. This corroborates Burke's argument that just as film-viewers have expectations from a film, literary readers have them too and these often begin long before the reader actually starts reading the text. The combination of anticipation and the curiosity about the novels before reading them demonstrate the eagerness with which readers approach chick lit,

especially given the numbers of books some readers claim to have read. Five of my interviewees claimed to have read more than fifty chick lit novels. These responses support the high sales figures of the genre as well as portray the emotional involvement of the readers with the texts.

Several readers confess to judging books by their covers when it comes to chick lit, which further affirms that the carefully packaged pink chick lit covers do help to make them fly off the bookstore and library shelves. For example, "LisaSteinke," a chick lit reader and also a chick lit author herself admits that "One of the things I love most about Chick Lit books is their covers. Sassy, colorful, and fun, they often tell a story all their own. And while many critics have mocked these cover images that include anything from long-legged women in stilettos to frosted wedding cakes, I've always read them proudly (especially in public places!)… So when I'm on the prowl for a juicy new read, hungrily weaving through the aisles of Barnes and Noble, my decision to buy or not to buy, will often be made primarily based on a book's cover—especially if it's written by an author I haven't yet experienced ("What's Wrong With"). "Kaz80" declares that "i sometimes judge a book by it's cover  other times i go by the synopsis and the author [all sic]." "Maggie Dana" replies to this comment saying, "These days you CAN judge a book by its cover. It's designed to make you pick the book up, which is why publishers pay a lot of money for them. The choice of colours, font, and graphics is hugely important, especially when the author is unknown or the book hasn't had a big publicity push and glowing reviews. Of course, it never hurts to peek inside and read a few paragraphs to make sure you're on board with that particular author's style" ("How Many So Far"). While chick lit covers are often criticized for the cartoonish drawings and loopy script as a way to infantilise or "dumb down" the genre, "Mamacita" sees the typical chick lit cover as an improvement on the steamy,

romanticised covers of romance novels. She says, “Hmmm, I haven’t seen anything objectionable about most of the so-called ‘chick lit’ covers...I’m sitting here staring at ‘Undomestic Goddess’...just a yellow jacket, the title and authors [sic] name in blue, and a cartoon briefcase with cooking utencils [sic] sticking out...Most of the chick-lit covers seem to trend toward cartoons... Now, if they were like the historical romance covers, I’d worry a bit...” (“Women’s Fiction”). On a Goodreads chick lit forum, a reader, “Marion” asked, “When you acquire new books, what draws you to the book? Do you judge a book by the cover? How do you decide what books are worthy of your shelf?” Out of five answers to her question, four readers said that they were drawn by the covers, and only if the covers and then the titles were interesting did they read the blurb (“What Do You Look”).

Four of my interviewees mentioned the bright colours of the novel covers which are eye-catching and attractively arranged in bookstores and libraries to catch the readers’ eye. S.G. said, “I like the pretty pink and pastel covers. The pictures also give you an idea of what lies ahead. Although since most covers end up looking similar, I go by the title and the description.” E.B. declares, “The covers usually attract me in the library. Most are pink or blue, I think. The graphics are also cute. But, in the end, I go by the blurb.” B.A. feels like she has a “pink section” in her bookcase at home because of the number of chick lit novels she has purchased.

The colour pink has been noted to appear frequently on chick lit covers along with other pastel colours such as lime green, baby blue, and yellow. Pink, a colour culturally coded as feminine, has been used to target female readers, and the sales figures demonstrate the success of

that strategy. In her article, "Not Just a Colour," Koller's analysis of the use of "pinkness" is helpful to understand why chick lit has adopted the colour pink more than others:

> While associations with pink still overwhelmingly make a connection between femininity and its stereotypical values, as well as with sexuality, an emergent concept is that of fun and confidence. In artefacts and visual texts, pink is seen as gendering textual referents and as attracting female readers' attention, often in tandem with verbal components. A second function of pink is to index sexuality and sexual identity …. Finally, the emergent associations of pink with fun, independence and confidence find their visual reflection in the use of pink as a post-feminist colour indexing economically independent, hedonistic femininity (418).

Koller thus lists three principal points that might enable us to understand why pink has inextricably become associated with chick lit and its themes, although not each book jacket is pink. First, the colour pink's associations with "fun, independence and confidence" can be seen in the playfulness captured by pink covers and the accompanying cartoonish graphics and cursive writing. Second, the target female readers' attention can be easily grabbed by the culturally gendered pink colour. Third, pink is an index for romance and sexuality (Koller references the Italian *scandalo rosa* and *letteratura rosa*), and in chick lit both romance and sexual confidence are usually characteristic features of the heroines. Lastly, the post-feminist issues that are manifested in pinkness represent independence, financial and professional confidence, as well as self-esteem and femininity. Postfeminism is closely connected with consumerism, and it tries to depict women's empowerment as a positive development while distancing itself from the negative stereotype of feminists as manly and grim (Koller 416). While one might associate the colour pink with clichéd femininity, a postfeminist perspective on

pinkness interprets the colour as empowering and thereby accepts it instead of rejecting it. The colour has been re-appropriated to distance it from feminist stereotypes of sombreness. Koller points out that pink is also linked to consumerism, and chick lit's own preoccupation with fashion, appearance, and shopping as part of the urban existence of the typical heroine demonstrates the aptness of its embracing of pink.

Besides the penchant for pink covers, all the comments from the online survey participants demonstrate the analytical and often critical stance readers take when reading chick lit novels. They understand it to be a popular genre whose main purpose is to entertain and provide an avenue of escape (Cawelti 8). However, it is this idea of popular culture as a provider of transient spells of escape and entertainment which suggests that audiences might not offer any opposition to the dominant encoded meanings in a text. My next question examines whether readers do or do not offer resistance to any encoded ideology that chick lit offers them. Question #6 on my online survey questionnaire asks, "Does chick lit portray 'how things really are'?" Aside from the ironic "Does most fiction portray how 'things realy [sic] are?'" answer that a reader provides to this question, the majority (66.12%) of my respondents believe that chick lit is a mixture of realism and fantasy. A few readers offer interesting points on this reality vs. Fantasy nature of chick lit:

- I think the time and place are generally very realistic, it's the situations that tend to be exaggerated versions of potentially real experiences
- Some are just too good to be true. Like an exaggeration of the "what should be".
- 75% no, but there is some reality that can be found in various heroine's relationships with family and friends

- It has realism in terms of the relationships the heroine has with her friends and family, and also the love and work issues she faces. The fantasy element is when the problems get resolved neatly by the end of the novel. But almost all genres of fiction have such neat all-ends-tied-together resolutions, so I don't mean that it's a negative aspect of the genre.

Apart from these comments, there is an interesting post by "prospero" on a chick lit forum where he rails against the unrealistic nature of chick lit. S/he blames chick lit's reliance on coincidences as the reason that makes it improbable. S/he believes that although coincidences do happen in real life, the author should not allow it to happen in fiction as fiction does not need to represent life that closely. S/he declares, "Life is random. Fiction is not. The author should be in control. Life doesn't make sense. *Fiction always should*" "What is Chick Lit?). The "what should be" fantasy element of the genre refers back to the wish-fulfilment and escapism pointed out by a few readers in the previous survey question. It is significant that merely 7.44% of readers find that chick lit is a genre that portrays life realistically since it shows that the overwhelming majority understand that although it might be based on real-life issues, the plot entanglements and the easy resolutions are fantastical. More than 90% of the respondents are astute readers who are not cultural dupes who unquestioningly accept the fantasy that popular media hands out to them.

With regard to fantasies propagated by the popular media, consumerism and capitalism seem to be celebrated in chick lit. As has been mentioned by each scholar about chick lit, consumerism is one of the principal features of the genre. While all chick lit writers do not write

shopping-centred novels, many chick lit heroines do enjoy designer clothes, accessories, and especially, expensive shoes a la Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*. I have dealt with this theme in more detail in my second chapter. In my survey I asked, "What is your reaction to the frequent instances of shopping in a majority of chick lit novels? (#8)" Unlike all the other questions where there was a decided majority in favour of a certain option, the opinions of the survey participants are remarkably divergent on this issue. While 23.53% think that the heroine's shopping sprees allow the readers vicarious fulfilment for their desire for high fashion, a close 21.01% think that the heroines are simply catering to the "keeping up with the Joneses" mindset which most real-life young women have, and a comparable 22.69% see the shopping as the heroines succumbing to capitalist ideology. Again, a very close percentage (25.21%) provides their own answers. While some readers claim they have not really noticed the occurrence of shopping, seven readers said that they hate the predominance of shopping and it makes them go off the book, while seven readers see this as a reinforcement of a female stereotype.

Apart from calling the consumerist tendencies "humorous" and "fun", some other answers include:

- The purchase of goods is an essential part of life which society has relegated to the female gender due to the women's predominant role as the domestic artisans of society throughout history
- shopping is just a popular pastime for women
- I consider the instances of shopping to be pandering to a stereotype about women. It's part of a plot structure that some authors believe will help the reader identify with the

main character. I think it also appeases the people who are reading chick lit for a comfortable plot structure.

Other readers' comments are more analytical about this theme, attempting to establish one or more reasons for the role shopping plays in the lives of chick lit heroines and perhaps, by extension, real women. One commentator dismisses the theme as a sort of formula which all writers follow: "It is more like a custom now. If it's chick-lit, the authors think they have to describe everything including the brand of a button :p" Thus, for her, there is no particular agenda or "meaning" behind women who shop extravagantly; it is simply the code for chick lit laid down by writers such as Kinsella with her wildly successful *Shopaholic* series. Indeed, one reader sees the innate fallacy in the plots that depend on women shopping. She points out, "Trust me, it's not real. Sure, girls frequent malls and shops but more often than not, they don't get a thing." Thus, while heroines might indulge themselves in bouts of—purely fictional—shopping and the reader might get a thrill out of all the designer name-dropping, *real* women know the value of money and do not follow the heroines' lead and actually purchase much. Another reader comments: "I prefer a more realistic view when it comes to shopping. I.e. [sic] the shopaholic series annoyed me because the heroine was being stupid about spending money she didn't have." This respondent obviously sees the innate stupidity of Becky Bloomwood living on credit when she does not even have enough credit to live on. Becky is Mr. Micawber on the modern stage, but she, of course, has a charmed chick lit existence and avoids debtor's prison. Another reader pinpoints a psychological reason for the heroine's fascination for retail therapy: "9 times out of 10, if the main character in a Chick Lit book shops excessively, she does it to fill a gap in her life

that is completely unrelated to the overpriced merchandise in her shopping bags." In Chapter 2, this is the reason I myself have offered for Becky Bloomwood's obsessive consumerism.

Some readers believe the consumerism theme to be a combination of more than one of the given options and elaborate in their own answers:

- All of the first four choices, but I do find a sort of satisfaction in imagining I'm buying haute couture through the heroine's purhases [sic].
- I love the shopping in the novels. This is why Kinsella is my favorite chick lit author. I would love to buy high end stuff, but don't usually have the money to splurge. The books let me do some designer shopping by proxy.
- All of the first 3. Once I started a full-time job, one of the perks of the salary that came with it was all the shopping I could finally afford! So I understand the desires of the heroines.
- I don't know if that characterizes all women, but I am from an urban background and most women I know love shopping. I would choose options 1,2,3. When my friends and I are a little short on cash, shopping "vicariously" through the heroines does feel better than nothing at all. Why earn good money and not indulge oneself?
- Again, another combination of things: vicarious enabling of your couture cravings, allows your "keeping up with the Joneses" without actually spending any money, but I would not say that this characterizes all real-life young women

From my interview group, the majority said that chick lit writers cater to the "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality but that other factors are also involved. The interviewees generally

felt that the chick lit heroines give in to the consumerism commanded by advertising with the desire to be as well turned out as other women. Some mentioned that the novels play on stereotypes about how women love shopping, but then they good-humouredly confessed that they enjoyed shopping themselves. Five of my informants said that they enjoyed reading about high fashion purchases because it felt like they could partake in the extravagance from a safe distance—and for free. M.A. said, "I mean, who wouldn't want to have nice things? I don't have the money to do so, but I'm happy for these girls that can somehow get nice things even with the bad salaries they complain about." C.R. enthused, "It's like reading about what I used to watch in *Sex and the City*. I am kind of fascinated by the big city lifestyle these women seem to have. I've never really lived anywhere bigger than Lansing." S.G said, "I love going shopping, but usually buy nothing after trying out lots of clothes. I enjoy the chick lit girls actually buying stuff I would like to have in my own closet. It's kind of something I dream about, but would never actually do."

The readers' own answers as well as the very comparable percentages of respondents who voted for the given options made this question the most difficult for me to form a coherent opinion on. The only point that was clearly established by the survey was that very few readers see extravagant shopping, high fashion clothes and accessories as necessary for women to maintain a certain position in contemporary society. Chick lit is a genre which is aspirational for the majority of readers due to the luxurious lifestyle symbolised by its name-dropping of designer articles. It can be empowering for some privileged women with an appropriate economic background, and allows women with lesser financial backing to indulge in some imaginative consumerism. Yardley refers to this phenomenon as "lifestyle envy." She writes that

the "Chick Lit fabulous" with the deliberate name-dropping of international fashion houses is not realistic, but it plays on the readers' desires for guilty pleasures. It's the kind of fascination one gets from the mere lavishness portrayed in shows like *It's Good to Be…* and puts a veneer of otherworldliness on the novels (Yardley 14). While readers do agree that they enjoy reading about shopping because it allows them the transient pleasure of "owning" couture without having to spend anything, no one mentions that the theme of consumerism encourages or stimulates her to go on a shopping spree herself. Others recognise the syndrome as merely giving in to capitalism that encourages these characters to buy their way into prosperity and happiness. This is turn leads to the other option where maintaining the same level as one's neighbours is the raison d'être for the heroine's consumerist inclinations. The results do conclude that the readers are aware of the ideological messages encoded into chick lit and self-consciously take positions against it, thereby revealing their own ideologies.

Smith suggests that the reflection of current issues in chick lit depicts a self-reflective, ironic attitude (26) that challenges the aforementioned Cosmopolitan culture, but whether readers are actually failing to interpret this ironic stance and are embracing the consumer values that chick lit is ensconced in is a question that needs to be examined**.** My data from the surveys suggest that readers do understand that the guilt-free consumerism that the heroines can enjoy is only possible in the fictional world. Since, as mentioned several times before, chick lit is often blamed for engendering materialistic desires in female readers, this question (and answer) is pertinent to the genre as a whole. While Smith believes that chick lit novels challenge the ideologies embedded in romantic comedies and fashion magazines, she still wonders the effect these messages have on the readers. She writes:

> While I voraciously consume these magazines each month, I am simultaneously disturbed by and wary of the messages that they impart to their readers, and I see the negative effects that these images and articles can have upon their consumers when I teach *Bridget Jones's Diary* in my college classes. Many young women in my classes speak fervently about their identification with Bridget, and I worry that they, like Bridget, are unable to dissect or critique the messages conveyed to them everyday by consumer culture. (Smith 19)

Chick lit's identity as a product of a consumer-capitalist time and its purported ironic reproduction of certain ideologies—normative femininity, romantic love, married domesticity—creates a contradictory situation which affects the critical stance that one must take to those facets of consumer culture that are ubiquitous both in real life as well as in chick lit. Chick lit's emphasis on appearance and fashion portrays its link with consumerism and *Cosmopolitan* culture, but it is its playful, ironic treatment of contemporary social issues which chick lit writers and readers may not necessary agree with.

As mentioned earlier, several survey respondents claimed that chick lit was simply pandering to female stereotypes by showing heroines indulging themselves by shopping expensively. On a chick lit forum, a contributor ("vodkafan) asks, "Does Chicklit do damage by reinforcing negative female stereotypes that young women then conform to unconsciously? Or should the whole genre just be dismissed as a bit of harmless fun?" While the respondents to this question mostly agree that chick lit has some predictable stereotypes—just like mysteries and thrillers—readers are aware that the plots are predictable and expect that the novel will have some, perhaps negative, female stereotypes. This is the reason they believe that chick lit does not actually harm the readers since they employ a suspension of disbelief and do not take the novels

at face value. One reader ("ummilia") says, "I think of the relationships being sort of fairy-tales for big girls..I haven't met too many Prince Charmings (or Mark Darcys, to use an example from Bridget Jones) in real life..I've met many nice men but that's an unfair standard to hold them to..! There's a lot of suspension of disbelief; for example I doubt that any knight in shining armour is going to come and sort out my finances any time soon ,or that I'm going to get a wonderful job just in time to pay my debts....Sophie Kinsella's 'Shopaholic' would in real life be filing for bankruptcy..[all sic]" ("Chick Lit Reinforcing Stereotypes"). Thus, the respondents to this question generally believe that chick lit's female stereotypes do not do any damage to the readers since the readers are already well-versed in the formula it follows, and treat a chick lit as novels that are "very entertaining to read" ("Miss Mabel") ("Chick Lit Reinforcing Stereotypes").

Question #9 on my questionnaire asks, "How do you feel about the construction of feminism and femininity in chick lit?" The majority (66.67%) of readers felt that chick lit demonstrates "the contrasting forces which modern women experience: the personal desire for success and financial independence with the societal pressure to find a boyfriend/husband and settle down." Approximately 20% of the respondents believe that chick lit portrays "smart independent women navigating modern life with aplomb and promoting feminist ideas to the female audience." Other respondents provide a range of responses, some of which make the claim that chick lit does not necessarily have to espouse feminism because it is essentially a genre targeted towards entertainment and does not need to champion any overtly political messages. The readers do not anticipate the genre to be eminently feminist, and although they realise that most novels feature superficial women who are not particularly career-oriented, they enjoy them nevertheless because the readers' goal is simply entertainment.

Some readers provided their own opinions:

- It provides an unreal perspective which I consider mostly superficial as women are usually more complex than the heroines.
- Chick-lit tries very hard to show a modern woman (trendy jobs, cool lifestyles, etc), but always falls back on the option that "Women have to have a man to be happy." Chick-lit isn't designed to forward the feminist movement, but anyone reading it who gest [sic] upset b/c they THINK it is…they are pretty confused.
- It portrays life from a female perspective, often with humor, intelligence and ingenuity on the heroine's part. Each heroine makes different choices and has different experiences....I enjoy chick lit because it is different but from the perspective of the female in a similar society to mine and it is not all about love. If I wanted love I'd read a romance.
- When I read chick lit, I'm not seeking books based on the construction of, or femininity in, the story. I'm looking for a fun, even humorous escape…just plain & simple.
- I find most chick lit heroines superficial and flimsy. Most don't show any strength of purpose. They usually have jobs that do not require much intellect, and flit from one job to another, their main concerns being their girl friends, relationships (or lack thereof) and shopping
- I think it's a little clichéd—particularly the "she won't be happy till she finds a man" one.
- I don't think it's a realistic view in many cases. As I said, they're usually more glamorous/frivolous than "real women". At least, the female characters in grad school (I'm pursuing a scientific career) are closer to those from phd comic than those from any chick book

From the pool of my interviewees, most supported the idea that chick lit reflects the contrasting forces of women working hard for their careers and financial independence while being pressured to settle down with a man. S.G. said, "I don't expect chick lit to be a feminist manifesto, why should it? I think it does a decent job of showing what an ordinary woman's life is like. We're not always mouthing feminist ideas everyday, are we?" A.G. argues, "Chick lit girls are sort of simpler versions of real women. Some girls are feminist—some of Jennifer Weiner's books, for example—while most are not. But, that's not the point of chick lit, is it? I read it because it's light and funny. It's not to say literary fiction is always feminist."

Although the portrayal of women in chick lit is usually criticised for being pre-feminist and patriarchal, the interesting fact in my survey is that only 3.33% of the respondents think that chick lit's depiction of women is upholding the pillars of patriarchy. One reader provides an interesting qualification: "I'd say the third option, were it softened a bit. Trite, yes, because mostly these women don't seem to be self-aware enough to realise their own position in life or the impulses which they given in. But chicklit, even with its fantasy elements, often do hold up a mirror to a number of contemporary dilemmas women of particular societies face in balancing professional and personal lives and desires. So my answer would be somewhere in the middle space between option 2 and 3." Indian chick lit, for example, shines light, albeit humorously, on the phenomenon of the arranged marriage prevalent in India. While women wish to find a partner for themselves, one who is suited to them and whom they love, they are often urged by society—in the form of their mothers—to settle for an arranged marriage with someone they do not know since it is a social stigma to be single in one's late twenties. I study this in more detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Chick lit novels establish a somewhat open relationship between the female characters and feminist values and beliefs. For instance, in Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret?* The heroine, Emma's friend, Jemima describes her idea of feminism:

> "I'm being a feminist, actually," retorts Jemima. "We women have to stand up for our rights. You know, before she married my father, Mummy went out with this scientist chap who practically jilted her. He changed his mind three weeks before the wedding, can you believe it? So one night she crept into his lab and pulled out all the plugs of his stupid machines. His whole research was ruined!" … "Do you think you should just let men walk all over you and get away with it? Great blow for feminism. (Kinsella 280)

Although there is no absolute "definition" of feminism, the idea in general consists of an awareness of women's rights, denouncing the inequalities women face in society, activism to ensure women get the rights they are entitled to, and so on. In the above example, Jemima seems to condense the socio-political message of the feminist movement into revenge directed specifically at male partners who have done something to fall out of favour. This unorthodox understanding of feminism is demonstrated in several chick lit novels where the women do not use the ideology to fight for women's rights but as a foundation for comedy. If this comedic nature is removed, the sarcastic way in which feminism is presented can lead to an anti-feminist reading of chick lit. This is especially problematic because the writers themselves are women writing to women readers and seemingly belittling the advances made by the feminism.

The sense of discomfort with the irregular way in which chick lit treats feminism was voiced by Whelehan in *Overloaded* (2000), where she comments on the "unattractive" portrayal of a feminist in *Bridget Jones's Diary*:

> Bridget neatly expresses the tensions of a woman who recognises the rhetoric of feminism and empowerment, but isn't always able to relate this to her fulsome desire for a hero from a Jane Austen novel. … The second crucial lesson is that "after all there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism." … *Bridget Jones* might be seen as a "post-feminist" text in the sense that feminist values are situated as somewhere in the past. (*Overloaded* 136, 137)

Whelehan explains her point further by remarking on the confessional style of the novel which is meant to "encourage the reader to identify with Bridget's vulnerabilities. But in doing so, the reader also becomes complicit in the view of feminism as too prudish, judgemental and unattractive" (*Overloaded* 137). In spite of Whelehan's reasonable reading of the novel here, one could say that calling Bridget's view of feminism as "prudish and unattractive" may deny the novel its humour. Whelehan herself mellows her critique in a later work *(Feminist Bestseller*), and says that chick lit has made some developments in relation to some women's writing of the 1960s and 1970s.

The chick lit genre is able to express feminist issues that are suitable for the realities of the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries, and which do not necessarily fit the social situations of the First and Second Wave feminist movements. When she compares chick lit to the feminist bestsellers of the 1970s (the consciousness raising novels), she concludes that both categories demonstrate just how huge a difference the Second Wave made on social policy, law and politics, but also show that there were certain deficiencies which excluded certain women (*Feminist Bestseller* 5). Since chick lit heroines do not demonstrate the devotion to feminist ideals that their 1970s forebears did, their relationship to feminism is certainly faulty**.** However,

since the genre tries to provide a realistic representation of contemporary social realities, such as the career, appearance or relationship issues women grapple with, the relationship of chick lit to feminism is unconventional but still legitimate. Most chick lit heroines enjoy talking to their friends about their interests in fashion, their beauty routines, and any weight problems they might have. Since these contextual issues do preoccupy real life twenty-first century women, the characterization of chick lit heroines are not undermined, but actually legitimated by the appearance-based femininity expected of and experienced by real women. One could also construe chick lit heroines' desire to look good as not kowtowing to patriarchal demands but as an attempt to feel empowered and confident. However, this sense of what looks good needs to be a result of self-realisation and not a socially constructed ideal. Thus, in chick lit, femininity is not necessarily in conflict with feminist ideas, although it does approach feminism in a different way.

Chick lit's relationship with feminism is certainly unorthodox since the female characters often treat the important political, social, and philosophical movement in a comedic or flippant way. For example, in Fielding's *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, there is a moment that is indicative of the unconventional understanding of feminist ideals that the female protagonists have.

> "Wait … wait. It's this book called *What Men Want*. Right … 'If you have a beautiful sister; or friend, rest assured that your boyfriend is HAVING THOUGHTS ABOUT SEX WITH HER.'" …
>
> "I mean, isn't that revolting? Aren't they just …?"
>
> "Shaz, can I call you back later?"

> Next thing Shaz was accusing me of being obsessed with men when I was supposed to be a feminist. So, I said, if she was supposed to be so uninterested in them, why was she reading a book called *What Men Want*? It was all turning into a hideously unfeminist man-based row when we realized it was ridiculous and said we'd see each other tomorrow. (*Bridget Jones's Diary* 20)

These untraditional—and often dismissive—treatments of feminism have been examined by several scholars, some of which are helpful to refer to here. For example, in her discussion on *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) Clare Hanson comments that the novel endorses femininity and bodily perfection as the route to empowerment instead of feminism. She claims that Fielding's novel offers "a kind of lipstick feminism that assumes that a woman's best weapon in life is a floaty white dress in a romantic setting" (Hanson 17). This term—"lipstick feminism"—that Hanson employs proposes that in Fielding's novel, and by extension, in the typical chick lit novel, the kind of femaleness or femininity perceived in the women's fixations with appearance, fashion, and body image overshadows their preoccupations with the feminism as a socio-politically important movement associated with fighting for women's rights. Hanson adds that the binary opposition between feminism and femininity might have become mutual interdependence now as feminist beliefs have entered the mainstream to a large extent (25-6). Therefore, Hanson argues that just because chick lit features a striking emphasis on femininity, maybe more than other kinds of women's fiction, it does not mean that it is completely divorced from feminism.

Chick lit could be said to incorporate a modified or mellowed down sense of feminism which is not as aggressive as that featured in the consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s. Gill and Herdieckerhoff add that:

> Chick lit articulates a distinctively post-feminist sensibility characterised by an emphasis on neo-liberal feminine subjectivities and self-surveillance and monitoring; the notion of the (sexual) body as the key source of identity for women; discourses of boldness, entitlement, and choice (usually articulated to normative femininity and/or consumerism); and a belief in the emotional separateness of men's and women's worlds. It is also characterised by an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Gill and Herdicekerhoff 487)

Hence, after providing a list of the main themes and issues that preoccupy chick lit, Gill and Herdieckerhoff conclude that "an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses" is also a feature of the genre. Moreover, they also emphasise that some of chick lit's main facets conform to a "post-feminist sensibility" rather than with feminist ideology.

According to Ferriss and Young, chick lit is a postfeminist genre, but they later add that one must keep in mind that postfeminism is an evolvement of feminism and the two are not necessarily adversative. They summarise concisely what they believe to be the most archetypal principles of feminism and postfeminism, and in light of the ongoing discussion, it is worth quoting them at length here:

> Feminism:
>
> - Reliance on political action, political movements, and political solutions;
> - The primacy of equality; resistance to and critique of the patriarchy;

- Choice is collective—it refers to women's right not to have children and to have children and to enter careers and professions formerly closed to them;
- A rejection—or at least questioning—of femininity;
- Suspicion of and resistance to media-driven popular culture and the consumerism it supports;
- Humor is based on the disjunction between traditional women's roles and women as powerful, independent people.

Postfeminism:

- The personal as political; agenda is replaced by attitude;
- A rejection of second-wave anger and blame against the patriarchy;
- Choice is individual—whether of family, career, cosmetic surgery, or nail color;
- A return to femininity and sexuality;
- Pleasure in media-driven popular culture and an embracing of the joys of consumerism;
- Humor is based on the discrepancy between the ideals put forward by both feminism and the media, and the reality of life in the modern world; as such, the humor of postfeminism is often ironically self-deprecating (*Chick Flicks* 3-4).

The postfeminist aspects that Ferriss and Young point out seem to be more applicable to the prototypical chick lit novel than the bullet points describing feminism. The binary feminism/postfeminism is still not satisfactorily resolved, and simply fitting chick lit to the list of postfeminist features does not convince critics that the genre is clearly postfeminist in the face of the feminist claims voiced by chick lit heroines. However, the consumerism and preoccupation with physical beauty aspects of chick lit chime in with a feature of postfeminism. Tasker and

Negra argue, "Postfeminism also perpetuates woman as pinup, the enduring linchpin of commercial beauty culture. In fact, it has offered new rationales for guilt-free consumerism, substantially reenergizing beauty culture…and presiding over an aggressive mainstreaming of elaborate and expensive beauty treatments to the middle class" (3). Thus, in conclusion, chick lit can support femininity and femaleness in various ways as the scholars cited above discuss, generally in the postfeminist vein and at times in the somewhat in-between space of feminism and postfeminism. The readers' interpretation is that the heroines of the postfeminist generation are attempting to make it on their own but constantly struggling against pressure from friends and family to settle down with a man.

V

Reading the Surveys through Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

Although I have a smaller sample of interview participants than I had expected, their responses still provided me with a wealth of perceptive data for qualitative analysis. I mentioned earlier that questionnaires and surveys often need contributors to invest their time with none or minimal monetary compensation, and therefore, informants do not often respond with the zeal that the researcher would love to find. The limited nature of the qualitative sample only enables me to draw initial conclusions but there is definitely a trend in the reading experiences of chick lit that can be gauged through my examples. However, the preliminary conclusions are certainly significant and have bearing on the genre as a whole. The first is that the readers are well aware of the main issues, themes, and elements that are central to the chick lit genre and are interested in new publications. This curiosity in reading new books leads to faithful consumers and therefore the high sales figures for the genre. Not only do readers enjoy the books on their own,

but they also like to share their opinions with other women who appreciate chick lit on online forums and blogs. These readers are discerning customers of the genre and their evaluations of the novels are based on a concrete knowledge of the genre itself. All my respondents seem to share the expectation of a feel-good happy ending from chick lit novels. The fact that the generic chick lit novel does follow this principle suggests that the genre's success can in part be ascribed to the happy resolution and positive feeling engendered in the reader from the ending. The online book forums also provide a sort of self-help network or a shared social and emotional space where readers can discuss and emphasize the positive effects expected of chick lit.

The presence of both qualitative and quantitative examinations of chick lit readership has turned out to be a useful study because the somewhat cautious conclusions based on the former were carefully supported by the latter. The downsides in the small sample of the qualitative analysis allowed me to make provisional claims. Moreover, there is always the possibility that the actual wording of the questions in the surveys were "leading" to the respondents because an element of error needs to be factored in when human responses are being evaluated by a human researcher in empirical research. I have largely attempted to use impersonal sources for the quantitative side of my analysis in order to have a more independent "scientific" environment.

After having presented my results from my surveys as well as some selected comments from book forums, the readers seem to be self-conscious discerning readers who are well aware of the dominant hegemonic messages encoded into the chick lit novels but adopt a negotiated stance in their enjoyment of the genre. The two most common themes for which chick lit is critiqued are the depiction of feminine, not feminist heroines, and the heroines' love of shopping.

These themes perpetuate both a negative female stereotype as well as capitalist ideology. With regards to the consumerism, the preferred dominant reading is that shopping is good as long as the shopper is financially responsible. The exaggeration of the "shopping principle" as shown by Kinsella in the *Shopaholic* series critiques uncontrolled extravagance, although Becky avoids any serious consequences and continues spending without limit in subsequent novels. Shopping can be seen as celebration of women's economic independence, and the fashionable *Sex and the City* single girl lifestyle. Readers do not see chick lit as detrimentally propagating negative female stereotypes, but as harmless entertainment where readers are aware of the formula chick lit functions on and can maintain an easy distance between fiction and reality.

The more or less equal responses to three of the given options for the question on consumerism in my survey show that readers are self-aware when they read chick lit—it is a *negotiated reading* they are indulging in, and not passive consumption. The capitalist economy would like them to spend huge sums of money on consumer goods, but enjoying vicarious wish-fulfilment through fiction without spending their own money allows them to cheat the system. Moreover, the readers recognised that it is not realistic for PR assistants and publishing interns to have BCBG, Prada, or Manolo Blahnik items, and they enjoy reading about the heroines' shopping escapades simply for the fun of it. As mentioned earlier, according to Yardley, it is a case of "lifestyle envy" (14) where readers imaginatively experience and indirectly indulge in the good life.

Reading chick lit is thus an aspirational experience but does not translate into real life. Two readers comment that in real life Becky Bloomwood's debt might be true enough, but not the miraculous escape that she makes from her mountain of debt. There were a few readers who

said they disliked heroines who liked shopping or books that depending too heavily on this plot mechanism like the *Shopaholic* novels. They said that they avoided this kind of book, thereby not giving in to the dominant code in any way. Chick lit features the circulation of financial capital and cultural capital as a result of globalization, the consumerist Western glamorous lifestyle, the American dream at its peak. It allows one an escape into a part-real-mostly-fantasy world, a world where "what should be" rules as a reader points out. The postfeminist chick lit heroines can indulge themselves in retail therapy to make themselves feel better for anything from boyfriend trouble to bankruptcy, and of course, fantasy endings allow every problem to be resolved so that the heroine can live happily ever after.

With regards to the portrayal of femininity and feminism in chick lit, the dominant hegemonic code would be that popular media is attempting a throwback to pre-feminist days so that chick lit women are shown as feminine instead of actively feminist, limiting the personal to the personal without making it political, the dedication to professional improvement being subordinated to a desire for love and sex. Readers once again show that they execute a *negotiated reading* of chick lit whereby they understand the pressures that patriarchal societal expectations place on contemporary women, and recognise that the chick lit heroines are attempting to navigate through those pressures to still make a life for themselves in a bid to "have it all." There are some readings where readers dismiss the often flaky heroines, and their concern for their friends, shopping, and relationships over more "serious" matters, but these are limited. As the discussion on feminism and femininity above has shown, scholars cannot come to a decision on chick lit's position on the feminism movement, but most tend to think that it fits in more with postfeminist tenets.

My interviewees also weigh in on the conflation of femininity with feminism in chick lit. Two of my readers agree that chick lit falls into the postfeminist category. M.A. said, "I learned about postfeminism at school. I think chick lit women are more postfeminist than feminist. It's not that they don't appreciate what feminism has given us, but in reference to your question,[10] they think femininity is part of today's feminism." A. G. Argued, "It's not like earlier when feminism and femininity did not go together. It's no longer a sin to be feminine and also believe in being a strong, independent woman. I'm not sure what this position is called, but I think I've heard it's called postfeminism now." The readers are sensible of the fact that many chick lit heroines are very superficial and frivolous and certainly more glamorous than real women. Several readers commented that chick lit depicts women being unhappy without having a boyfriend/husband, but three of my interviewees said that although this is not a positive portrayal of women, most women they know do feel less happy when not in a relationship. D.J.M. suggested, "It's usually those in happy relationship who point out that women are shown to be useless without men. But, really, who wants to be alone? When all your friends are paired off, and you're the only single girl, would you really be thrilled? I think chick lit shows the truth when it come to this." A.G. said, "My family is hounding me to get married. Most of my friends have. The others are actively looking for boyfriends. So, girls cannot be feminists just to end up alone. I was unhappy before I had a boyfriend but I don't feel like that was weak. People need companionship. So do chick lit women." Thus, while readers understand that chick lit women are more glamorised versions of themselves or their friends, they also realise that some aspects of their own lives are certainly reflected in chick lit.

[10] Question #9 on my interview questionnaire

Chick lit might be a clichéd representation of young women on the lookout for Mr. Right, but this search is still a legitimate concern for young women in real life. As mentioned earlier, only 3.33% think that chick lit portrays women conforming to the patriarchal code, and a clear majority of 67% think that women are caught between the duelling forces of having professional and financial success as well as finding a life partner. The feminist ideal of working towards an independent livelihood versus the pre-feminist search for a mate culminates in the postfeminist position of struggling after both. This is the junction which the chick lit brand of humour derives from according to Ferriss and Young: "the discrepancy between the ideas put forward by both feminism and the media, and the reality of life in the modern world" (*Chick Flicks* 3-4). While 20% of my online survey-takers believe that chick lit is already forwarding the feminist cause, a few think, as noted earlier, that chick lit by its nature is meant for entertainment, not for espousing the feminist movement, and readers should neither expect that nor be upset if it is missing. Readers are aware of the predictability of the genre, but therein lies some of the pleasure as well as the comfort it provides. They are not taken in by the hegemonic preferred reading of creating weak victims of über-femininity, but exercise negotiation in their reading processes, to understand that while the heroines try their best at their jobs, be their lower- or upper-tier, and try to be independent, it is normal that they should also look for romantic fulfilment in their lives. The genre attempts to depict a simpler, more glamorous, perhaps more frivolous approximation of the complex lives of real life women, but it need not promote political ideologies like feminism, since the genre's main purpose is to entertain (see Yardley 5).

Thus, overall, my results prove that the chick lit audience are astute readers who are aware of the formulaic conventions which the genre relies on. Although my informants come

from different social, economic, and educational backgrounds, they all agree on the basic machinations of the plot: they anticipate the happy ending, the neat resolution of all crises, the girl-meets-boy-and-has-a-potentially-happy-future plot device. They tend to view chick lit as a lighter genre compared to literary fiction, geared towards providing diversion and escapism, but still have expectations from it to maintain superior stylistic and linguistic standards. One of the main issues discussed in this chapter is the importance readers place on the entertainment aspect of the chick lit novels. The worth of the book is often judged according to its entertainment value, because readers turn to chick lit for its light-heartedness when they wish to read for pleasure/leisure. The presence of the playful, humorous entertaining element that they expect makes the readers judge the books positively. It is important to keep this point in mind because this positive outlook also determines how they interpret the issues of consumerism and femininity featured in chick lit. The readers understand the comedic nature of these issues as conveyed by chick lit, and do not take any negative connotations at face value, but place it within the context of postfeminist humour. Being avid readers of the genre, readers are well aware of the formula as well as the dramatic roles involved, and can sustain negotiated readings of the novels without succumbing to the dominant code.

Although Radway's Smithton readers found their romance reading both compensatory as well as combative, I do not feel like my respondents' readings, although negotiated, can be seen as a form of resistance. While I maintain that chick lit readers are not cultural dupes due to the self-aware interpretations that they offered, there is no emancipatory effect as such as the hegemonic power structures are not changed, and the escape and pleasure that is enjoyed by the readers do not occur in a socio-cultural void. It would be more suitable to suggest that women read chick lit to cope with real-life problems, but chick lit as a form is too constrained to offer

any genuine scope for resistance. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I discuss some of the thematic constraints of chick lit and suggest a few new directions that a new wave of chick lit could take. Also, the point of resistance is different compared to popular romance novels, especially romance novels of the 70s and 80s that Radway had been researching. There are certainly fantastical elements to chick lit, but there is overall less of a sense of escapist fantasy than popular romance which was set in very exotic locales and featured an uber-masculine, dark, brooding hero—an Arabian sheik was a standard type. The gap between the reality of Radway's readers and that of their fantasies is much wider than the fantasies depicted in chick lit and the lives of chick lit readers. Radway can see the act of reading by her readers as an act of resistance since it is difficult to imagine those fantasies as literal forms. The level of practicality that exists in chick lit makes its readers' negotiation less defiant due to its closeness to reality.

I

Introduction

Globalization facilitates the spread of Western popular culture around the world, and with it Western capitalism and consumer society. Globalization thus helps to disseminate the illusion of a glamorous world and a society where the values are directed towards individual consumption. Chick lit, one such vehicle of popular culture, is a manifestation of the global proliferation of Western consumer culture. This chapter shall explore consumerism as it is featured in chick lit. The young, urban middle-class women with access to discretionary income enjoy their relatively newfound economic independence by spending their earnings to experience their successes in the material forms of designer clothing and accessories, as well as exotic holidays and other luxuries. The high-end products they purchase also work to reinforce their sense of selfhood and help to buttress the fact that they have "made it". The fetishization of commodities is a characteristic shared by a majority of chick lit heroines as is testified by their consumerism and (usually) conspicuous consumption of fashionable articles and popular media. I suggest that another strategy used by some chick lit writers is to exaggerate their heroines' shopping tendencies to such an extent that they become ironic figures meant to humorously show the female readers the result of blind consumerism and gently steer them away from a similar fate as that the heroines suffer.

There is, of course, still a gender-wage gap, and women still need to go a long way before they can enjoy parity with men when it comes to equal pay for equal work. Notwithstanding such unfortunate realities, women now outnumber men in colleges and universities, and enjoy an

economic payoff due to that education (Mundy, "Employment Projections"). The pill provided women with a means of reliable contraception, and allowed women to pursue education as well as a career without having to devote time exclusively to taking care of the family. This phenomenon led to women being able to work higher paying jobs, thereby boosting their earning potentials than they previously could have accomplished (Bailey, Herhbein and Miller). This comparative economic prosperity that middle class women have access to now leads to more independence and sense of confidence, which is expressed in the glamour of extravagant spending. However, as a side note, to suit the mindset of today's credit-crunched population who are struggling to make ends meet, "recession" lit—such as Sarah Bilston's *Sleepless Nights* (US version) (2010) and Kimberly S. Lin's *Recession Proof* (2001) —takes a step away from the cheerful consumerism to discuss the realities of lay-offs and restructuring. Although chick lit must stay true to the "escape" factor provided by popular fiction, it still shadows reality as it claims to be a realistic depiction of real life events.

I will be using the theories of cultural critics such as Thorstein Veblen and Jean Baudrillard, to analyse the consumerist propensities of the chick lit heroines. The heroines subscribe to a Veblenesque ideology of conspicuous consumption as a means to having and showing off a self-directed life and having an aura of earned conspicuous leisure. Baudrillard critiques the objectification of people's relations with each other, a direct consequence of the Marxian commodity fetishism that characterises the chick lit heroines, where they carve out their personalities in relation to the objects they own. The sign value of the objects the heroines purchase give them the status and social cachet that they are in search of: if they spend too much, it is "wastage to feel alive" (Baudrillard 43). I will discuss consumerism in women's fiction from

Edith Wharton through Anita Loos to the contemporary chick lit novels, by writers Sophie Kinsella and Lee Tulloch. I first consider Jane Austen's subtle discussion of the changing fashions of the Regency period to demonstrate how women feel that their dress will make them stand out and be more attractive to a man at a ball. As discussed in Chapter 1, chick lit is a genre that offers imaginary wish-fulfilment for the majority of readers due to the luxurious lifestyle symbolised by its name-dropping of designer articles. It can be empowering for some privileged women with an appropriate economic background, and allows women with lesser financial backing to indulge in some imaginative consumerism.

II

"Woman is fine for her own satisfaction alone" ~ Northanger Abbey

Penelope Byrde in *Jane Austen Fashion* writes, "Jane Austen had a natural and lively interest in clothes as is evident from her letters to her sister, Cassandra. She enjoyed discussing such matters with her close friends and relatives; no doubt if it had been relevant to the story, characters like Elinor and Marianne Dashwood and Jane and Elizabeth Bennet would have discussed very similar topics with each other" (Byrde 13). Her letters show that Austen was well-versed in the practices of self-display and shopping as far as it pertained to female fashion and adornments, carriages, furniture, and dancing. It is also quite easy to see proof in her correspondence of her taste for the pleasures of consumption. Austen, with her characteristic wry tone, announces that she is not in favour of the "poor & economical" people of Steventon, but is much more impressed with her wealthy brother's lifestyle at Godmersham: "Kent is the only place for happiness. Everybody is rich there" (*Letters*: 28). Shopping, especially in London, was

an activity she seems to be fond of. In April 1811 she wrote to Cassandra: "I am getting very extravagant & spending all my Money; & what is worse for *you*, I have been spending yours too" (*Letters*: 179). London, moreover, was the home of her brother Henry who, as a banker, led a life of luxury till he went bankrupt in 1816. Although Austen rarely describes her characters overly fascinated with dress—and when she does, it is to show the character in an ironic light (for example, Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*—she does record the changing fashions of Regency England in subtle ways.

While Austen is often condemned for not recording the remarkable socio-political events of her period, hints of the changes taking place in England are translated into the shifting details of English fashion as a consequence of the French Revolution. Sarah Jane Downing notes in *Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen* that the delicate muslins that governed the female fashions of the era—mentioned by Austen when she describes the gowns worn by her protagonists to dances—were imported from revolutionary France, the neoclassical design inspired by the political desire to imitate the democratic republics of the ancient world, and the military flourishes a response to the long period of war in which more British servicemen died than during the First World War (10). Trains also became a facet of gowns for day and evening wear in 1800 as noted by Oliver Goldsmith:

> As a lady's quality or fashion was once determined here by the circumference of her hoop, both are measured now by the length of her tail. Women of moderate fortunes are contented with tails moderately long but ladies of true taste and distinction set no bounds to their ambition in this particular (qtd. In Downing 18)

Men were not enthusiastic about this new feature as it was easy to trip over the long trains, but many gowns allowed the trains to be pinned out of the way like those of Catherine and Isabella Thorpe, who "pinned up each other's train for the dance" when they were dancing at the assembly rooms in *Northanger Abbey* (*Northanger Abbey* 20).

Downing remarks that the simple muslin had become the foundation of female dress, and industrialisation had made it affordable to everyone—a democratization of fashion. She remarks that while once this was considered to be an advantage, by 1813 it was criticized as "no distinction exists between mistress and maid except that one wears a cap." The upper classes disapproved of lower-class women emulating their fashions, and in *Mansfield Park* the housekeeper is praised because she "turned away two housemaids for wearing white gowns" (Downing 27). In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland and Eleanor Tilney are fascinated by Ann Radcliffe's novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Miss Tilney always wears white like Radcliffe's heroine, Emily. Austen uses the colour white, especially white muslin, in her parody of the Gothic form in *Northanger Abbey*, where Henry Tilney is perceived as sensitive and heroic by Catherine because he understands muslins. Catherine, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, wondering what to wear for her next ball, "lay awake ten minutes on Wednesday night debating between her spotted and her tamboured muslin," and the author went on to observe that "it would be mortifying to the feelings of many ladies, could they be made to understand how little the heart of man … is biased by the texture of their muslin, and how unsusceptible of peculiar tenderness towards the spotted, the sprigged, the mull or the jackonet" (*Northanger Abbey* 45). Like other men, Henry Tilney was quite unaware of the intricacies of female dress

but muslins were such a vital topic of conversation among ladies that he enters good-naturedly into a discussion with Mrs Allen on the subject.

Figure 1: *The Advertisement for a Wife* (from Thomas Rowlandson 's *The Third Tour of Dr. Syntax*)

[For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation.]

Byrde records that women who were active in London society or who visited stylish centres were expected to transmit detailed accounts of the ensembles of the most fashionable ladies that they had seen (Byrde 9). For example, Austen makes Mrs Gardiner in *Pride and Prejudice* "distribute her presents and describe the latest London fashions" to the Bennet household as soon as she arrives at Longbourn (*Pride and Prejudice* 144). Figure 1 demonstrates the competition among women for the most eligible bachelor, which made it necessary for each woman to strive to be the most fashionable and beautiful. Dancing was

supremely important to ladies in the Regency period because there were very few chances to meet bachelors like Mr Darcy, and the competition in the marriage market made every ball or assembly an opportunity to showcase the ideal gown in order to outshine the other bevy of beauties.

III

"All the things she envied"~ The Custom of the Country

The importance attached to dress and ornament as a way of female self-display at dances and other social occasions in order to find a desirable partner is skilfully demonstrated in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), a novel primarily about the heroine's conspicuous consumption. Marriage and human relationships follow the dynamics of consumer goods and are depicted as profit-making, advantageous investments. In *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, Katherine Joslin writes, "Her most American novel, *The Custom of the Country*, features an acquisitive heroine, Undine Spragg, whose family money has come from an invention. Even her name comes from "*un*doolay, the French for crimping" and its association with her grandfather's patented "hair-waver" (80). Ariel Balter writes that Undine is characterised "both as a consumer and a consumer good" (20). Through the course of the novel, Undine traverses a path of self-objectification and self-aggrandizement through her compulsive competitive consumption of expensive objects as a marker of her own stock in and domination over the ultimate social frontier which is the New York elite society.

Undine Spragg, in *The Custom of the Country*, converses with her sumptuous clothes while preening in front of the mirror. She hails from the Midwest, but is living in the Stentorian Hotel in New York. The novel begins with Undine attempting to make a grand entrance into Old New York society by choosing the "right" dress to wear for the dinner invitation she has received at the Fairfords. Although she has been living for two years near Central Park, this is the first invitation she has received from the New York social elite, and it serves as the first real opportunity she has had to make her mark on the New York aristocracy. Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes Undine as "initiative run amuck. Undine is the spirit of competition embued with a voracious appetite" (Griffin 253).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton says that an activity that was central to her idea of self was dressing nicely (like her well-dressed mother) and this is shared by her heroine, Undine. This process is directly related to Judith Butler's notion of gender and performativity as outlined in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), where she describes gender as the reiterations of specific behaviour that defines class and gender identity. Butler argues that gender is defined through action, through iterations of making up and dressing up, a ritual she terms performativity: "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (33). Undine is defined by such performativity; she inspects garments in front of the mirror to gauge whether she should buy them and builds her sense of self on the clothes she wears and the objects she purchases. As a child she had realised that her "chief delight was to 'dress up' in her mother's Sunday skirt and 'play lady' before the wardrobe mirror," and we see Undine engaged in this form of "play" through the rest of the novel (Wharton 22). In the first scene where we encounter Undine, she is dressing before her pier-glass

mirror, and this reflection of herself in her beautiful clothes is symbolic of preening and shopping. This appreciation by a woman of herself in new garments has now become the principal ritual of shopping for clothes with the advent of department stores. Undine is, "in the eyes of her family, already a product" (Joslin 52), and she fashions herself into a stylish product by dressing à la mode.

Wharton describes Undine as "fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative" (19), and Joslin says that this mixture of self-assurance and uncertainty captures Wharton's idea of the American character: "It is the custom of an American, as she put it, to model oneself on the last person met, so that performances mimic observed behaviour" (109). It is the combination of confidence and doubt—doubt that her current husband cannot give her the same material luxuries that a richer man out there can and confidence that she can have the richer man as her next husband—that gives Undine the impetus to extend her penchant for shopping for beautiful clothes to shopping for richer husbands. In the consumer society of America, where rampant consumerism is the "custom of the country," the domestic sphere is inseparable from the business realm, and by extension, the desire for love and companionship is indivisible from the desire for consumer goods.

This interdependent relationship of love and money is best portrayed in Undine's marriages. *The Custom of the Country* represents marriage as a contract enacted between two people for mutual monetary gain. Almost every marriage Wharton documents is a business transaction. The reality behind society marriages is revealed in Ralph Marvell's reflections: "Marry—but whom in the name of light and freedom? The daughters of his own race sold

themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange" (Wharton 78). Divorce assists the plot of *The Custom of the Country* by allowing Undine to scout out a richer husband. She starts her trajectory as the clandestine bride of a young and not yet successful Elmer Moffatt, goes into elite New York society as the bride of Ralph Marvell, finishes her social rise in a marriage to the French aristocrat Raymond de Chelles, and lucratively completes her social and financial climbing agenda by remarrying Moffatt, who has now made his fortune in railroads. Once she successfully sells herself into profitable marriages, she sinks into ennui and starts shopping again; the systematic acquirement of things serves as consolation. After all, it is partially the clothes she wears that make her social rise comparatively smooth. Because the mass production and affordability of garments makes sumptuary values difficult to interpret, Undine finds New York high society economically and socially fluid enough for her to navigate. Her physical beauty and the garments her father's money permits her to buy facilitate her journey from Apex to New York aristocracy.

Wharton makes the reader into a voyeur by letting him/her look into the goings-on in fashionable New York and titillates the reader's desire for consumer products. She sanctions the consumer culture that she critiques by seducing the reader with detailed descriptions of the leisure class. In this sense, *The Custom of the Country* serves as a kind of commodity itself due to the enticing advertisement for how the rich live and what luxuries their money can buy for them. The reader basks in the fantasies of what it would mean to belong to the leisured society. Wharton's Undine serves as a realistic placeholder for a Midwestern audience; her wants stand in for the desires of the reader and by her social rise into the rarefied circles of New York and Paris

creates potential desires for the reader. Wharton herself was raised in the closed leisure class of New York and can comfortably draw scenes capable of alluring the reader into the captivating realm of wealthy, upper class New York. To Undine, "All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene" (Wharton 37). Elaborate descriptions of aristocratic New York and Paris abound in *The Custom of the Country*; clothes, restaurants, classy haunts, furniture, art of the rich and elite are detailed by someone who is obviously familiar with the lifestyle. Descriptions of lunches at the *Royal* (394), dinner at the Nouveau Luxe or Café de Paris, or a play at the Capucines or the Variétés (282) and lyre-backed chairs (414) seduce the reader.

Wharton features Undine on shopping trips, especially on her honeymoon with Ralph Marvell. He wishes to share his pleasure in the beauty of the European countryside with her, but Undine is resolute about visiting cities where she can show off her clothes to the best advantage. He tells her mockingly, "You poor darling! Let us, by all means, go to the place where the clothes will be right: they are too beautiful to be left out of our scheme of life" (Wharton 145). In Paris, Undine makes a "round of the rue de la Paix" and does not agree to go with Ralph to classical performances at the Français where, as she scornfully remarks, "they walk around in bath towels and talk poetry" (Wharton 174). Clothes always have the upper hand where Undine is concerned and rule her imagination: "Early and late she was closeted with fitters and packers—even the competent Celeste not being trusted to handle the treasures now pouring in—and Ralph cursed his weakness in not restraining her" (Wharton 181). Undine purchases her

wardrobe from the stylish rue de la Paix, and proves to have as good a mind for business as her father when she is adept at bargaining for lower prices on labour and materials.

The Custom of the Country records the conversion of human relations, including sexual desire, into business dealings, and shows that the unbridled consumerism that is custom of the country can gradually become a tyranny of things for the bourgeoisie. Undine is mesmerized by "all the things she envied" and conforms with the custom of her country by her relationship to the products she desires and becomes able to purchase (Wharton 561). Towards the end of the novel, Wharton writes, "She knew her wants so much better now, and was so much more worthy of the things she wanted" (Wharton 562). Elmer Moffatt, her first husband, who has now become very wealthy, is the man who can give her those things that she feels herself worthy of. He too, like Undine, values objects over anything else. He proposes to Undine a second time, but this time his desire for her is propelled more by her association with things that signify social class than her beauty or her personality" "'You're not the beauty you were,' he said irrelevantly; 'but you're a lot more fetching'" (Wharton 568). The Boucher tapestries and the Van Dyck paintings of de Chelles, as well as Undine's familiarity with the performance of the "shades of conduct, turns of speech, tricks of attitude" symbolizing aristocracy make her a desirable object to Moffatt (Wharton 568).

Undine claims that she likes "to see such things about her—without any real sense of their meaning she felt them to be an appropriate setting of a pretty woman, to embody something of the rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed" (Wharton 548). For Undine, as an American, worth is inherent in the possession of things. She finds satisfaction in haphazardly collecting beautiful objects by the purchasing power of money, not just because of

the context or the socio-cultural background of the objects, but because handsome objects are the fitting background for a woman of her beauty. “To have things always seemed to her the first essential of existence” (Wharton 537). Being surrounded by gorgeous things gives Undine the associated sign-value that she craves and also strengthens her anxious sense of her own worth.

Undine has no sense of self divorced from her possessions. She can only understand herself in the approval she gleans from other people. Undine wants anything that will make her be accepted into high society, and she equates respectability by the social approval acquired through one’s wealth and material possessions. Since what society regards highly desirable changes constantly, Undine’s desires are also constantly in flux. She marries each husband hoping they will be able to fulfil her desire for wealth and social status. Undine gradually learns how to talk with her things, chiefly the clothes and jewellery, and her proximity to valuable objects makes her a more valued thing herself. “I mean to have the best” and “I know it when I see it,” Moffatt boasts of his taste (Wharton 538), and Undine and Moffatt together is the best pair because they each desire the same things.

Although critics often ascribe the failure of Edith Wharton’s characters to achieve happiness to dichotomous, even mutually exclusive causes—that is, to deficiency of character or to force of circumstance—the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu help to clarify the more complex cultural and literary project at the centre of Wharton’s work. Adopting a ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ approach to individuals and their environment, Bourdieu shows how the two work together to shape habitus—inherited and learned attitudes and behaviours—which is in turn self-shaping. Such a model also explains Wharton’s enactment of culture in her

own life; that is, her remarkable ability to negotiate the ostensibly mutually exclusive realms of high fashion and serious literature, of domesticity and travel, of the USA and Europe. Wharton's novels replicate the social hierarchies and taste born out of her habitus. Undine herself does not share the habitus of the Old New York/French social elite she so desperately wishes to join, and is therefore not restrained by the social conventions that limit Ralph Marvell or later Raymond de Chelles. In her desire for self-aggrandizement, she stands in the crossroads between the fields of a conventional marriage into high society and its associated stultifying social conditions, and a monomaniacal sense of entitlement to riches and social status. By refusing to subordinate her desires for wealth and social clout by accepting the narrowness of the former field, she gives free rein to her relentless ambition and participates in constructing her own social destiny.

Bourdieu notes in *Distinction* that capital is valued according to the cultural and social characteristics of the habitus and can be converted into other forms, which are valued differently at given points in time. Adherence to a specific class or group depends not only on the amount, but also on the structure, of capital possessed. Undine is, thus, like Elmer Moffatt, who is similarly free of any rigidities of convention dictated by his habitus. Undine lacks cultural capital, and cannot match or understand the aristocratic advantages enjoyed by and the love and respect given to art and culture by Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles. Attempting to compensate for this lack of cultural capital, she views marriage as a means to rapidly gain social capital by marrying men who enjoy both cultural as well as social capital—like her second and third husbands. However, while her string of marriages does give her the social mobility she craves, those in the position of social authority, such as the Van Degens, Fairfords, and Marvells, and later Madame de Chelles, condemn her and verbally dismiss her as a heartless, consumerist

social climber, and thereby deny her any symbolic capital. By marrying the nouveau riche Elmer Moffatt for a second time, the crass Midwesterner who had seemed perfect for her at the beginning, she resigns herself to be an outcast from aristocratic society, but with all the wealth and expensive objects that her greedy heart desires.

Although Undine likes Moffatt the best of all her husbands since he can provide for her the best, Wharton ends the novel with the suggestion that even Moffatt might not prove to be rich enough for Undine. Lacan describes desire as stemming from a lack that can never be completely filled, which is why desire is infinite. Since Undine's desires are constantly evolving, she can never be satisfied either, and she will desire continuously: "Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them" (591). The novel ends with Undine yearning for yet another thing she cannot have:

> But under all the dazzle, a tiny black cloud remained/ she had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife [because she is divorced]; and … she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for" (594).

IV

…kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever (100) ~ Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

The desire for *more*—more wealth, more social clout, more symbolic capital, more expensive things that characterises Undine—is echoed by Anita Loos's heroine, Lorelei Lee, in

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady (1925), called "the great American novel" by Edith Wharton herself. Lorelei reflects the same custom of the country—the consumerism that serves as a national characteristic in the Roaring Twenties. In a nutshell, the plot of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* follows Lorelei and her brunette friend, Dorothy, on a trip across Europe—paid for by Gus Eisman—and back to New York, where Lorelei marries Henry Spoffard and begins an acting career in the movies. Lorelei Lee operates through the ethic of acquisition, and Lori Landay describes her aptly as "an economic vampire, producing nothing herself yet profiting by siphoning off the surplus accrued by rich gentlemen" (Landay 56). She is characterised as the ideal consumer, and like Undine Spragg, makes herself into an expensive commodity by decorating her public image with the glitter of expensive jewellery.

Blondes was initially serialized as short sketches in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1925, itself surrounded by several advertisements. Lorelei is entangled in the mass consumer culture of magazine advertising, and the novel attends to this culture through her devotion to shopping. The advertising realm characterized women as voracious consumers and reinterpreted female dissatisfaction as desire for an unachievable ideal which could only be satisfied through consumer goods. Thus, the idea of deferred pleasure through the continuous purchase of articles emerged. Lorelei ostensibly performs as the ideal consumer, the passive gullible woman imagined by the advertising professionals. She shops for gowns to make herself happy; she has "reverence" for brands such as Cartier. However, in some other ways, she subverts the stereotype by functioning as a cunning consumer. Lorelei is always very particular about what she wants and makes precise plans on how to accomplish those goals. Moreover, she never allows emotions

to interfere with her decisions, and criticizes Dorothy for being swayed by emotional deterrents on prospective moneymaking chances. Even pleasure can act as a negative distraction from her carefully calculated goals: "I always seem to think that when a girl really enjoys being with a gentleman, it puts her to quite a disadvantage and no real good can come of it" (Loos 77). Since the only "real good" to Lorelei can be material gain, her nose must always stay to task to acquire the expensive gifts she hankers for. Sex, love, fun, lust—nothing is a good substitute for the satisfaction she gets from collecting jewellery, the signifier of conspicuous consumption which makes her public image conspicuously "valuable". Landay describes Lorelei's parlaying of her appearance for material gain as a transaction that "conflates economic exchange with economic desire" (Landay 55).

Nancy A. Walker writes that the "dumb blonde" stereotype established by *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* uses Lorelei's deceptively innocent comments as a tool for social satire (93). Lorelei and Dorothy are subjected to marginalization by the patriarchal culture, but they are able to overturn the existing power dynamic to exploit men such as Henry Spoffard and Gus Eisman by manipulating the naïveté expected of the "dumb" blonde. On the one hand, Loos is endorsing the system of conspicuous consumption including the gender dynamics at play in such a system through her blonde gold-digger. On the other she is celebrating Lorelei's awareness of herself as an image that needs to be manoeuvred and her power to play with that image in order to stage-manage her own game against the ruling society (Cella 47). Lorelei is a crafty, selfish, avaricious, persistent social climber, embodying the effects of a sexist society that celebrates female beauty. Loos satirises a gendered consumer culture that degraded the feminized consumer and applauded the male expert of production. Loos adopts the vernacular of the American

undereducated lower class to record Lorelei's adventures. Her educated readers will see through her descriptions, filled with misspellings, bad grammar, and malapropisms, to the reality and thereby feel intellectually superior to her. However, since Lorelei overturns the traditional stereotype of dumb women by being an expert at manipulating (rich) men, she proves she is not so stupid after all.

Susan Hegeman calls Dorothy and Lorelei "economic fetish objects" (Hegeman 548) that Loos uses to criticize capitalism in the novel and its film adaptation. In her Introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Regina Barreca builds on Hegeman's idea and says, "The men who perpetually orbit around Lorelei and Dorothy have two major problems: They have too much money in their bank accounts and too much time on their hands. Lorelei and Dorothy are able to solve both their problems at once. The two women soak up excess time and money by being excessive themselves – by embodying excess" (Barreca xii). In the consumer society of the 1920s, Lorelei demonstrates the continuation of the separate spheres ideology by embodying female consumption as opposed to male production. She commodifies herself as an expensive luxury good by spending the money earned by the "gentlemen" who keep her. During her trip to Europe, Lorelei describes Frenchmen analytically:

> French gentlemen are quite deceeving. I mean they take you to quite cute places and they make you feel quite good about yourself and you really seem to have a delightful time but when you get home and come to think it all over, all you have got is a fan that only cost 20 francs and a doll that they gave you away for nothing at a restaurant … So I really think that American gentlemen are the best after all, because kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever. (Loos 100)

She evinces a deliberate calculation of profit that inspired the now-famous song, "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend," which reveals Lorelei's careful analytical side. Although she enjoys attention and European chivalrous gestures, she knows that she needs to play her cards in a way that will get her more than twenty francs out of the gentlemen she spends time with. She does not allow herself to have pleasure in the short-term, and she reaps the rewards for her self-control by acquiring all that she had desired by the culmination of the novel—a rich husband, a career in movies, an extra-marital affair to prevent boredom with Henry Spoffard, and a potential plan to get rid of her tiresome mother-in-law. Unlike the constantly deferred pleasure of consumer desire, Lorelei deliberately denies herself pleasure to have sustained pleasure at a slightly later time. She does not succumb to the middle-class inclination to view deferral of desire for its own sake as a virtue; she exercises choice and agency in the face of the passive consumer of commodity culture.

In the beginning of the novel, a man named Gerry tells Lorelei that she should not dress fancy for their date and she interprets this as "Gerry seems to like me more for my soul." However, Lorelei, the unemotional strategist, responds: "I really had to tell Gerry that if all the gentlemen were like he seems to be, Madame Frances' whole dressing establishment would have to go out of business" (23). She immediately looks beyond the sentimental aspect of Gerry's comment—he appreciates her "inner beauty"—to point out the disagreeable monetary side of his outlook. For Lorelei, appearance and desire can never be separated, and both fashion and beauty are ruled by financial laws. In *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, Lorelei records, "Instead of always saying something complimentary to Dorothy, like, "Oh, you wonderful girl!" for instants, Charlie took to looking Dorothy over in his sober senses, and seeing her as she really was, and

making remarks like, “Go wash your face! You’ve got on too much make-up!” And Dorothy fell in love” (*Brunettes* 415). For a woman, being seen as she “really is” is not a triumphant moment, and Lorelei thinks that any romanticization of the un-made-up self is ill-advised.

Appearances and desires can never be distinct because the way one looks and the things one wants are always indivisible. Artifice is something that Lorelei accepts as the guiding principle of her life. Her most distinctive physical characteristic could also be potentially artificial. Loos never tells the reader whether Lorelei is a real blonde. Golden curls could easily be purchased through the hair-bleaching properties of hydrogen peroxide. In her history of American beauty, Lois Banner notes that “for centuries European culture had identified dark hair with passion, blonde hair with purity” (63). In the twentieth century, this brunette/blonde dichotomy reverses to attribute blondeness with a kind of sexuality, a particular variety of sexuality that is a participant in commodity culture. It does not really matter if Lorelei is a real blonde since she lives in a world of artifice anyway. By supporting the values propounded by mass market beauty advertisements, Lorelei endorses the conversion of beauty into an investment, of virtue into worth. She knows that her own beauty is her biggest asset and she not only takes pains to maintain it but also uses it as a commodity to negotiate business. She takes the promises of beauty ads at their face value and her acknowledgement of her beauty as her capital not only makes her a prostitute but also allows her to become an active agent in defining her fate. She subverts the celebration of women’s “inner” beauty that can shine through the use of the correct beauty products and uses her visible beauty as her fortune.

While Lorelei controls her desires so carefully, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* participates in consumer culture on various levels, especially by being used for ad campaigns that used the novel's success to sell beauty products. Jean Marie Lutes, in "Authoring G*entlemen Prefer Blondes*: Mass-Market Beauty Culture and the Makeup of Writers," records the different ad campaigns that incorporated Lorelei into their ads. Armand Complexion Powder's ad in 1929 asked "Which of These Alluring Types Are You?" where one of the eight "types" was Lorelei. The brand suggested that women who purchased it could look like Lorelei, with the caption under her deceptively demure face reading "Blonde and aggressive, she 'gets her man'" (qtd. in Lutes 441). Lux soap had a campaign featuring Alice White and Ruth Walker, both of whom worked in an early film adaptation of the novel. The caption under the still reads: "Alice White and Ruth Taylor—filmed in Anita Loos's blonde saga. It was just such trifles as those worn by Ruth Taylor that made cleansing a hard problem for the movies, until they all decided to insist upon Lux!" (*The New Yorker*, February 25, 1928, 35).

Lorelei's idea of education is settled in the realm of consumer culture; her desire for being "educated" is synonymous with her desire for beautiful jewellery, dresses, and money. When Lorelei is first introduced to the reader, she is a kept woman whose main "patron" is Gus Eisman, "known all over Chicago as the Button King." Lorelei remarks, "He is the gentleman who is interested in educating me, so of course he is always coming down to New York to see how my brains have improved since the last time … So of course when a gentleman is interested in educating a girl, he likes to stay and talk about the topics of the day until quite late" (12-13). She continues to tell the reader the nature of these late-night talks and makes the link between money and education. She writes, "I will be quite glad to see Mr. Eisman when he gets in.

Because he always has something quite interesting to talk about, as for instants the last time he was here he presented me with quite a beautiful emerald bracelet" (16). Lorelei thus equates interesting conversation with expensive presents. There are numerous such passages in the novel connecting education with money and costly items. Lorelei feels her birthday was "depressing" because Eisman did not "educate" her well enough, meaning that the diamond he gave her as a present was too small. She laments:

> Well my birthday has come and gone but it was really quite depressing. I mean it seems to me a gentleman who has a friendly interest in educating a girl like Gus Eisman would want her to have the biggest square cut diamond in New York … I was quite disappointed when he came to the apartment with a little thing you could hardly see. So I told him I thought it was quite cute, but I had quite a headache and I had better stay in a dark room all day … But he came in at dinner time with really a very beautiful bracelet of square cut diamonds so I was quite cheered up (18-19).

The education that Lorelei's gentlemen friends are willing to give her is restricted to enabling her to commodify herself for their pleasure, not for the improvement of her mind. Lorelei is only learned in the arts of conning men with her looks in the socio-sexual market, and she is happy to "refine" herself through the costly objects she wants and further study the value system of consumerism.

To Lorelei, being "educated" is to implement a careful strategy designed to fulfil her needs for expensive gifts from gentlemen, holding out for the best of gifts, which is marriage to the richest of those gentlemen who partake in her mission of "educating" herself. She also enjoys "educating" the wealthy men she interacts with in her own way. She meets a British nobleman,

who is known for his miserly ways, and decides to teach him the proper way to treat an American girl. Manipulative as usual, Lorelei arranges to send herself a bouquet of the most expensive orchids in London when he is visiting her, and pretends to believe that he had sent them to her. She hugs him in gratitude, flatters and massages his male ego to the best of her ability, warning him that

> he would have to look out because he was really so good looking and I was so full of impulses that I might even lose my mind some time and give him a kiss. So Piggie really felt very very good to be such a good looking gentleman … So Dorothy and I had quite a little quarrel after they went because Dorothy asked me which one of the Jesse James brothers was my father. (80-82)

Lorelei does not appreciate the orchids for their own sake but as an instrument for teaching Piggie that showering her with generous gifts will be a profitable business transaction for him since she will return the favour in kind—through suggestive sexual favours. Piggie seems to be a model student because Lorelei is soon relieved to leave her apartment since "50 to 60 orchids really make a girl think of a funeral" (89). She does not identify with the outlaw figure, like Jesse James, who opposes the educative programme of society and needs must rob a bank at gunpoint for money. Lorelei is a con artist who works within the societal framework: she has mastered the sophisticated art of trading favours to get ahead in the social ladder. Lorelei thinks it would be a good idea for "an American girl like I [she]" to "educate" the British Piggie, and she launches her plan to make him buy her a $7500 diamond tiara she had fallen in love with "because it is a place where I never really thought of wearing diamonds before" (68). Her plan works like a charm, of course, because as she had expected, "by the time Piggie pays for a few dozen orchids, the diamond tiara will really seem like quite a bargain" (83).

This idea of social mobility through education is an aspect of the American dream that Lorelei attempts to achieve—the concept that through a decent education any American could establish him/herself in a respectable place in the social stratum. To Lorelei, that place of respectability is at the top of the social ladder with all the monetary benefits attached to such a position, and she views anything that will facilitate her social climbing as education, including money transactions and sex. When she goes to Paris, the jewellery and perfume shops are the only "historical" sites that she is interested in, just like Becky Bloomwood on her trip to New York City. Lorelei writes,

> When a girl walks around and reads all of the sings with all of the famous historical names it really makes you hold your breath, because when Dorothy and I were on a walk, we only walked a few blocks but in only a few blocks we read all of the famous historical names, like Coty and Cartier and I knew we were seeing something educational at last. (94-95).

The Parisian historical monuments are represented only by the monuments to consumer culture to Lorelei. Like Undine Spragg, she is awed not by centuries of world history but by signs of capitalism and monetary success. She combines education, history and consumerism to suggest that all knowledge is essentially a commodity.

While she navigates her way in the world of sex and beauty, Lorelei not only stands for the commodification of sexuality, but also simultaneously represents the power that she can wield since this self-commodification is a very deliberate act to fulfil her desires. In her encounter with Sigmund Freud in Vienna, Lorelei demonstrates how consumer culture turns the

everywoman into a spectacle who lives life in the moment, without inhibitions, and is dedicated to consummating each desire as it occurs. Lorelei reports her meeting with Freud:

> So Dr. Froyd and I had quite a long talk … So it seems that everybody seems to have a thing called inhibitions, which is when you want to do a thing and you do not do it. So then you dream about it instead. So Dr. Froyd asked me, what I seemed to dream about. So I told him that I never really dream about anything. I mean I use my brains so much in the day time that at night they do not seem to do anything but rest. So then he asked me all about my life. I mean he is very very sympathetic, and he seems to know how to draw a girl out quite a lot. I mean I told him things that I would not even put in my diary. So then he seemed very very intreeged at a girl who always seemed to do everything she wanted to do. So then he asked me if I never really wanted to do a thing that I did not. For instance did I ever want to do a thing that was really vialent, for instance, did I ever want to shoot someone for instance. So then I said that had … So then Dr Froyd looked at me and said he did not really think it was possible. So then he called in his assistance and he pointed at me and talked to his assistance quite a lot in the Viennese language. So then his assistance looked at me and looked at me and it really seems as if I was quite a famous case. So then Dr. Froyd said that all I need was to cultivate a few inhibitions and get some sleep (Loos 156-58).

This passage captures Lorelei's reality of *always* living her dreams—which is a fantasy of consumerism where every wish is granted instant gratification. She is an expert consumer, articulate about her sexual and financial needs, and does not need Freud's psychoanalytic assistance to voice her repressed desires because she has no repression. Lorelei is an embodiment of pure consumption, and there is an insistence on surface without depth in her character.

At the end of the novel, Lorelei abdicates her image as a Jazz-age hedonistic, independent flapper of mass consumer culture and adopts the role of an old-fashioned, conservative sentimental heroine in order to acquire wealth, status, and all the expensive jewellery she wants in the form of her boring—but very rich!—husband, Henry Spoffard. Landay writes that for Lorelei, "who is the embodiment of self-commodification, becoming a film image is the ultimate step in capitalizing on her masquerade of femininity by extending it further into the public sphere" (Landay 61). She sells herself as a commodity to the highest bidder—Spoffard—and also to the film-going public as a beautiful image. Her business acumen pays off and she finally cashes herself in to enjoy the benefits of her hard labour in managing to acquire all the riches and social capital she had desired.

V

Commodity Worship and the Chick Lit Heroine

While Austen lays a very subtle foundation for the way prevailing fashion trends influenced the social life and romantic prospects of young ladies of the Regency period, Edith Wharton paints a vivid portrait of the importance that dress plays in shaping a woman's position in society. Undine Spragg is one of the prototypes of the competitive consumerist chick lit protagonist, similar to Janey Wilcox of Candace Bushnell's *Trading Up* and *Four Blondes.* Anita Loos's consumerist diva, Lorelei Lee, serves as a prototype for the contemporary chick lit heroine with a penchant for high fashion shopping.

The fashion and consumerism which are an integral part of chick lit novels have invited disapproval because these novels are cultivating female readers to develop a weakening femininity and making them victims of capitalism. However, it is an equally popular claim that fashion is one way in which women feel that they can express their individuality, and reinforce their selfhood. The book-cover designers adeptly anticipate the market for chick lit and create eye-catching pastel covers with cute drawings of girls in high heels, martinis and shopping bags. Thus, the consumerism begins at the level of production with the attractive cover designs. For instance, books like Cathy Yardley's *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* shows the nexus between chick lit as a manufactured product and its consumption as a fashionable accessory such as shoes, and which can function as both reason and reward for creative output. Chick-lit-inspired self-help, such as Jacqueline Williams's *The Handbag Book of Girlie Emergencies* (2002), conflates book with fashion accessory. Each cover of Lauren Weisberger's books has a stiletto shoe as the central icon, and the theme of the book is characterised by how the shoe is fashioned. For example, *The Devil Wears Prada* depicts a red stiletto with the heel in the shape of a devil's trident, and *Chasing Harry Winston* has a solitaire diamond ring circling the stiletto heel of a bright green shoe.

Some chick lit novels also serve as instructional manuals of fashion and material culture for the uninitiated. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea Sachs learns that Marc Jacobs items are known in the industry as "M.J.s". In Plum Sykes's *Bergdorf Blondes*, readers are taught the shorthand used by the Manhattan elite, and Sykes even includes a glossary to explain the terms most frequently used in the book. For example, "A.T.M." means a wealthy boyfriend; an

"M.I.T." is a Mogul in Training (leading to the desire to be an "M.T.M." where one is Married to Mogul); "The Fritz" stands for "the fucking Ritz," i,e. The Ritz Hotel, Paris (Sykes 96).

Juliette Wells, in her essay, "Mothers of Chick Lit?", poses the question: "Without shopping, could chick lit exist?" (62). Such is the centrality of consumerism in chick lit novels that many of them could accurately be titled, as was Sophie Kinsella's first novel, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. Many chick lit heroines cheer themselves up by buying expensive clothing, lingerie, indulging in expensive spa treatments, and adding to their often already impressive collections of shoes, handbags, and makeup. Some lucky heroines do not even need to spend their money; in *The Devil Wears Prada*, Weisberger's Andrea amasses her ultrafashionable ensembles from the "Closet" of goods there for the taking at the fashion magazine where she works. The description that Weisberger provides for the Closet is like porn for the fashionista:

> The Closet wasn't really a closet at all. It was more like a small auditorium. Along the perimeter were walls of shoes in every size and colour and style, a virtual Willy Wonka's factory for fashionistas, with dozens of slingbacks, stilettos, ballet flats, high-heeled boots, open-toe sandals, beaded heels. Stacked drawers, some built-in and others just shoved in corners, held every imaginable configuration of stockings, socks, bras, panties, slips, camisoles and corsets. Need a last-minute leopard-print push-up bra from La Perla? Check the Closet. How about a pair of flesh-colored fish-nets or those Dior aviators? In the Closet. The accessories shelves and drawers took up the farthest two walls, and the sheer amount of merchandise—not to mention its value—was staggering. Fountain pens. Jewelry. Bed linens. Mufflers and gloves and ski caps. Pajamas. Capes. … each bearing an exclusive label and a price tag of more than the average American's monthly mortgage

> payment. And then there were the racks and racks of clothes—pushed so tightly together it was impossible to walk among them—that occupied every remaining inch of space. (Weisberger 206)

Regardless of their source, however, consumer goods are essential to chick lit heroines' self-conception, self-presentation, and self-confidence, and writers commonly give as much attention to the obtaining and assembling of outfits as to the maintenance of faces and bodies. Fashion and body image are thus primary concerns of the genre, and consumption of some sort is almost inescapable. Contemporary women are reaping the rewards of the successes of the women's movement, and now have the financial capability to not simply yearn for but purchase haute couture, a phenomenon which is reflected in chick lit's name-dropping of designer articles. However, the commodity worship is more than a penchant for exercising the protagonists' earning potential but an integral aspect of their self-fashioning: the clothes and accessories do make the woman.

In accordance with this idea of creating a public image for oneself, Rachel Bowlby in *Shopping with Freud* argues, "All the world's a showroom, every man or woman is an advertisement for himself or herself, aiming to 'impress' and please his or her consumers. By the same token, everyone is also, in relation to everyone else, a consumer, taking in as well as giving off impressions; 'paying' or withholding his or her attention and interest" (Bowlby 95). Chick lit being a genre which is so focused on women's body image, dress and fashion become a way of exerting control over one's identity and making a positive impression. In *Fashion, Culture, and Identity,* Fred Davis declares that clothing is "virtually a visual *language*, with its own distinctive grammar, syntax, and vocabulary" (Davis 3). He believes that clothes can

clearly "speak" of who we are and want to be seen as while concurrently or on the other hand proving an impression that simply hints at more than it can actually communicate (Davis 3).

Fashion can be thus seen as a "quasi-code," which, while it needs to refer to the conventional visual and tangible symbols of a culture, maintains an amorphous ambiguity, so that the meanings suggested by the different combinations and variations of the code's key components (fabric, texture, colour, pattern, volume, silhouette, and occasion) are always in flux (Davis 5). One cannot assign specific meanings to clothing anyway since the ensemble which "says" something now will "say" something very different next year and another thing two years later. Davis thinks that "in semiotic terminology, the clothing sign's signifier-signified relationship is quite unstable": the meaning of clothing is cultural (Davis 9). Style does not mean the same thing to all members of a certain society, and therefore, what one wears plays an important role in a symbolic upholding of class and status boundaries in society. Dress can address basic sociological characteristics of a person for which Western culture has ascribed different valuations—i.e. age, gender, class, race, physical beauty, which can be termed *master statuses* (Davis 26). In this sense, then, dress functions as a visual metaphor for identity, and signifies the culturally coded ambivalences of Western society that resonate within and among identities (Davis 25). He writes that fashion has been analyzed by Simmel (1904) "as the social by-product of the opposition of processes of conformity and individualism, of unity and differentiation, in society" (Davis 23).

In *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson agrees with Davis that clothes, due to the intimate relationship they have with our bodies and our selves, communicate with the outside

world, form a "language" which can express our "psychology" (Wilson, Foreword, vii). She describes modern individualism as an exaggerated yet fragile sense of self, characterised further by an anxiety of not sustaining the autonomy of the self. This fear of self-annihilation is staved off by the way we dress; our sense of style serves as an instrument of stabilization for our identities. It also functions as a bridge to connect individuals with their social group (Wilson 12). In the city, as Simmel had noted, an individual continuously interacts with strangers and needs to survive by manipulating the self. Wilson notes that fashion is an "adjunct to this self-presentation and manipulation. It is the imposition of this newly found self on a brutally indifferent and constantly fluctuating environment" (Wilson 138). Thus, the urban social conditions produce an amplified sense of individuality within the overpowering milieu of a metropolis, and fashion and adornment become the media through which urban chick lit heroines navigate the rival concerns of expressing their individuality and blending into the crowd. Fashion, therefore, becomes an indicator of the relationship between society and the individual, a way to maintain the shaky balance between standing out and fitting in.

This dichotomy between self-display and conformity can be negotiated by the use of *play* where one can perform a different identity by sporting a new style of dressing. Lorelei in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is a master of the art of performing identity. Her facade of über-femininity is further supported by her demure style of dressing when she is being wooed by Henry Spoffard. In *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, Joanne Hollows writes that "if our sense of who we are increasingly comes from what and how we consume, then this makes people aware that our identities are not fixed but something we can *play* with, construct and reconstruct through our use of commodities" (Hollows 132). As an instance of how the socio-

cultural milieu dictates fashions and tastes, Hollows contrasts the New Look attire launched for women by Christian Dior in 1947 with the more mannish attire during the war years. She notes that "the New Look silhouette consisted of rounded shoulders, a close-fitting bodice emphasising the breasts, a tiny nipped-in waist and long full skirts …. The stiletto heel was also introduced as an 'intrinsic element' of the New Look, and worked to emphasize the bottom and breasts. … the New Look was a return to a 'true' femininity which had been masked by the masculine war-time fashions" (Hollows 148-9). The introduction of the New Look allowed women to "play"—although in a very limited way—with their identities because they could now dress as both "the dutiful homemaker and the tempting siren" (Hollows 150). This element of play, a variation of dressing up in a way, allows chick lit protagonists to control their identities and the image that they wish to project of themselves to the world at large.

VI

I shop, therefore I exist

"I love new clothes. If everyone could just wear new clothes every day, I reckon depression wouldn't exist anymore." (Kinsella 171)

The female protagonist, Rebecca (Becky) Bloomwood, in Sophie Kinsella's novel, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2001), exemplifies contemporary capitalistic society's acquisitive materialism; she is a consumer with a fashion fixation, enthralled by the Marxian mysterious powers of the high-fashion designer articles she purchases. The novel also showcases Jean Baudrillard's idea, elaborated in *The System of Objects* (1968), that advertisements teach consumers that they need to purchase commodities which will reflect their personalities. Baudrillard claims that the act of personal choice is significant:

> The most important thing about the fact of choosing is that it assigns you a place in the overall economic order. … [C]hoosing such and such an object in order to distinguish oneself from other people is in itself of service to society. Clearly personalization'…[helps to] integrate persons more effectively (141).

Bourdieu's theory of distinction is also apt here since he claims that one's taste is shaped by one's habitus and is a mark of one's status: "taste classifies and it classifies the classifier" (6). The hierarchical structure of taste differentiates the individual from other consumers, and conveys a certain class position. Thus, a Prada bag would imbue one with a higher class status than that of a standard department store. Becky Bloomwood illustrates this idea as she is in a continual process of buying the trendiest thing on the market to create a newer, more improved version of herself. Like most chick lit heroines, Becky enjoys the thrill of the new buy, and as is the case for most of them, her life deteriorates to a point where everything seems to be bleak, until she gives up her commodity worship to find happiness. Hence, while fashion allows her to keep up with the consumerist "Joneses" and briefly bask in the self-confidence it buys her, longer-lasting happiness is achieved only when capitalistic ambition is thwarted and the status quo is restored in the end.

Sophie Kinsella is the nom de plume of Madeleine Wickham, who, before she became a writer, used to be a financial journalist like her protagonist, Becky. She is now an extremely successful writer with the *Shopaholic* series as well as her other books being bestsellers, and in 2009 *Confessions of a Shopaholic* was adapted into a motion picture. The latest *Shopaholic* book, *Mini-Shopaholic* was released in 2010. *Confessions of a Shopaholic* introduces Becky Bloomwood, a young, white, woman working for a financial magazine in London. The novel charts her attempts to deal with a job that gives her no satisfaction, her incessant shopping

sprees, and her repeated avoidance of creditors. She plays into the Western stereotype of the woman as an obsessive shopper, and accords with the capitalist notion of consumerism as the way to status and social identity: "I've merely been succumbing to the Western drag of materialism—which you have to have the strength of elephants to resist" (Kinsella 65). In the latter half of the novel, after being bothered continually by bills from creditors and the threat of a serious financial crisis, she stops shopping and takes refuge in her parents' home for a few days. The turning point of the plot is when Becky gets involved in the financial troubles of her parents' neighbours, the Websters, who have been deceived by an investment company and lost a large amount of their lifetime savings. She writes a newspaper article about the Websters' situation, and as a result of the ensuing publicity, is asked to appear on a television show. Because of her spectacular performance on the show, she is offered a long-term stint as a TV financial advisor, and is also seen as a woman of both style and substance by Luke Brandon, her love interest, resulting in a happy ending.

Confessions of a Shopaholic demonstrates Karl Marx's idea of commodity fetishism as the designer articles possess human-like characteristics for Becky. In *Capital*, Marx argues that commodities acquire a "mysterious" power when they circulate with other objects of value in a system of exchange, and manifest this mystical and seemingly inherent power in the desire that individuals participating in a capitalist economy feel to possess the commodities (Marx 164). In anthropology, fetishism alludes to the belief of some culture that divine/mystical powers exist in inanimate things, for instance, in totems. Marx uses this concept of fetishism to describe the "magical" quality of the commodity: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical

subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx 163). He elaborates on those "metaphysical subtleties" to conceive of what he calls "commodity fetishism."

Marx elucidates that the commodity remains a simple object while it is tied to its use-value, but as soon as it enters into the system of exchange it becomes a commodity because the real labour exerted to create the product is alienated from the finished product. The capitalist makes profit from the surplus value created by the difference between the exchange-value of the commodity and the joint value of the objects' use-value and the labourer's wages. In a capitalist society, people treat commodities as if value was inherent in the objects themselves, and this leads to the social relations between people becoming "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 165). Becky suffers going into extreme debt while looking for the next retail fix for her troubles, and finds happiness only at the end of the novel once she gives up her conspicuous consumption. The obsessive consumer culture shapes a new system of social value, where Becky's worth in society is determined by her level of commodity consumption. However, her income cannot support her extravagant lifestyle, thus leading to constant indebtedness in the pursuit of consumerism-induced happiness.

In modern acquisitive society, sociability implies an eagerness to be devoted to the logic of consumption, which means that a failure to relate through objects makes one anti-social. Moreover, the enormous department stores which have become an institution in urban centres diversify the variety of goods for sale while encouraging consumption by the extension of credit. Becky's sense of security is threatened by the spectre of the Endwich Bank which haunts her throughout the novel. *Confessions of a Shopaholic* begins with an extension of credit to Becky, an allowance which she proceeds to abuse through the book to end up in dire financial straits.

The bank encourages Becky's obsessive, credit-driven shopping binges: "We are offering you, Ms. Bloomwood—as a graduate—a free extended overdraft facility of £2000 during the first two years of your career" (Kinsella 1-2). Baudrillard blames this modern system of credit as a primary factor in modern capitalist society's insidious conversion of the citizen into a consumer. He calls it a "strategy of desire" (Baudrillard 156) and argues that the "*consumption* [of objects] *precedes their production*" (Baudrillard 159) because objects, which embody the labour required to produce them, can be accessed today without expending any effort to create/earn them. An individual's needs are created before the production of goods to fulfil those needs, and credit allows one to pay for the satisfaction of burgeoning desires and consumption of commodities to come in the future. In a primitive economy, production must precede consumption, but in a capitalist economy, the labour involved in producing the commodities is already hidden, and a line of credit allows the buyer an easy accessibility to commodities even before they exist. This strategy enables the buyer to indulge his/her desire for any object he/she fancies without the necessity of negotiating the labour involved in the production of the desired items.

Becky is very relatable to female readers because Kinsella's novel focuses on the couture yen which young, urban, professional women struggle to afford on their middle-class salaries, and her thoughtless conspicuous consumption allows the more cautious readers to bask in a vicarious retail-therapy-glow and indulge themselves in the fantasy of fashionably having one's cake and eating it too. Jessica Van Slooten in her article, "Fashionably Indebted: Conspicuous Consumption, Fashion, and Romance in Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* Trilogy" writes, "Becky's exaggerated irresponsibility, delivered by means of a confessional first-person narrator, prevents readers from taking her or her problems too seriously: a common reader's response would be "at least *I'm* not that bad" (220).

The novel itself is designed as a commodity to be fetishized and consumed by the reader. The cover design presents a cheerful pink background with a blue shopping bag on it, with tiny pictures of a shoe, a bag, an ornament, and a glove on it to give the reader a tantalising hint of all the stylish goodies Becky will be buying within the covers of the book. The British edition of the book is named *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic,* and has a pink cover with seven shopping bags on it, and the arresting tagline: "When the going gets tough—the tough go shopping…" The reader, who has already been attracted by the pastel-pink, female-reader-friendly cover in the bookstore, will be further enticed by wanting to share her own secret dreamworld with that of Becky Bloomwood, and pamper the hidden shopaholic in herself by proxy. Van Slooten accords with this idea and asserts, "the novels become objects of conspicuous consumption, allowing readers a 'safe' outlet for their own consumerist fantasies, reinforcing the luxury lifestyle as a means of creating identity and achieving success in both personal and professional spheres" (220).

In *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, Becky usually spends money on clothes and accessories to bridge over some unhappiness or dissatisfaction in her personal or professional life. Her consumption is a way for her to fashion a sense of identity and self-esteem by trying to achieve the kind of image she visualises for herself. Any unfavourable occurrence in her life, any situation which leads to disappointment would be a reason to shop and forget the frustration, just as any happy incident would make her shop to celebrate. One cannot count on society or other humans to never let one down, but one can always trust objects. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard asserts that a consumer often attempts to achieve a "kind of totalization by means of objects" in order to create a world where he can exert control over the signifiers and where the latter refer to him alone. This allows the consumer to establish a discourse which is accessible to

him when he feels vulnerable in a world where the tenets of the social discourse elude him and leave him feeling alienated (105). Becky can entertain an illusion that she has complete control over her life when she does the one thing she knows she enjoys and is very good at: shopping.

Becky buys things in order to serve some emotional goals, for the pure pleasure of losing the burden of the combination of work and love troubles within the confines of a clothing superstore. For example, after being fired from her job at Ally Smith on her first day on the charge of hiding a pair of zebra-print jeans from a customer because she wanted them herself, Becky has to suffer further humiliation when she meets her childhood neighbour, Tom Webster, who is with his fiancée (the same customer she was hiding the jeans from). Tom mistakenly thinks Becky has feelings for him, although she doesn't, and lets her down gently. Becky's sinking spirits lift when she realises "at least I've got twenty quid" (Kinsella 134). In characteristic Becky fashion, she starts to daydream about what she will buy:

> Twenty quid. I'll buy myself a nice cappuccino and a chocolate brownie. And a couple of magazines. And maybe something from Accessorize. Or some boots. In fact I really *need* some new boots. … God, I deserve a treat, after today. And I need some new tights for work, and a nail file. And maybe a book to read on the tube. (Kinsella 134-135)

Although this is only fantasy shopping, the items bear testimony to the personal as well as professional images she wants herself to have. The gourmet café fare will provide her with some high-class comfort food and the book and magazines will be escapist accompaniments which she can forget her disappointments in. The items she wishes to purchase from Accessorize are stylish things which will help her to create the glamorous image she wishes to show to the world, as a complete, professional, chic, self-sufficient woman who is not lonely without a boyfriend.

This conscious act of image-construction is apparent at several moments in the novel. However, beyond her psychological needs to shop, Becky is enamoured of the tactile experiences involved in the act of shopping. After buying a Denny and George scarf, Becky says:

> That moment. That instant when your fingers curl around the handles of a shiny, uncreased bag—and all the gorgeous new things inside it become yours. What's it like? It's like going hungry for days, then cramming your mouth full of warm buttered toast. … Everything else is blocked out of your mind. It's pure, selfish pleasure. (Kinsella 27).

She associates the pleasure from the purchase of designer articles with survival itself, equates food for the sustenance of life with shopping as manna for the soul. The film adaptation of the book plays with the "buttered toast" metaphor to make Becky say, "You know that thing when you see someone cute and he smiles and your heart kind of goes like a warm butter sliding down a hot toast? Well that's what is like when I see a store. Only it's better." Becky's commodity worship leads her to replace human relationships with fashion artefacts; the tingly feeling a girl experiences when a good-looking young man gives her an appreciative glance is the feeling Becky gets when she sees the window displays at a store—only it is, as she says, even better.

People often wonder about the purpose of life, but because the designer articles possess human-like qualities for her, Becky's screen avatar proclaims that, "We all have a destiny in life and since 14 I knew I was put on this earth to shop." In *The System of Objects,* Baudrillard writes that the ideal of consumption is founded on the substitution of the active relationship between human beings by a "'personalised' relationship to objects." The idea is that consumer products are so abundantly variegated that they can be regarded as "*complex* beings" in themselves, which

implies that the interaction between person and object in the buying process is tantamount to an actual *human* relationship (187). Every time Becky purchases a high-end designer article, she rationalises it to herself as an invaluable investment by saying that she would wear it multiple times to exercise its maximum use-value, although her actual motivation was to buy the product for the prestige its sign-value would accord her in the eyes of her equally consumerist peers. When she buys the Denny and George Scarf she imagines she will be known as the "Girl in the Denny and George Scarf" (Kinsella 14) to all and sundry because her constant use of the article will make it a distinct part of her identity. After buying three pairs of NK Malone sunglasses, she envisions her role as the "Girl in the NK Malone shades" (Kinsella 308), and has other similar projected images of herself as the "Girl in the Gray Cardigan" (Kinsella 61), and the "Girl in the White Coat" (Kinsella 153). Becky gives precedence to an identity as the wearer/owner/consumer of a fashion item instead of in terms of her relationship to other people, as a daughter, friend, or girlfriend.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption to prove one's economic strength and social status could also be one premise behind why chick lit heroines have a penchant for high end designer articles. Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* began in 1994 as a column in the *New York Observer*. The column's strappy sandal logo, modelled on one of Bushnell's own shoes, foregrounds the column's concern with surface appearance judgments among the Manhattan party-going elite. Upscale shoes, particularly the brand, Manolo Blahnik, work metonymically, as an expression of protagonist, Carrie's femininity and spiritual devotion to fashion. In the episode, "Ring a Ding Ding" of the television series, *Sex and the City*, Carrie discovers that she is going to be evicted by her landlord, cannot afford to rent a similar apartment, but has accumulated $40,000 worth of

Manolo Blahnik shoes. Similarly, Becky has a fortune in clothes, shoes, and accessories, but has no money to pay her creditors—until she decides to liquefy her assets at the end of the novel. In *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit,* Caroline Smith writes, "Calling to mind Lily's conversation with Selden [in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*] on her mortal fear of dinginess ("If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself"), protagonists struggle with assembling an exterior attractive to an upscale man and often incur debts for the wardrobe needed to sustain dating this type of marriage prospect" (12). Smith's thesis is in agreement with Veblen's assertion, that consumption is the by-product of an overriding concern with the maintenance and enhancement of social status.

The consumption of goods serves, in addition to the conventionally accepted function of satisfying needs, to indicate a person's level of wealth or 'pecuniary strength', and that is, in turn, a primary index of social status. The Veblen effect, involves recognising that the price of a commodity is a culturally significant symbol in its own right, and not merely an index of economic worth or utility. Following this logic, Manolo Blahniks are better than Payless shoes due to the brand and price alone. Also, according to Pierre Bourdieu, one's taste is a gauge of one's social status. Hence, as a mark of distinction, high fashion, expensive articles are better to make someone, especially the hero, "pay" attention to the heroine. The demand for goods may increase with price where the function of consumption is to manifest pecuniary strength [for example, the Birkin bag].

Accepting the logic of the claim that time is money, Veblen argues that wealth and leisure are alike in being symptoms of privilege and high status, and that conspicuous

consumption and conspicuous leisure are both ways of gaining honour through displaying waste. What he calls the leisure class is thus at the pinnacle of the system of social stratification and sets the standards which all below must aspire to:

> The leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore affords the norm of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale. […] The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to their ideal. (Veblen 51)

Thus, in Plum Sykes's *Bergdorf Blondes* and *The Debutante Divorcee,* the heroines show their pecuniary strength and social clout by holidaying in exotic locales and shopping at New York's version of Milan's *quadrilatero della moda*. They are friends with the Park Avenue Princesses, buy Chloe jeans for $325 a pair, ignore girls dressed in the previous season's Manolo Blahniks, and would only date an "'of' of New York. … [i.e] Princes Felipe of Spain, Pavlos of Greece, Max of Sweden, Kyril of Bulgaria…" (*Bergdorf Blondes*, 173). However, Veblen does not provide a basis for distinguishing traditional from modern consumer behaviour, and hence does not account for that insatiability and desire for novelty which is such a crucial hallmark of the latter.

Colin Campbell posits a theory of hedonistic conduct to explain current consumerist desire that explains Becky Bloomwood's obsessive need to shop and the pleasure Becky derives from the thrill of chasing any particular fashion item. In *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism,* Campbell calls it "modern autonomous illusory or imaginative

hedonism" (78). He insists that an experience itself is not the key to understanding pleasure, but that anticipation is central. Through the daydreaming encouraged by early nineteenth-century novels, pleasure was introduced into the normal process of imaginative anticipation of the future (Campbell 83). This was crucial for both modern subjectivity and capitalism. For Campbell, romantic daydreamers' embracing of fantasy did not just strengthen desire, but helped make desire itself a pleasurable experience. Although delayed gratification was frustrating for "traditional men," Campbell contends that "modern men" found it to be a happy hiatus between desire and consummation. Stories that circulate today increasingly feature commodities and are a central way in which fantasy worlds of consumer pleasure are sustained. Campbell explains modern consumer subjectivity by saying: "The essential activity of consumption is not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, 'real' consumption being largely a result of this 'mentalistic' hedonism" (89).

Symbolism and communication then, and not simply materialism, are the defining features of consumer societies. Becky Bloomwood thinks that all the things she purchases when in an emotional downturn are "necessities" without rationally thinking of the efficacy of buying them, but they *are* necessities to her in the sense of the emotional lack they fill up momentarily, the "mentalistic hedonism" they provide. She always needs more of the same "necessities" when the next moment of personal or professional trouble comes along. After her humiliating date with Tarquin, the seventeenth richest man in England, where he sees her going through his chequebook, Becky feels herself in the slough of depression:

> My head's aching and my eyes are red and I could really do with a drink or something. Just a little something, to make me feel a bit better. A drink, or a cigarette, or …

> I look up, and I'm in front of Octagon. My favourite shop in the whole world. Three floors of clothes, accessories, furnishings, gifts, coffee shops, juice bars and a florist which makes you fill your entire home with flowers.
>
> I've got my purse with me.
>
> Just something small, to cheer me up. A T-shirt or something. Or even some bubble bath.
>
> I *need* to buy myself something. I won't spend much, I'll just go in, and …
>
> I'm already pushing my way through the doors. Oh God, the relief. The warmth, the light.
>
> This is where I belong. This is my natural habitat. (Kinsella 216)

An impulse buy, and Becky's spirits lift, as the new article fills up that emotional lack which was triggering her self-doubt and self-pity.

Becky needs this retail therapy everyday, at least in some minor form like buying coffee and a muffin from a coffee chain, just to bolster her self-confidence and *joie de vivre.* Baudrillard argues that by personalization of the consumed goods the consumer becomes a subject but in turn also becomes objectified by economic demand (152). The act of buying idiosyncratic things which give one a distinctive identity subjectifies one as a consumer, but simultaneously objectifies one as another average customer in the system of economic demand and supply. Becky needs to constantly replenish her wardrobe because she cannot afford to live outside the fantasy of the fashionable diva she has created for herself to always reassure herself of her personal achievements, success and happiness. When she keeps receiving letters from the Endwich Bank because of her long-overdue overdraft payments, she knows that she is deep in debt, and realises that she is living considerably beyond her means. However, although she

knows that her fashionable lifestyle is not within the reach of her Prada-purse-strings, her answer for even being in debt is to go shopping.

Becky shops as that is the only activity that soothes her anxiety, but which serves to involve her in even greater debt. After she throws away the bank's increasingly terse letters requesting a meeting with her to discuss her financial situation, Becky says:

> Already my step's lighter and I'm feeling buoyant.
>
> Before long, I'm feeling completely innocent; purged of guilt. I mean, it's not my fault if I never read the letters, is it? … As I bound along towards the tube station I honestly feel as though neither of those letters ever existed. (Kinsella 146)

She has temporarily escaped from the reminders of her consumerism, but still needs to buy something to relieve her anxiety. However, this time she has to will away the pricks of conscience:

> … even as I'm heading towards the T-shirts, I'm not quite as happy as I should be. I look through the racks, trying to recreate the excitement I usually feel at buying myself a little treat—but somehow today I feel a bit empty. Still, I choose a cropped top with a silver star in the middle, and put it over my arm, telling myself I feel better already. Then I spot a rack of dressing gowns. I could do with a new dressing gown, as a matter of fact. … I can hear a little voice at the back of my head, like a radio turned down low. *Don't do it. You're in debt.*
>
> Yes, well, maybe I am.
>
> But quite frankly, what does it matter now? It's too late to make any difference. I'm already in debt; I might as well be more in debt. (Kinsella 217)

Becky does not have the strength to dissociate herself from her self-indulgent mode of living. It is only when she shops that the pleasurable feelings cover up the underlying anxieties about her financial and personal problems, and gives her momentary relief. At one point Becky says, "By the time I join the queue at Starbucks, I feel happier already" (Kinsella 135), meaning that she is cheered up just by the *thought* of the coffee she would be buying in a matter of minutes. She needs to fashion her identity through new and stylish clothes, accessories, and attitude in order to build a protective firewall against any threat to her personal and professional security.

Because of the ability to buy whatever she wants and to worry about paying it off later, Becky digs herself deeper and deeper into a pool of debt, and it comes to a point where even shopping, her go-to panacea does not remove the pangs of anxiety and unhappiness she suffers:

> Every time I add something to my pile, I feel a little whoosh of pleasure, like a firework going off. And for a moment, everything's all right. But then, gradually, the light and sparkles disappear, and I'm left with cold dark blackness again. So I look feverishly around for something else. A huge scented candle. A set of Jo Malone shower gel and moisturizer. A bag of hand-made potpourri. As I add each one, I feel a whoosh—and then blackness. But the whooshes are getting shorter and shorter each time. Why won't the pleasure stay? Why don't I feel happier? (Kinsella 217)

She carts these comforting purchases home, but when she wakes up the next day, she usually suffers from "the twin horrors of Guilt and Panic" (Kinsella 137) because she has already outlived the momentary happiness that escapism through shopping had allowed her. Baudrillard claims that credit allows agency to luxury-loving consumers, and Becky can pretend she has the means to seem wealthy due to the line of credit open to her.

Matters come to a head and Becky can find happiness—and readers learn a suitable moral about the pitfalls of too much shopping—only at the end of the novel once she gives up her conspicuous consumption. Caroline Smith argues, "Kinsella exaggerates Becky's consumer behaviours in order to satirize publications like *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire* that regularly encourage readers to replace their wardrobes with entirely new ones" (23). Baudrillard describes advertising as a referendum by which the mass consumer society can implement a continuous drive for self-approval (182). In *The Consumer Society* (1970), Baudrillard differentiates between men- and women-directed advertisements. While men are encouraged to take pleasure in women, women are tempted to take pleasure in themselves. Baudrillard argues that by promoting "the myth of *Woman*", the category of Woman as befitting the model of hedonism, only women are invited to indulge themselves.

The idea of femininity is sold to women, thereby ensuring that while women are occupied with clothing, perfuming, and grooming themselves to conform to the ideal of Woman, they are, in effect, *consuming* themselves through their "creation" of themselves as feminine women (Baudrillard 96). Therefore, the invitation inherent in women-directed advertisements is insidiously always already playing on women's subconscious because of the cultural construction of the image of the Woman. Popular culture creates an idea of the Woman as thin, beautiful, stylish, flawlessly made up, and perfectly turned out. This image is sold to women everywhere, and that in turn sells a lot of products so that average women can identify with the Woman they see on screen and on billboards. These public platforms are the signs which dictate the consumer products that the targeted market—namely women—need to purchase in order to access the public credo they seek to have. The use-value of the fashion and beauty products is

manifested in their sign-value as they facilitate the rights of entry to the status/prestige which the consumer desires. Thus, an individual's relationship with him/herself is rendered a *consumed* relationship.

When a woman tries to achieve the accepted code of femininity, her relationship with herself is objectivised, where the objects are the signifiers representing the ready-made signs of femininity (*Consumer Society* 96). Baudrillard adds, "There is a great difference between *having self-worth* [*valoir*] by dint of natural qualities and *showing oneself off to best advantage* [*se faire valoir*] by subscribing to a model …The latter is a case of "functional femininity" (*Consumer Society* 96). Thus, Becky Bloomwood, like many other female protagonists of chick lit novels, justifies unnecessary purchases by saying "I *ought* to act on my natural impulses and buy it. It would be false not to" (67). Mary Wollstonecraft had declared in her 1792 manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that women are socially programmed to play dolls with themselves in order to look prettier: "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison" (83). This ideology of femininity and female beauty still creates insecurity in women, which promotes shopping for fashion and beauty products to feel better about oneself and also more socially accepted as "beautiful." The objectivised relationship women then develop with themselves makes shopping a "natural" impulse for women, to deny which would then be "false" and against nature.

While discussing the advertisements which reduce women to "*function* as consumers … [and thereby] seal their destiny as serfs [to consumerist society]" (Baudrillard 98), Baudrillard

argues that advertising has an element of "hidden persuasion" by which it effectively manages consumers by feeding them fantasies of what they need and hence what they should purchase. It indirectly advises image-conscious women how they can improve themselves and feel happier, thereby encouraging "functional femininity". He writes that consumer objects can be classified into hierarchical categories of objects which then correspond to the categories of people who buy them, and in this way objects have the power to regulate and strictly control social meaning (Baudrillard 184). Thus, advertising creates a new social system where one's worth in society is determined by the things one owns, the individual's identity is achieved through the objects that are associated with him/her. In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard argues:

> Women are only called on to gratify themselves in order to better be able to enter as objects into the masculine competition (enjoy themselves in order to be more enjoyable). … If a woman is beautiful—that is to say, woman is a woman—she will be chosen. If a man is a man, he will choose his wife among other objects/signs (**his** car, **his** wife, **his** eau de toilette) (98).

Thus, a woman's status and worth are allegedly dependent on a man's approval, and that approval can only be acquired when one woman wins over another in a competition of beauty.

According to Baudrillard's logic, it would thus be the survival of the most consumerist. Becky would need to consume in order to be more attractive in Luke Brandon's eyes and be chosen over other women. The idea of the brand is of central importance in relation to this as it is the official "'language' of consumption" (Baudrillard 191) denoting the exclusivity of the item which is owned by a person. It also explains Becky's need to buy expensive branded clothes and accessories because it makes her feel confident and fashionable. She says:

> It's a habit of mine, itemizing all the clothes I'm wearing, as though for a fashion page. I've been doing it for years—ever since I used to read *Just Seventeen.*….T-shirt: Chelsea Girl, Jeans: Top Shop, …if I buy something from a shop that's a bit uncool, I cut the label out. So that if I'm ever stopped in the street, I can pretend I don't know where it's from (Kinsella 21).

In her passionate pursuit of consumerism, Becky herself becomes as much of an object as the articles she buys, completely identifying with the objects, and her relationship with herself is an objectivised and consumed one which is fuelled by the signs of the ready-made code of the consumer system.

The fashionable things that Becky fetishizes have a mysterious power over her that Marx critiques because of the human relationships it alienates, but Becky's antics in *Confessions of a Shopaholic* provide female readers with a fantasy of extravagance without real-life consequences, and have a mysterious power over them just like the commodities that are advertised within the pages. After an absorbing 250 pages describing Becky's hopelessly shopaholic ways, and the prospective financial ruin she creates for herself, Becky retreats to the safety of her parents' home. This is a regressive act where the grown-up protagonist still needs to be looked after and have her problems solved by her parents. However, once she is protected from the temptations of London's shop windows, she is able to get her life back on track on her own and save her financial predicament. She writes a newspaper article exposing a company's scam which ruined her parents' neighbours, and the resulting publicity lands her a job on television, where, ironically, she has to help solve other people's financial problems. The money she earns pays off her debt and ends the anxiety caused by her debilitating financial

irresponsibility. Luke Brandon sees her as a smart, desirable woman because of her knowhow on retail matters, and she can leave her dead-end job in the financial magazine and be the glamour girl she wants to be while working on TV.

The novel's objective seems to be to provide readers with the freedom to indulge their couture cravings without the punishment they would encounter in the real world. Van Slooten critiques the ending of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* because "Becky never *really* suffers privation because of her spending habits. Instead, her problems almost miraculously disappear, suggesting to readers that there are no real consequences to Becky's behaviour and providing readers with a 'safe' consumerist fantasy world" (219). However, it is the safety of this fictional world that attracts readers and enables them to indulge their pleasures in shopping without the repercussions they would face in life. Although readers can identify with the endearingly bumbling Becky who has no control over her spending habits, they are at the same time aware of the ludicrousness of the level of her consumerism. Caroline Smith argues that through Becky's comically exaggerated consumer tendencies, "Kinsella consistently deploys humor as a means of deconstructing the consumer ideologies of women's magazines, particularly the way in which they encourage excessive spending habits of female readers" (36). While readers cheer on Becky's side, they are simultaneously warned off of indiscriminate consumerism by the hazards of extreme consumption that Becky suffers throughout the novel. They are made aware that the fairy tale ending where the heroine is absolved of all debts and disappointments is purely fictional, and that they themselves have to have much more savoir-faire when making any consumerism-related choices.

In her *Reading the Romance* (1984), an ethnographic study of female readers of romance novels, Janice Radway illustrates how women, mostly housewives, use romance reading to control their identities and pleasures within the limits of patriarchal society. She calls this "*compensatory literature*" (Radway 95) for the romance readers, and in *The Romantic Ethic,* Colin Campbell refers to this vicarious pleasure as "a kind of emotional and imaginative decadence" (Campbell 176). The chick lit novel, an offshoot of the traditional romance novel and a genre aimed at young, urban, female professionals functions not as a compensatory mechanism but as a source of imaginary wish-fulfilment. The protected fictional world of the chick lit novel allows the reader to enjoy this "imaginative decadence," and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* serves as a kind of imaginative shopping extravaganza which soothes fashion cravings without touching the wallet. Readers know that at least their fictional alter ego might escape unscathed from any consumerist overindulgence which they would be penalized for in real life. Through "exercises in extrapolation" (Radway 168) similar to what the Smithton romance readers in Radway's study performed, chick lit readers thus effect an emotional escape into Becky's world where she is as flawed as they are, but there is the guarantee that everything will work out for her by the last chapter.

By "fashioning" her self-image in terms of her stylish accessories, Becky is a poster child for Marx's critique of the transformation of social relations into a relation between commodities, and her relationship to her possessions also exemplifies Guy Debord's idea of the "spectacle" posited in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord argues, "The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Debord 29; thesis 42). He critiques commodity fetishism and contemporary consumer culture, where society

suffers a degradation into becoming a spectacle, which is not "a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 12; thesis 4). The commodity reification manifest in Becky's relationship with her fashion accessories describes the total takeover of her life by her possessions. The designer products' "colonization of [her] social life" leads to her alienation from her friends and family because her catastrophic debt makes her ashamed to tell them the truth about her situation and she has to take refuge behind a ludicrous story that she is being stalked by a man, who in reality is her bank manager asking her to pay off her bank overdraft. Fashion consumption seems to be a vicious cycle because even while Becky is in extreme debt, she is still looking for the next retail fix to alleviate her troubles.

Another chick lit text which is an apt example of the commodity reification that Debord critiques is Lee Tulloch's *Fabulous Nobodies* (1989), a humorously acerbic satire of the Manhattan jet-set-wannabes who live for fashion and crave popularity and fame even if it is as transient as a small column in a weekly gossip magazine. While attempting to navigate the channels which might catapult her into a Fabulous Somebody from a Fabulous Nobody, the heroine, Reality Nirvana Tuttle, pays homage to her clothing as people in their own right. She compares the plight of her "frocks" to the suffering in Biafra and Tasmania. Reality reveals herself to be truly a citizen of Debord's "society of the spectacle" due to her lack of any sense of self-worth outside the realm of images of celebrity and fashion. Reality takes this fetishism to an extreme and has names for each frock she owns and carries on conversations with them. Shopping in vintage and thrift stores for second-hand designer clothes are her favourite activity, and her one criterion in a good boyfriend is "[t]olerance of window-shopping" (Tulloch 61).

Reality reifies her relationship with her clothes to an extent where she believes that they are actual people—"They're not just things. They're people. They need as much love and attention as pets or babies or starving children in Africa" (Tulloch 224)—and that they have human feelings:

> My frocks are very quiet in their closet. I know they are depressed. I feel sorry for them. Frocks are so *vulnerable*. There's all this talk about the poor homeless people and the starving farmers, as if they were the world's downtrodden. They're not the only ones. It's all out of proportion. Did anyone ever think of the frocks? There are more frocks on this planet than there are human beings. Yet you never hear a single word about the way frocks suffer. All this stuff about Biafra and Tasmania, or whatever, and you never hear a peep out of anybody about frocks. The poor frocks have to hang there and take it. (Tulloch 226)

Reality thinks her dresses—named Tallulah, LouLou, Gloria, Dolores, etc—have their own personalities and speak to her about their worldviews. Debord, taking a spin on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, asserts that reified people display the evidence of their closeness with the commodity. Similar to the exaltations of old religious fetishism, commodity fetishism also evokes such moments of fervent rapture (Debord, thesis 67). This fits Reality's feelings about her frocks to a tee because there are two major instances in Tulloch's novel when she goes into a rant about how clothes are mistreated by their owners and the way clothes scream their agony like the mandrake plant when it is uprooted (Tulloch 224). Her clothes being the one constant in her topsy-turvy life, they occupy the status of and receive the worship due to religion in the believer's social life, and Reality suffers pangs of agony on behalf of dresses in general when not

cared for by their owners to such an exaggerated level that she has to go "home and cry and cry for the pity of it!" (Tulloch 224).

Lee Tulloch's Reality Tuttle is one of the first chick lit shopaholic heroines, pre-dating Carrie Bradshaw of the *Sex and the City* fame and Rebecca Bloomwood of the *Shopaholic* series. Tulloch satirizes the 1980's Manhattan hip crowd where Reality's love for her clothes—to the point of naming each and having reciprocal conversations with them—and ambition to be known as a fashion icon makes her ignore everything else, thus making even Reality's name ironic. She is accompanied in her frivolous pursuits by her two best friends, Phoebe Johnson, who has devoted her life to being an Audrey Hepburn lookalike, and transvestite Freddie Barnstable, who has a little dog named Cristobal Balenciaga and a talent for discovering fabulous clothes. Reality is a "doorwhore" at Less is More nightclub, where she decides who is fashionable enough to be allowed entry into the trendy club. She makes her mission in life to appear in Hugo Falk's column in the weekly *Frenzee* magazine as a stylish woman making waves in the Manhattan nightclub scene. Reality Tuttle is a poster child for Baudrillard's idea of women having objectivised relationships with themselves, and she repeatedly claims she loves her "frocks" more than she loves people. Her obsessive love for her clothes and desire to be a celebrity for celebrity's sake with all the symbols of opulence which accompany it are shown to be overrated, ephemeral, and inane by Tulloch's sardonic humor.

Reality is so enamoured of celebrity status that her world revolves around being as fashionable as one, and trying to be a celebrity herself just for being as stylish as one. As a door attendant at the hip nightclub, she delivers the Gospel of fashion to all the wannabe entrants, and

believes she knows who the up-to-the-minute fashion designers and celebrities are whom people should try to imitate. She is in awe of Hugo Falk, gossip columnist of *Frenzee* magazine, who seems to be on hobnobbing terms with Faye Dunaway, and yearns to be written of by him so that she can be a Somebody that the club goers will want to aspire to. Living in a world ruled by images of fashion and celebrity culture as seen on TV, billboards, posters, cinema, and in fashion magazines like *Vogue*, she is the perfect example of Debord's idea that "Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behaviour" (thesis 18).

This "hypnotic behaviour" is what characterizes Reality, who directly contradicts her name by being detached from reality and living in a world of images, demonstrated in her blind desire for her one-week of fame till she is replaced by the next starlet Falk writes about in his column the subsequent week. She follows him around and caters to his every whim in order to get a mention in his weekly gossip column because

> [Hugo Falk] is *very* influential. He has the power of putting your name in print. *That* sort of power. It makes me go all goose-bumpy to think what this means. My name in Hugo's column would catapult my career into another dimension. It would lead to a million things for me. … If I were in Hugo's column, I'd feel more—real. … That's the word. I'd feel I *achieved* something if someone wrote about me. The problem is, I'm a stitch away from twenty-one. I try not to think about it, it's that serious. I've got to get my name in print by the time I'm twenty-one, or it will be too late. I'll be over before I've ever begun. (Tulloch 14-16)

Thus, Reality's hankering after a transient fame which can only influence the limited demographic of *Frenzee* readers bears testimony to her alienation from any sense of self-worth outside the realm of images of celebrity and fashion. She reveals herself to be truly a citizen of Debord's "society of the spectacle". Reality's character as a "spectacular" subject is further illustrated in her relationship with her clothing. As mentioned earlier, she frequently declares that she cares about her clothes more than she cares about other people, and also calls them her best friends (Tulloch 47).

Thus, Reality's life is entirely directed by fashion, and this is apparent from the outset, as she begins the account of her life so far by linking the year of her birth, 1968, with Yves Saint Laurent creating a ripple in the fashion scene with his first transparent blouse. She explains her unusual name by telling the reader that it was a result of her mother being a "New Age kind of person" (Tulloch 3) who named her during a "Marxist Feminist Environmentalist brain wave" (Tulloch 3) because the name had seemed to be fashionable at that moment. However, since Reality envisions herself as a "fashion goddess," she is very dissatisfied with her unfashionable name and wishes she had been given a name more befitting of how stylish she is: "Now Ines de la Fressange, *that's* a fashion goddess name, or Victoire de Castellaine, or Lisa Fonssagrives Penn" (Tulloch 3). Reality—her friends call her Really—has to experiment with different chic names such as Anouk, Coco, Anita and Celeste to find one which will suit her, but laments that: "There's not a single name I can think of that covers all the possibilities. A name that reflects my glamorous lifestyle and my seventy-two different fashion personalities" (Tulloch 4).

Reality is just like her best friend, Phoebe Johnson, who does not seem to have a individuality of her own but who, after having tired of impersonating Leslie Caron in *Gigi*, channels the style as well as the personality of the characters played by Audrey Hepburn. Similarly, Reality is also the imitator of widely different style icons and celebrity figures. She is unaware of this, and believes herself to have a fabulous sense of individual style until she has a party where the theme is Reality herself, but where all the guests arrive dressed as different fashion idols and celebrities. When Reality complains to Freddie that no one had understood that the theme of the party was coming dressed as Reality, Freddie answers by telling her:

> "It's a tribute to you."
>
> "What do you mean?" I ask him as I run my eyes over the crowd. "They all look like Suzy Parker or Gina Lollobrigida or Eva Marie Saint."
>
> "But, Really, that's the Reality look."
>
> "It doesn't look like the Reality look to *me*. Don't tell me I look like *that*." I point to a six-foot-four-inch drag queen with an Eva Gabor wig, tossing his long neck back and forth to "Only You Can Do It," which is now playing on the stereo. "I don't, do I?"
>
> "Of course, *you* don't look like that. …But you've inspired him. You're his muse. You're a *goddess*. I don't know what you're so bad-tempered about. It's what you've always wanted." (Tulloch 247)

However, this is not what Reality had wanted, to inspire people to look like everyone else but not like herself. A muse inspires original artistic creation, but Reality's self-confessed "seventy-two fashion personalities" have made a mishmash of any personality of her own. Reality's desire to be perceived as a fabulous style icon in Hugo Falk's column in *Frenzee* ultimately shows her how hollow her sense of style is. She frequently comments on how Phoebe is the "just a pale

imitation of another girl" (Tulloch 249), the other girl being whichever celebrity Phoebe happened to be "channeling" at the moment. However, at this party where all of Reality's guests come dressed as her like they were meant to but yet somehow arrive dressed as different pop culture icons, Tulloch subtly satirizes how the obsessive pursuit of and conformity to ever-changing fashion trends ultimately ends in a person losing his/her individuality. One's personality effectively becomes an amalgamation of those of several different people. Debord argued that the spectacle "is separation perfected within the interior of man" (thesis 20). If, as Reality declares, "Not only am I what I wear, but I am what I don't wear. It's fundamental" (Tulloch 276), it creates an existential conflict for her where she changes her Weltanschauung every time she discards a particular dress, and it is never fairly certain who Reality actually *is*. She is at a remove from a well-developed sense of interiority because her life and world-view is constructed on a series of changing images which dictate her actions.

Guy Debord begins *The Society of the Spectacle* with the potent thesis that "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord thesis 1), thereby critiquing the reality of modern life being an accumulation of spectacles. Lee Tulloch's *Fabulous Nobodies*, while a witty narrative of a girl in love with her clothes, also shows this reality of the contemporary capitalist world lived in subjugation to representation through Reality, who confidently states that "[t] he only thing that's constant in my life is my frocks' (Tulloch 249). It is not only Reality, but also her friends who have a similar worldview, where the commodity presides over their lives. This ethos of living in the thrall of the spectacle, where relations between people are superseded by their relationships with their things, demonstrates Debord's idea of the "becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world" (Debord thesis 66). Freddie worships designer clothes as much as Reality does, as does

Phoebe, as long as they are similar to the ones worn by the celebrity she is currently imitating. Brooke, a fashion-victim and devotee of the newly-made-famous Reality is literally victimized in a fire which results in all of Reality's clothes getting stolen while people evacuated her apartment. While Brooke is recuperating in the hospital, she is happy because her illness has made her lose enough weight to wear more fashionable clothes than her former figure would have allowed, and her only concern is for the recovery of Reality's lost frocks. Hugo Falk, Reality's new boyfriend, complies with Reality's obsession with her clothes by hunting down her lost dresses and buying them back as his act of love for her.

To sum up, Reality cements the foundational importance of the spectacle in today's world by casting fashion in an existential light: "If we didn't believe in fashion, where would we be? … No, without fashion, we might as well all be dead. As far as I'm concerned, fashion is like *oxygen*. You can't breathe without it" (Tulloch 71). With this statement, Tulloch satirizes the domination by the spectacle which is inherent in contemporary society characterized by intemperate consumerism, where people in the 1980's New York fashion culture are estranged from each other but in total harmony with their pet commodities, and where the commodity has taken total occupation of social life. The world one now occupies is that of the commodity, that of the spectacle.

VII

Conclusion

Just like Undine charms rich men to elevate her social position, Lorelei uses her abundant femininity to manipulate wealthy men into "educating" her with their wallets. Lorelei sets the

prototype for the chick lit consumerist protagonist. There is the first-person narrative style, the flawed, materialistic female protagonist, and the veiled references to sexual licence embodied in the "professional lady" of the title itself. Although Lorelei plays a foundational role in chick lit, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is usually an outlier to the chick lit genre as it is rarely cited as a predecessor. There are certain ways in which chick lit deviates from the determined gold-digging opportunist that Lorelei is. While Lorelei receives all her riches from her male admirers, chick lit heroines spend their own money—or use their line of credit—to purchase their luxurious goodies. Moreover, Loos insists on emphasising surface in Lorelei. The encounter with Freud confirms what the reader had guessed from the beginning—Lorelei has no repression, she does not have any depth. Diamonds, seemingly Lorelei's favourite gemstone, could stand as an apt metaphor for herself. A diamond cut too deeply allows light to escape from its sides, thus appearing dull, but Lorelei is as brilliant as a diamond that has as many shallow-cut surfaces as there are sides of her personality that she performs.

However, chick lit often uses superficiality as a semblance of depth. The chick lit heroines discussed in this chapter, Becky and Reality, are not single-mindedly chasing eligible, wealthy men, but claim to be career girls who are looking for love. Shying away from Lorelei's unapologetic materialist greed, they claim to have depth of character. However, both Reality and Becky are revealed to have no depth either since they forge relationships with their clothes and accessories and create their identities based on those objectivised relationships. Moreover, the humorous irony that marks the construction of Lorelei's character as well as all the incidents that befall her is altered in chick lit. While Loos shows Lorelei's triumph at the end of her gold-digging swathe across Europe, Tulloch, Kinsella, and Helen Fielding provide tongue-in-cheek

portrayals of the pitfalls of consumption. They depict the twenty-first century everywoman who naively buys into every false—and contradictory—ideology that self-help books and magazines sell to gullible consumers, and teach savvy readers how not to be as runaway in their consumerism as the heroine they identify with.

Caroline Smith's *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* demonstrates how chick lit texts question the "consume and achieve" promise offered by women's magazines and self-help books, and in doing so challenge the consumer industry to which they are linked. Chick lit authors respond in varied ways to the manuals they reference, and in doing so, complicate the readers' expectations about female consumption, women readers, women's writing, and popular fiction. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Helen Fielding portrays Bridget as an obsessive reader of self-help books geared at women and women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. Bridget is shown to be an "ideal" reader who unquestioningly follows the contradictory advice of the various women's manuals that she reads. She contradicts herself from one journal entry to another: she is satisfied as a singleton, she's dissatisfied being alone; she's happy with her weight, she desperately wants to lose a few more pounds. In Bridget's New Year Resolution list, she asserts, "I WILL NOT…Waste money on: pasta makers, ice-cream machines or other culinary devices" (Fielding 2). Although we rarely see Bridget using any household appliances (without making a terrible mess of it, and needing to be rescued by her friends), Fielding makes it clear in the opening list that Bridget buys into the domestic goddess ideal advocated by women's magazines, and purchases state-of-the-art household goods irrespective of how impractical and useless they may be for her kind of lifestyle. Through the depictions of this exaggerated consumer behaviour,

Fielding satirises the advice given by these publications and comments ironically on the protagonist as both a reader and a consumer.

Fielding deploys humour to highlight the ridiculous consumption patterns encouraged by women's magazines, exposing the unrealistic expectations they place on women. Similarly, Kinsella also exaggerates Becky's consumerism to an unrealistic level. Tulloch likewise exaggerates Reality's commodity worship humorously to underline her satire of the materialism of New York's fashionable crowd. Although readers can identify with the endearingly bumbling Becky who has no control over her spending habits, and the ditzy Reality who cannot shape her identity separate from her clothes, they are at the same time aware of the ludicrousness of the level of their consumerism and commodity worship.

"LADKI[11]" LIT: CHICK LIT FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

"Weddings are a huge event in India. Every woman aspires to nothing more than the perfect marriage to the perfect man" (*An Imaginary Man* 209)

"The Indian woman was carefully crafted within public cultural discourses to be modern, representing globalizing India, yet "Indian" by being anchored in "core" values" (Oza 22)

I

In 1991, the Narasimha Rao government began the process of economic liberalisation in India as a result of its financial crises and the resulting World Bank and International Monetary Fund directives. There were new approaches to policy on foreign exchange, banking, trade, and foreign investment (Jenkins 1). The new economic reforms increased India's contact with global capital though its exposure to foreign markets, and also allowed the middle classes to rise to the fore (Oza 2, 12). This new middle class now had access to foreign education, foreign consumer brands, as well Western values and lifestyle through satellite television. Globalisation was seen as an "amalgam of social, cultural, and economic outcomes resulting from the 'opening-up' of the Indian economy to the global market." Thus, globalization and economic liberalization were two sides of the same coin in India (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 4). This affected not only the nation's economic sphere but also its families and gender roles. The cultural homogenization thesis (Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* for example) proposes that the globalisation of consumer capitalism involves a loss of cultural diversity. It emphasizes the increase of sameness and leads to a loss of cultural independence. However, globalization of cultural elements and images enables local communities to create hybrid identities. Cultural globalization is not a uni-

[11] "Girl" in Hindi.

directional spread from the west to the rest of the world, but the exchange of cultural elements among different cultures, and adaptation of global elements to local contexts.

Globalization also opened channels for the circulation of global media including popular literature and culture, the upshot of which was the creation of a tension between the globalized production of images and the localized adaptation of the same images. A good example of this phenomenon is Indian and Indian diaspora chick lit, which features plots which have a lot in common with mainstream chick lit but are adapted into an Indian paradigm, complete with the popular Indian stereotypes to make it more relatable to "foreign" readers. Thus, Indian and Indian diasporic chick lit feature women from middle class backgrounds as they navigate their way through work, relationship, and family issues. While Indian chick lit portrays the cultural conflicts that Indian heroines face both in India and in the diaspora, it is interesting in that these Bridget Joneses sometimes cannot exercise the "choice" which their English and American counterparts can, a transnational aspect of the genre that I wish to examine here.

Indian chick lit is a branch of chick lit which, although still in its embryonic stage, inflects the genre with some regional flavour and demonstrates that middle class women in comparatively more traditional countries also experience the struggles involved in having it all. Indian chick lit contrasts how young women struggle to wed modernity with age-old tradition, often making an effort to break tradition completely. Authors of the Indian diaspora interpolate their own cultural sensibilities, perceptions and observations into their work, narrating their stories from a unique Indo-American/Indo-British point of view. One generation ago, marriage was the only way to independence from parental control in India. However, in the present day,

upwardly mobile middle class women are working, living alone in the cities, hanging out with friends, drinking, dating and having fun in spite of the enormous social pressure to get married—although this pertains mostly to urban women. Thus, one of the commodities imported as a result of globalization is Western culture, especially the Western idea of independence, mostly freedom from parental control and financial dependence, as well as marital and sexual freedom. Chick lit protagonists generally worship and emulate this *Sex and the City* idea of the independent (read freedom of choice) single girl living the good life in the big cosmopolitan city. With the influx of popular cultural media from the West, there is a fetishism of American culture and a commodification of American cultural values.

I suggest that the hybrid cultural formation that is post-1990s Bollywood also influences Indian chick lit as both foreground the neo-liberal subject of post-liberalisation India. They both use glocalization[12] as a framework to popularize the media to the target audiences. Bollywood shows the global and the local as interconnected forces and adapts global elements to local conditions. Shakuntala Rao argues that for Bollywood films to be popular to an Indian audience, it needs to reinforce "Indian" values amidst the global influences (1). For example, several Bollywood films are set in or shot in foreign locales, and it is considered chic to live or travel outside India as the global reach designates a higher socioeconomic class to the characters in the films. Characters speak English, wear Western clothing, the choreography is infused with

[12] *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words* defines glocalization as: "the term 'glocal' and the process noun 'glocalization' are formed by telescoping *global* and *local* to make a blend." The idea has been "modeled on Japanese *dochakuka* (deriving from *dochaku*, living on one's own land), originally the agricultural principle of adapting one's farming techniques to local conditions, but also adopted in Japanese business for "global localization, a global outlook adapted to local conditions." Also, it has become "one of the main marketing buzzwords of the beginning of the nineties" (qtd. in Robertson 28).

Western dance styles, and the music is heavily influenced by Western forms such as rap and hip hop. However, Rao observes that Bollywood adapts English to Hing-lish (a hybrid of Hindi and English), traditional Indian clothes are worn at least a few times to mark the national identity of the characters, and the Indian-ness of characters are stressed when the setting is foreign. Rao writes, "The active audience of Bollywood films in India does not passively succumb to complete Westernization, but rather successfully demands a compromise between Westernization and India: indeed, that Western adapts to India (Rao 1-2). I suggest that Indian chick lit writers also achieve a mean between a heroine's Indian and Western characteristics to popularize the novels in the Indian market.

Ronald Robertson argues that globalization cannot adequately describe the complex network of international dynamics, and glocalization is a better alternative to ground the contrasting forces of the global and the local. The glocal does not see the global and the local as polarities but as mutually complementary forces that jointly influence contexts and identities (Robertson 29). Post-liberalisation, i.e. from the 1990s onwards, Bollywood has established "a visual culture with a slick and sophisticated look reflecting consumerist lifestyles, appeal for affluence and modernity, and comprised a new group of heroes and heroines with beautiful toned bodies. Such globalized themes have been, concurrently, balanced with familiar 'Indian' themes of family values, emotional connections, and song-and-dance routines" (Rao 16). Chick lit represents similar themes of consumerism, a socially-directed idea of beauty, and a desire for wealth and modernity. This aspiration to "modernity" usually implies steps towards Westernization, but the tension between modernity and Indian tradition is controlled by finding a balance between the two thereby controlling the danger of over-Westernization. Globalization in

Bollywood seems to be broadly interpreted as "Westernization" and localization then implies Indianization. Rao's claim that "[m]edia representation can depict India's shifting relation with the world economy, but must retain its 'Indianness' in moments of dynamic hybridity" (6) can be applied to Indian chick lit, especially Indian diasporic chick lit.

Chick lit represents what Rupal Oza has called "the new liberal Indian woman" and this liberalization involves sexual autonomy and a consumer identity. As a contrast to the "Bharatiya nari" or a traditional Indian woman, the new woman is self-confident, urban, poised, with an aggressive sexuality (Oza 22). The anxiety of the globalizing nation was projected onto the figure of the new Indian woman, and reinscribing the newfound freedom of the sexually liberated new woman within Indian tradition was seen as an effective measure of controlling the borders of the globalizing state against Westernization (Oza 24). Oza writes:

> the new Indian woman had to be constituted through narratives of home and family that required a negotiation and balance between the new "modern" woman and the old "traditional" one. This traditional modernity dyad also interfaces with the dual construction of Indian versus Western. The new Indian woman had to be modern but not so modern as to transgress into "Westernized" modernity. Furthermore, this resolution of tradition/modernity, old/new, and Indian/Western in the identity of the new woman was also an attempt at reconstituting globalizing national identity (31).

Indian chick lit heroines reflect this popular cultural concern against Westernization. Both the Indian as well as the diasporic heroines considered in this chapter are exposed to Western influences due to the global proliferation of Western media in the former case and an American

birth[13]/location in the latter. However, they all need to adapt their "global"/"Western" outlook to focus on their Indian-ness in order to maintain Indian cultural sovereignty. If we extrapolate Rao's claims about Bollywood audiences to apply to Indian chick lit, a level of glocalization is required to suit the expectations of Indian readers.

While chick lit portrays the new Indian woman who celebrates personal independence and sexual freedom, the dominance of the institution of marriage co-exists with these "imported" Western values within the Indian cultural context. In her essay "Marriage and Love" (1914), Emma Goldman critiques marriage as an institution that is primarily a financial partnership. She writes, "Marriage is primarily an economic arrangement, an insurance pact. It differs from the ordinary life insurance agreement only in that it is more binding, more exacting." Chick lit portrays women who ignore the negative connotations that Goldman associates with this financial aspect of marriage, but focus on the improved lifestyle that a rich partner can allow them to have. Similar to mainstream chick lit, Indian heroines are also on the lookout for the man with the biggest bank balance. Although most heroines hold jobs, having a rich husband would entail a more luxurious life than they themselves might be able to afford and enable upward class mobility. However, women are often turned into embellished commodities in order to win the matrimonial transaction. If one is light-skinned, convent-educated, and good at housework—and exceptionally pretty, of course—one stands a high chance of striking rich in the arranged

[13] Indian-American heroines like Lina Ray and Maya Mehra discussed in this chapter are still considered "Indian" by their parents who immigrated to the US (presumably before 1990 since their children were born in the US) and who still maintain their Indian culture. They are unfamiliar with Oza's "new liberal Indian woman" and attempt to temper their children's Americanization with traditional Indian values.

marriage marketplace. All the heroines discussed in this chapter fit the ideal of the "good bride," although they undergo different experiences in their own tryst with matrimony.

On a darker note compared to the potential wish-fulfillment capacity that Indian chick lit provides, the string of "honour" killings recently in the UK that made headlines in world news shows that the cultural conflict between the East and the West can sometimes take tragic proportions. Shafilea Ahmed, born and raised in the UK, was murdered by her immigrant Pakistani parents because she was too "Westernized" for their liking and also refused to marry the man they had selected for her. This case, broadcast worldwide in August 2012, is just one of hundreds where violence is used by ultra-conservative parents for what they claim to be protection of their cultural "honour". There are approximately twelve murders each year in the UK where parents kill their children for adopting Western cultural trends, and these cases usually occur in Middle Eastern or South Asian families (BBC Ethics Guide). In Arizona in 2009, Noor Almaleki was run down by her father (an immigrant from Iraq) in his car for the same reasons Shafilea was killed in 2003. The diasporic honour crimes are testament to the fact that these dilemmas continue to remain relevant. Indian chick lit presents the Eastern/Western conflict in a non-violent way, but it still highlights the pressures the protagonists encounter in carving out their identities. In this chapter, I will examine Indian women who reside both in India and abroad and who choose to adapt to Western culture although their family pressures them to retain an Indian identity. I will focus on the Indian protagonist's struggle with her cultural identity in the conflicts explored by chick lit, such as relationships and love, work, personal development, beauty and self-acceptance, the fixation with consumerism, and the identification with Indian culture. In Indian diaspora chick lit, the female protagonist adjusts to the various aspects of the

foreign culture, but her family's opposition to her integration puts pressure on her to preserve an Indian identity. There is a suggestion that the heroine cannot straddle both Indian and foreign realms in terms of her personality, but needs to choose an Indian identity due to societal pressures.

II

Of "honourable matches" and "fresh" Girls of "wheatish" Complexion

One cultural phenomenon which rears its potentially problematic head in most Indian chick lit is arranged marriage. Globalization and financial success have led to an increase in social mobility and one can see the institution of marriage go through remarkable change. From inter-religion, inter-caste, interracial to same-sex marriages, the institution of marriage itself has undergone substantial transformation. However, arranged marriages, which are commonplace in many parts of Asia, are still perceived as something odd by the West. In India, although couples fall in love and then get married, these are referred to as "love marriages" since arranged marriages are still the norm. Parents who believe in the Indian traditional idea that they can find the most suitable partner for their child still believe in the sanctity of arranging marriages. This does not provide a guarantee that the couple will stay together forever but statistics show that much fewer arranged marriages end in divorce as compared to love marriages.

The statistics published by the UNICEF Human Rights Council in August 2012 establish that 55% of marriages in the world are arranged, and 90% of Indian marriages are arranged marriages. While the global divorce rate for arranged marriages is 6%, the Indian arranged

marriage divorce rate is 1.1%, the lowest in the world, and in sharp contrast to the American "love" marriage divorce rate of roughly 50% ("Arranged/Forced Marriage Statistics"). The low rate of divorce in India does not necessarily mean that the marriages are happy, especially since divorce is proscribed by society and even an unthinkable option in some, particularly rural, communities. However, in the arranged vs. love marriage debate, these statistics still add some possibility of happiness and success to the former. An arranged marriage is determined according to the bride's dowry, class, caste, religion, and horoscope, and is traditionally a practice where the woman is often treated as a commodity that is traded to another keeper. The procedures involved in arranging marriages especially in suburban and rural areas, may lead to differences in the autonomy with which individual women can choose their spouses, thereby denying many women the right to matrimonial happiness. Chick lit attempts to fight against this practice, to give the female protagonists a voice against this potential commodification, more choice and freedom in their own destiny. Urban protagonists usually have love marriages, but protagonists from small town backgrounds or from very conservative families, often cannot rebel against their status as a commodity in the bargain between the two families.

Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) begins with the "Is it Arranged or Love?" (22) question when the narrator's female co-workers find out that she is about to get married. The narrator tells us that the office girls "all looked a little disappointed" (Gokhale 22) when she tells them it is arranged as that robs them of the slight frisson of excitement and all the gossip that they could garner from a "love" marriage. *Paro* sets the precedent for contemporary Indian chick lit, and was the prototype for the current bold sexual escapades that Indian urban heroines indulge in. It takes the fashionable cityscapes of Bombay and New Delhi as the

backdrops of this great Indian drama, and the characters are undeniably the product of the period: urban, westernized, post-Independence. The narrator, Priya, hails from Mumbai (Bombay then), who is in love with the owner—known only as BR—of the sewing machine manufacturing company she works at. The novel is a "detachedly clinical" (Gokhale 3) narrative of her interactions with Paro, an anti-heroine with all the qualities of the femme fatale. Paro is beautiful, sexually voracious, and arrogant. It was uncommon to discuss sexuality with as much frankness as Gokhale does in the fictional world of 1984, but the reader is given sneak peeks into Priya's own sexual encounters with BR and then with her husband—with a couple of brief interludes with BR again. Priya describes herself as an "unmoved voyeur" (Gokhale 121) of Paro's life, but it is clear from the get-go that Priya is fascinated by the drama in the latter's life—with BR who is her first husband (the reason she inspires Priya with jealousy which leads to the lifelong obsession), and then with all the men who get enamoured with her throughout her life.

Paro is different from contemporary chick lit since it is a first-person narrative but focuses primarily on someone else's life. Priya's own participation in her tale seems to be via Paro, it is sometimes too vicarious. This might be explained by the fact that Priya sees herself in the role of the second Mrs. De Winter with BR serving as the Maxim figure. She claims, "I had always considered myself a person of little consequence and less talent" (Gokhale 121), and remains in envious awe of the voluptuous Paro, the Rebecca-figure, who is known to exude "the civet smell of recent sexual activity" (Gokhale 18). Unfortunately, Priya does not get to marry BR and Paro is ever-present both in flesh as well as in spirit. Priya is a diarist, like many modern chick lit protagonists, but she is a diarist of someone else's life and adventures. She records the

exact differences of wealth, status, ambitions and influence for each main character, and traces Paro's cycles of ups and downs with a keen eye of a storyteller. Her self-deprecating personality and penchant for storytelling sets the model for the female protagonists of contemporary Indian chick lit.

Aisha Bhatia in Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* (2009) is one such protagonist. The novel plunges us in medias res into the arranged marriage debacle that Aisha is facing. A typical advertisement in the Sunday matrimonial pages of a newspaper would be in the lines of what appears as Aisha's advertisement:

> A young lady from an upper-middle-class family with strong traditional values, a postgraduate in literature, of fair complexion and modest demeanor … hail[s] from Nashik, a small nuclear family of four … a humble lady of generous proportions (Kala 253)

This ad was placed by her well-meaning, but very interfering mother (think Mrs. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*) in a matrimonial website, hoping to lure the eligible bachelors to woo her daughter who she thinks is rapidly turning into an old maid. Aisha Bhatia is an Indian Bridget Jones, whose life has not turned out as she had wanted it to be – she is without a boyfriend, in a job she hates, and has a mother who constantly reminds her that her biological clock is ticking away. She works as a guest relations manager for very demanding guests at a New Delhi hotel, where her boss plays truant to have an affair with his sister-in-law behind his wife's back. Although Aisha is just twenty-nine, she and her girlfriends are treated as social pariahs since they have not managed to get married yet—a capital crime according to the Indian mindset. Every relative and acquaintance takes pains to remind her that time is running out if she wants to have a

family, and makes sure to update her on who else has got engaged or is having a baby. When Aisha meets Karan Verma, a Non-Resident Indian from New York, in her hotel, sparks fly and Aisha meets the first likely prospect to settle down with. A là Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Aisha and her friends assume that since he is single and *rich,* there is a high chance that he might be in the market for a good Indian girl to take back to the US as his blushing bride.

Prejudiced Indian society forms the backdrop for the novel, and although the plot is straightforward, it is one of the first chick lit novels where the characters actually live in India instead of visiting it. The plot stays clear of the usual American-born-confused-*desi*[14] trajectory and explores the social problems encountered by urban women on the wrong side of twenty. Instead of the stereotype of poverty-stricken India which is routinely touted on the media, *Almost Single* shows a young, hip India where young, working, middle-class women can enjoy the high life. It is possible to forget that the setting is New Delhi and not a Western metropolitan city, and the clubs and bars and casual sexual encounters between men and women which the novel charts could well be out of a *Sex and the City* episode.

Like most chick lit novels, *Almost Single* is a first-person confessional narrative of the female protagonist, and Aisha begins her tale with a short introduction to herself:

> My name is Aisha Bhatia, I am twenty-nine years old and single. I work as a Guest Relations Manager at the Grand Orchid Hotel. I dine at luxury hotels and stay in five-stars during my travels; I can name old and new world wines with great élan, and can tell my cheeses apart. I tolerate my job, hate my boss, and bond big-time with my friends,

[14] Colloquialism for the people, culture, and products of the Indian subcontinent.

while routinely suffering from umbilical cord whiplash.
I don't really care for my vital stats at the moment, and I don't have a cute/funny nickname either. Hence this introduction: it stinks, but it sticks.
In fact, sometimes I think there should be support groups like the AA out there for people like me (Kala 2)

Aisha is spunky and knows what she wants from life, and it is not just settling down with the first man the matrimonial ad might send down her path.

Aisha gets herself into the usual embarrassing escapades that all chick lit heroines seem prone to do, but ultimately gets the most eligible man on the scene to fall in love with her. However, instead of swooning in his arms at the proposal, she gives him an unromantic "I don't know" (Kala 253). She attempts to rework the stereotype of women as obsessed with getting married:

Aisha: "Karan, please, I know this sounds weird, but can we please put off marrying for a bit, and like really get to know each other?"

Karan rescues the wine from my hands and I quickly tuck the fold of my towel in—he then gently takes my hands in his. "Aisha, I can't claim to understand you, but I do love you."

"So we are together then? Together, because we love each other's company? Not because we're bound to do the right things or what's expected?"

"Meaning?" he asks, looking really confused.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm okay with being the oldest bride in India just as long as when I do get to be a bride it is with the right man (Kala 271)

Aisha turns down her Karan's proposal of marriage, and wants to have a longer relationship instead. In a country where arranged marriages are still the norm, where men and women often do not date before tying the knot, premarital sex is a social taboo, and there is a market for vagina lightening creams and vagina tightening gels,[15] *Almost Single* is challenging tradition to an extent.

Aisha is also representative of the growing trend of Indians youth who have premarital sex;[16] she and her friends refer to having had sexual relations openly, and Aisha and Karan are sexually active. The traditional Indian demure bride is supposed to be a virgin, and Aisha's mother calls her to warn her of potential problems she might face due to this reason:

> [Mama Bhatia]:"After a certain age, especially for a girl living alone…There are a lot of challenges…"
>
> "Like what?" I can feel the resentment setting in. trust my mother to look at being independent and socially active as a handicap.
>
> "Well, you know how boys like fresh girls…"
>
> "Fresh! What are we talking about, vegetables? What's with you and marriage and food groups?"
>
> "*Fresh* girls, you now…" My mother continues awkwardly.
>
> "Oh please, just say virgins. Why is that so hard?" (Kala 228)

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[15] Clean and Dry Intimate Wash, 18 Again

[16] Mumbai's International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) conducted a survey in 2009 to include 55,000 males and females from about 170,000 households in the three richest and three poorest states, their ages ranging from 15 to 29. Statistical figures reveal that about 21 percent males and 4 percent females from rural areas admitted to having had pre-marital sex against an urban figure of 11 percent males and 2 percent females.

Although Aisha acknowledges that "[o]nline spouse-hunting is actually a lot of fun once you get into it. It's like an electronic swayamvar"[17] (Kala 225), there are some sexist hurdles she would have to cross even if she met the man of her dreams on desivivaha.com,[18] the matrimonial site her mother signed her up with. The virgin/whore distinction is as strict in India as is its castes and classes, and Aisha and other Indian chick lit protagonists reject this unfair dichotomy to explore their sexualities.

Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake* (2004) begins in a similar way to *Almost Single*, with the female protagonist, Minal Sharma getting a letter from her mother with a newspaper clipping appended to it. The latter proves to be a matrimonial ad her mother has published in the matrimonial section of the national newspaper, which goes

> Honourable match invited for great granddaughter of legendary freedom fighter and daughter of professor and social worker. Bride is 29 yrs/175 cm/wheatish complexion/MBA working in MNC. Family remains devoted in the service of the nation and the great ideals of the great Mahatma. Prospective groom must be well educated, idealistic and high-minded. Please respond with… (Kaushal 2)

Instead of describing the prospective bride's personality or personal attributes beyond the basics of age, height and profession, the ad features more details of Minal's family background. One must remember that in India, one is where one is from: background is everything. Well, everything apart from the colour of one's skin. In the brief description provided of Minal in the ad, her mother does note that her complexion is "wheatish", Indianspeak for "not light-skinned".

[17] Ancient Indian practice of a woman being allowed to choose a husband from a group of suitors who woo her.

[18] Roughly translated as "indianmatrimony.com"

Fairness creams are extremely popular in India, and both men and women strive to be light-skinned as that is the bar by which one's beauty is judged. Sunscreen lotions focus as much on preventing skin tanning by the sun as it does on protecting the skin from harmful UV rays. It is much easier for a woman to get picked in the marriage market if she is light-skinned than if she is dark, even if the latter is more attractive and has a nicer personality. Light skin is called being "fair" which automatically implies that having darker skin is somehow "wrong". Thus, Minal being "wheatish" already makes her position slightly difficult, compounded with the fact that she is twenty-nine, making her as much of a social pariah as Aisha in *Almost Single*. Aisha's mother also describes her in terms of her complexion in the matrimonial advertisement. However, Aisha, unlike Minal, has a "fair complexion."

Minal lives in New Delhi and works at International Foods, first in the "Cookies" and then in the "Cakes" divisions. She was happy working in the Cakes division, but due to a misunderstanding at work she is shuttled off to the company headquarters where her work is mostly the mundane business of signing off on employees' expense accounts and keeping track of the nitty-gritty. It is not that Minal wants to be single, but she wants to find herself a man on her own terms. She says

> Sure I want to get married, but a dentist? *Yudishter?* [A man her mother suggests for her] I think I'll find my own man, thank you. A Rahul, or a Rohan, or at the very least a Ravi.[19] Someone who'll bring me flowers and buy me diamonds and laugh and flirt and throw parties and take happy pictures on our overseas vacations with a six-mega-pixel

[19] The expression is similar to "Tom, Dick, and Harry." Rahul, Rohan, and Ravi are very popular male names in India. Yudhishter is an old-fashioned name, and a namesake for the pious hero of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata.*

> digital camera. No postcolonial hangover, no quixotic desire to reform the world, just a healthy, wholesome, twenty-first century pursuit of wealth and prosperity. And a really classy car. (Kaushal 6)

Minal's desire for a wealthy partner with a "classy car" demonstrates her desire for social mobility. From the matrimonial advertisement we know that Minal is middle class since she is the daughter of a professor and a social worker. There is a link between her "wheatish" complexion that was mentioned above and her social climbing aspirations because her darker complexion world make it more difficult for her to attain her goal.

There is a kind of social hierarchy within Indian culture based on skin colour, where light skin is a sign of attractiveness. It is a legacy of centuries of colonialism which privileges fair skin over dark, and leads to a commodification of skin lightening creams in a bid to be more desirable. This yearning for lighter skin is by extension a desire to both change racial identity as well as change one's class status. While "passing" for a different race would be difficult for most people, even if the lightening products did work miraculously well, upward class mobility is an achievable goal. Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues that skin colour is a form of "symbolic capital" that influences one's life chances (282). Darker skin is associated with the need to work outdoors and thus be exposed to the sun, and therefore signifies a lower class background while those with wealth and privilege have lighter skin as they stay indoors (Glenn 289). Skin lightening is thus an alternative way of social climbing—both on its own as well as the matrimonial chances it brings. Glenn notes that "Indian and Indian diaspora communities around the world constitute the largest market for skin lighteners" (Glenn 289). Hence, the matrimonial ad for Minal would

serve to eliminate “good catches” instantly as the adjective “wheatish” would warn prospective grooms that they might do better—in terms of skin colour—elsewhere.

Minal does her best to ignore the matrimonial advertisement and look for love on her own. She oscillates between two men in the novel: Ali, a radio jockey who is six years younger than she is and therefore not someone she deems eligible for a serious relationship, and Sunil, an old childhood friend who reappears in her life and who is certainly the appropriate contender since he is a cancer surgeon and his family is very wealthy. However, both these men turn out to be Mr. Maybes because although she feels sexually attracted to the former and feels a sense of security which the latter will bring to her love life, she does not feel either of them is *The One*. After an engagement with the surgeon for half the novel, Minal rejects him and starts a relationship with another man, but one who finally understands her.

Minal is as open about her sexuality as was Aisha. Although she does not actually have sexual relations with any of her boyfriends in the novel, she does express her desire and laments when her prudish fiancé, Sunil, will not be intimate with her. When some friends tease her about she and Sunil finding ways to keep warm during their honeymoon, she thinks:

> Keep warm, ha. With room heaters and electric blankets most likely. I hope I wouldn’t have to pack whips and chains and leather stuff along for the honeymoon, just to get things started.
>
> I don’t mean to crib, but this bashfulness thing with Sunil was really beginning to worry me. Engaged for over a month now, and there was less going on between us than between

two nuns in a convent. And the last time I'd tried to kiss him, he'd mumbled something about Bahadur [the man-servant]. *Bahadur?* (Kaushal 240)

The reader is left to assume that Minal finds sexual satisfaction with her new boyfriend as she ends the novel on a happy note. Her relationship with her mother will have improved due to her happily coupled—and soon to be wed?—status, and her work is also flourishing since she heads a successful breakthrough for the Cakes division of her company.

III

The Unique Consciousness of the Diasporic

The Indian chick lit protagonist's struggle with marriage as well as her cultural identity continues even in a transatlantic context when she is a diasporic subject. Vijay Mishra, in the article, "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora," points out that "diaspora" had originally referred to the displacement of the Jews. He writes that the new meaning attributed to the word "diaspora" refers to the lives of "any group living in displacement" and adopts a more postmodern inclusive view of human affairs (3-4). Later in the same article, Mishra speaks specifically of the Indian diaspora and subdivides it into the "old" and the "new" diaspora.

Mishra characterizes the old diaspora as "early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture" where the Indians who emigrated primarily interacted with other colonized peoples in relation to whom they developed positions of privilege and power, such as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam. The new diaspora is the "late modern or late capitalist" counterpart of the old diaspora, and the sites

of this dispersal of Indian people are metropolitan centres of Empire such as the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1960s as part of a global trend of transnational migration (Mishra 13). Mishra coins the term "diasporic imaginary" to describe any ethnic community in a nation that describes itself "consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (4). The new diasporas' emergence coincides with globalization and the increasing patterns of mobility that was made possible by ever-improving modes of communication such as the telephone, airplanes, the internet and email, webcam access, etc. As a contrast to the experience of the old diaspora whose links to the homeland consisted of small objects they carried with them such as a traditional outfit or a copy of the *Ramayana*, the new diasporic subjects were essentially world travelers who could access their homeland everywhere through the internet (Mishra 14).

In *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (1998), Aparna Rayaprol writes that though the Indian diaspora is comparatively smaller in size than others such as the Jewish, African, and Chinese, it has a sizeable presence in over seventy countries and demonstrates a significant melting pot of economic and social classes with "occupations arising from manual labour to entrepreneurial activity" (4). She argues that in the United States, the majority of Indians belong to a wealthy socio-economic class, while in other countries, such as the UK, Indians belong to a range of socioeconomic classes from the impoverished to the affluent (Rayaprol 11). Thus, "[r]egional, linguistic, caste and religious variations from the countries of origin contribute to the diversity of Indians abroad" (4-5). President Lyndon Johnson's Immigration Act of 1965 made it so that for the first time, one's right to enter the US did not depend on one's race, and this was when the Indians emigrated to the United States extensively (Rayaprol 14). This Act demonstrated a preference for educated people and professionals, and

the diasporic subjects who established themselves in the US at this point were mostly engineers, doctors, professors—thus the "brain drain" from India—along with their spouses and children. The 1990 census also shows that there has been a 110.6 per cent increase in the Asian Indian population of the United States from 387,223 in 1980 to 815,47 in 1990 (Rayaprol 15). The majority of Indian professionals were fluent in English due to India's colonial past and could thus be easily accepted into the work force (Krauter and Davis 1978:93; qtd. in Rayaprol 15) and even be offered better and more well-paid jobs than they might have had in India (Bharadwaj and Rao 1990; qtd. in Rayaprol 15).

In this section, I will examine diasporic Indian chick lit from authors who write about Vijay Mishra's "new" Indian diaspora from a primarily diasporic perspective. I will focus on Indian-American heroines who live in the United States and adopt Western cultural values which often bring them in conflict with their more traditional Indian families. South Asian American chick lit provides a unique lookout from which to understand the critical time of flux within the Asian American female urban demographic landscape. The standard conflicts that chick lit heroines undergo relate to work, love, beauty and overall maturity over the course of the novel. These basic tropes are worked into cultural issues which the Indian heroines have to grapple with. Indian chick lit, like mainstream chick lit, depicts the heroine's struggles to find the right man and career. There are also some cultural conflicts which the protagonist has to work through, which is usually staged as a generational gap between her parents and herself, or a cultural gap between her immigrant parents who still live like Indians in the US and herself as a first-generation American citizen. There are also some chick lit novels where the heroine makes the transatlantic journey from India to the US either due to work or an arranged marriage. In the latter cases, diasporic Indian chick lit shows the estrangement one feels when uprooted from

one's own country and transplanted onto another, especially when one looks different and follows different customs. The diasporic heroines finally create a hybrid identity which helps them navigate cultural issues between their families and American friends. They find a fine balance between their Indian customs and beliefs and American cultural principles. Even when some protagonists believe that their emotional confusion would be resolved by returning to India, it is proven that one's homeland changes after one leaves it and the reunion can never bring back the original feeling of belonging.

The diaspora, then, must involve a cross-cultural or cross-civilizational passage, as Makarand Paranjape asserts in "Displaced Relations: Diasporas, Empires, Homelands" – if the diaspora is voluntary, it "must involve some significant tension between the source and the target cultures" (67). It is only such a crossing that results in the unique consciousness of the diasporic (Paranjape 6), where there is a conflict between the diasporic subject and the host country. This conflict is seen in the Indian diasporic chick lit heroines in Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire* (2004), Anjali Banerjee's *Imaginary Men* (2005), Kavita Daswani's *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2005), and Anne Cherian's *A Good Indian Wife* (2008). The first two novels portray the lives of first generation Indian heroines living in diasporic Indian communities in the US, while the latter novels are representative of the experiences of Indian heroines in the US after their arranged marriages. The Indian-American protagonists have love marriages because of their more liberal social background, while the small-town Indian protagonists are traded off in arranged marriages.

All four authors under consideration in this section—Sonia Singh, Anjali Banerjee, Kavita Daswani, and Anne Cherian—belong to the Indian diaspora in the United States, and

examine the lives and loves of first-generation Indo-American girls and the cultural differences they have to navigate. In her article, "From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature" (2002), Carine M. Mardorossian writes

> Exiled writers, for instance, are often seen as better equipped to provide an 'objective' view of the two worlds they are straddling by virtue of their alienation. They are ascribed the status of neutral observers, a detachment on which—according to the high modernist tradition that still dictates the discourse of exile—their literary authority is based. Their 'privileged' status as in-betweens, mediators between two cultures thus often becomes the cue that grounds interpretation and constructs a binary logic between an alienating 'here' and a romanticized 'homeland' (16).

Because the writers themselves emigrated to improve their lives, they portray characters who can also successfully retain their culture while also reaping the economic benefits related to modernization. Their protagonists adroitly balance their individualism with a sense of community and personal progress with the inherited cultural heritage (Mardorossian 20). On a related note, in "South Asian American Literature: 'Off the Turnpike' of Asian America," Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth claim that "ethnic writers reflect the general desire of their communities to be considered full and equal participants in the fabric of American life" (371). However, Indian chick lit seems to suggest that although the Indian protagonist wants to fit in the new country, it is an uphill struggle and she has to struggle to occupy a split-space (Bhabha 56) where she can practice a hybrid identity.

Caught between an American and an Indian identity, the diasporic Indian woman struggles to assimilate into the host country while attempting to manage the loss of her identity

from her homeland. Jennifer P. Barber discusses *Goddess for Hire* and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* in relation to Bhabha's notion of hybridity in her thesis, "Indian Chick-lit: Form and Consumerism," but she feels that the heroine fails to belong to the US despite all her attempts. I argue that the heroine is able find her niche in the diasporic community and ultimately embrace Bhabha's idea of the hybrid identity once she transcends her reluctance to accept both Indian and Western sides of her personality. As discussed earlier, the reinstating of Indian cultural norms in harmony with "Western" freedom of choice also brings the new liberal woman back to the fold and prevents her from being "too" modern.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity as he defines in the Introduction to his *The Location of Culture* is apt here. Bhabha observes that the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (5). Bhabha discusses the interstitial relationships formed between cultures as well as those formed in the public and private spheres. The suggestion is that the interstices destabilize the concept of rigid classifications. There are no fixed identities, and one can become a hybrid subject when one identifies both with the culture of one's origins and as well as the culture one lives in.

The diasporic protagonists finally create a hybrid identity which helps them navigate cultural issues between their families and American friends. They find a fine balance between their Indian customs and beliefs and American cultural principles. Even when some protagonists believe that their emotional confusion would be resolved by returning to India, it is often proven that one's homeland changes after one leaves it (usually because of the emotional/psychological development of the protagonist herself) and the reunion can never bring back the original feeling

of belonging. However, both Indian as well as Western cultures are depicted as static and unchanging in Indian diasporic chick lit. While Indian culture is generally "traditional" and "conservative," Western culture is "progressive" and "liberal." Cherian and Daswani both describe how Indian society prefers unhappy marriages to divorce, and Singh and Banerjee's Indian-American heroines seem to have distaste for Indian traditional values that are often marked by misogyny, such as the stereotype of the submissive "good" Indian wife. However, there is a gap between the contemporary India and the India constituted by the diasporic imagination of those who left India before the economic liberalisation. Stuck in a pre-liberalisation "pure" notion of Indian traditional values, the protagonists' parents are unfamiliar with the globalising nation-state. Even those protagonists who move due to marriage or work are so changed by their experiences in the diaspora, that their perspective on their homeland changes. Thus, to all Indians who leave the homeland, the erstwhile home becomes *unheimlich*.

All four protagonists under consideration in this section are forced to navigate their way through cultural conflicts stemming from the differences between their ethnic culture and the foreign cultural milieu they find themselves in. The heroines in these four novels have to fight society's tendency to "Other" them, and somehow manage the double affiliation they have to their inherited "tradition" and the cultural values of their adopted country. In her article, "Survival as an Ethic: South Asian Immigrant Women's Writing," C. Vijayasree calls this reality of expatriation "a crisis of epistemology" (133), where the desire to maintain one's ethnic values and roles amid the multifarious traditions one could pick up in the melting pot of America results in a struggle for cultural survival. I will examine the hybrid identity that the heroines of these four novels struggle to maintain while they undergo diasporic experiences where they feel the

tensions between the American culture that they decide to adopt and the Indian customs that their families desire them to practice.

In *Imaginary Men* and *Goddess for Hire*, the heroines and their families belong to the group of prosperous Indians that Rayaprol alludes to, those who moved to the UK and the US during the 1960s, and who are educated and well-off. Neither Lina Ray nor Maya Mehra can understand the mindset of their parents because they are alienated from the idealized fantasy of the homeland which their parents have created for them. This underlines the heroines' estrangement as citizens of the Indian diaspora in the US and is representative of the alienation of the diaspora in general. Their ideas do not conform to the more conservative notions of their parents and they feel that they cannot identify with their Indian roots. Mardorossian asserts that in the diaspora "the traditional notion of 'home' as belonging and community is exposed as a myth" (22). Even if the idea of the homeland remains the same, the reality is continuously changing and thus, no one can really ever go "home." Mardorossian's argument suggests that the chick lit heroines are unable to identify with the homeland not only because they themselves are changed due to diasporic circumstances, but also because the homeland that even their parents knew changes while leaving them with the old notions.

In Anjali Banerjee's *Imaginary Men* (2005), the heroine, Lina Ray is a first-generation Indian-American, enjoys the single girl lifestyle in San Francisco and specialises in matchmaking Indian-American women with their suitable partners. However, she is unable to find Mr. Right for herself, and is forced to invent a loving boyfriend when she is pressured by her conservative Indian parents to settle down via an arranged marriage to a groom of their choice. This lie born out of desperation ultimately leads to true love for the heroine when the

handsome Indian prince (yes, he is literally Prince Charming), Raja Prasad, who had caught her interest at her sister's wedding, steps into the shoes of the imaginary suitor. The result is a Bollywood-meets-chick lit hybrid where the professional matchmaker finally meets her own match. Banerjee adeptly portrays the conflict between American modernity and Indian tradition that Lina needs to grapple with in order to satisfy both her parents with their Brahmo Samaj Hinduism background as well as herself in her choice of her mate.

Throughout the book, Lina seems to embrace American culture in preference to Indian culture and begins her narrative with the declaration, "I am allergic to India" (Banerjee 1). Lina thinks of herself as "an independent American woman" but eventually falls in love with Raja who she previously described as "traditional". The book ends with a scene where Lina meets Raja at the railway station in Kolkata, and we are left with the certainty that they are going to decide to stay together—although we are not told whether Lina will move to India or Raja to California. At the beginning of the novel, when Lina says she does not want typical "traditional Indian men who expect their wives to do everything for them" (Banerjee 3), her great-aunt rebukes her by saying "Perhaps it wouldn't hurt you to learn a little tradition" (Banerjee 3). This suggests that Lina's family believed that she was too alienated from her own cultural heritage, too Americanized having grown up as a diasporic Indian. Lina carps about her disconnect with her Indian background at several points and contrasts the tradition with her own American independence. Feeling the pressure from her family to settle down, she says, "I'm letting my parents down by not getting married and having kids. My father gets indigestion. Ma dreams of a grand wedding with all our family and friends in attendance. In India, everyone knows everything about everyone else. It's a big soap opera" (Banerjee 66). She shudders at the

possibility of an arranged marriage with an Indian man chosen for her by her family, and says, "What a terrifying thought. Me, Lina Ray, poster child for independence, settling in India with a husband, a family? Impossible" (Banerjee 31-32). Her insecurity in her sense of identity makes her insecure of Raja loving her back because she is "some Americanized pretend-Indian woman…[and] I don't live with my parents. I rarely follow their advice. I can't wear virgin white at my wedding" (Banerjee 163). The last sentence itself reveals that Lina is unaware of the common fact that Bengali brides wear red at weddings, not white.

Like Lina, Maya Mehra in Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire* begins her tale with a confession of the distance between her beliefs and that of her parents: "I never believed in the dharma, karma, reincarnation, or any of that spiritual crap, which caused sort of a problem growing up because my parents are devout Hindus" (1). Maya is thirty, lives in Newport Beach, California, is fashionable but unemployed, and still living with her parents. She has also recently found out that she is the reincarnation of the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali. However, with her matchmaking parents and extended family dedicating themselves to finding a suitable groom for her, saving the world from evil seems to be an easier job than dealing with her own family. To cope with the stress of being the new Kali reincarnate, being hunted down by a Kali-hating fanatic, as well as avoiding her parents' well-intentioned matchmaking, she indulges in restorative sprees of shopping and coffee from Starbucks. Although she believes in the mantra of being her own person, she does not have the backbone to actually stand up to her parents, and craves their approval like a good Indian girl.

Kali is a complex figure who is both the goddess of destruction as well as the protector of the universe. In popular iconography she is depicted naked and the colour of her skin is black. She wears a garland of human skulls around her neck, holds a human head in one of her hands and a sword in the other (Kinsley 67). Kali is naked and black because she is beyond "Maya," and she transcends time and is the eternal transcendent reality (Gupta 463). In Hindu philosophy, "Maya" is a term for the illusion or physical reality which separates the pure human spirit from Brahman, the real. It is also associated with a futile regard for worldly things which prevents one from attaining moksha. However, Maya is also goddess Kali, who is the reason behind mankind's illusion, and she must be worshipped in order to achieve freedom from it (Harding xxxi). Thus, Maya Mehra is aptly named due to her love of shopping and disregard for things beyond the pursuit of her own pleasure.

With typical chick lit humour, Singh makes Maya (Mehra) a reincarnation of Kali as the personalities of the two figures are diametrically opposite. Maya is self-centred and enjoys conspicuous consumption. She follows the *Shopaholic* heroine, Becky Bloomwood's path to self-fashioning by her label-driven consumerism, beginning with an eye-catching Hummer H2. Our first glimpse of Maya in *Goddess for Hire* is when she is shopping on her thirtieth birthday and after spending extravagant amounts on clothes (although she is unemployed), she ends up with eight shopping bags. Since we are told that Maya has a "Kate Spade bag" (Singh 20), "Seven jeans" (Singh 135), Bebe clothing (Singh 103) and Sergio Rossi shoes (Singh 136), she is self-indulgent enough to spend her parents' money on fashionable items. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, a chick lit heroine's consumerism is often central to her selfhood, and in Indian diasporic chick lit like *Goddess for Hire*, Maya's consumption of products might be seen as

supporting her self-conception as an American citizen. It also simultaneously distances her from her Indian background as consumerism is popularly associated with Americanization. However, she learns that she needs to fight evil around her—somewhat like a superhero—in order to truly *become* the Kali reincarnate. Thus, in an ironic twist, Maya gradually needs to let go of her selfishness, mature as an individual and learn to care for others in order to become an annihilator of evil like the goddess Kali.

Meanwhile, even being the goddess Kali herself does not seem to be enough to fit the role of the good daughter to her parents throughout the book. At the beginning of the novel, Maya explains to the reader that "[i]n traditional Indian culture, a woman is supposed to get married and have children—strictly in that order—by the time she is twenty-five. My female cousins and I, having been born and raised in America, have it considerably harder, not easier. We're all supposed to get married, have children, and be either a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, all by the time we're twenty-five" (Singh 3). Since at thirty Maya is both single and not gainfully employed, she is quite the black sheep of the family where of the ninety-seven relatives she has scattered over the US, she is the only one who is not a doctor. Also, initially she is able to channel the goddess within only at certain times and is not able to truly *be* her. Even with her godly attributes, until she settles down with a suitable Indian man, she still would not be the dutiful daughter. Although she claims that she "was never one to subscribe to that sacrifice-everything-for-your-family Indian shit," (Singh 259), she falls in love with Tahir Sahni,[20] who does care about his family and needs them to approve of the girl she loves. Maya retaliates asking if she should "[t]ry to be a different person? Your [Tahir's] mom obviously wants a

[20] Maya's parents had arranged for Tahir and Maya to meet in the hopes of an arranged/love marriage between them.

typical Indian daughter-in-law who quietly pours tea and doesn't speak her mind. I'm American. Screw that. I'm a goddess" (Singh 257). Till the end of the novel, Maya maintains her independence and does not capitulate to the stereotype of the submissive wife that her prospective mother-in-law desires, but she is willing to settle down with a traditional Indian man like Tahir.

Indian chick-lit tries to mirror mainstream chick lit's dominant themes, but in the process it portrays how the resulting mixed Indian-American identity makes acceptance within the diasporic community difficult for the heroines. These heroines adopt the cultural lifestyle of the US, including the outlook on issues such as work, love, and relationships, but their parents cling to the Indian values they themselves grew up with. Shankar and Srikanth claim, "Transnationalism is a palpable reality for these [diasporic] groups, a mode of being. Even when no physical travel to home or ancestral countries takes place, current technological developments enable the maintaining and nurturing of emotional connections" (372). Thus, Maya and Lina's immigrant parents still adhere to the notions they grew up with in India, and oppose their daughters' assimilation to the "foreign" culture. Paranjape claims that the second diaspora that Mishra writes about experiences a level of guilt for having left India and have a latent desire to return to the homeland (70). Thus, the first generation immigrant Indians set up little Indias where they settle and practice the traditional Indian conventions there and expect their children, who might have no instinctive bond with their heritage, to observe the same.

Mishra argues, "Even as the hypermobility of postmodern capital makes borders porous and ideas get immediately disseminated via websites and search engines, diasporic subjects have

shown a remarkably anti-modern capacity for ethnic absolutism. In part, this is because diasporas can now recreate their own fantasy structures of homeland even as they live elsewhere" (Mishra 8). The female protagonists do not identify with this mindset due to their exposure to other cultural norms and this leads to the opposition between their parents and their own desires. They seem to occupy a position where they do not have the choice to peacefully straddle both the Indian as well as the American aspects of their personality but needs must choose one or the other—the families definitely want them to adhere to their Indian roots. Thus, the heroines of both *Imaginary Men* and *Goddess for Hire* endure a form of alienation from their family and friends when they attain their personal and professional goals.

The cultural conflicts which Maya was facing is finally resolved when she understands her true calling as the goddess Kali reincarnate and steps away from her purely acquisitive American identity as a hip but ineffectual fashionista. Initially, her pressing worry is how to dress when she is out saving the world: "What does a goddess wear to kick ass? *In Style* magazine [has] yet to cover the issue, so it [is] all up to me" (Singh 135). However, although she still loves the presents her devotees bring her later in the novel, she learns to step outside her circumscribed "spoilt rich brat" mindset where she was simultaneously estranged from her Indian traditional roots, and carry out her duties as the Hindu goddess effectively. Maya is able to achieve Bhabha's notion of hybridity only when she consciously recognizes her Indian roots.

Lina is also able to find happiness only when she tries to venture outside her comfort zone of American independence and take a chance on an Indian prince who is willing to do the same for her. It is this acceptance of a part of India and the attempt to find some sort of

connection with the home country that finally allows Lina to embrace her hybridity and move on with her life. She is given the chance to hold on to her American identity because Raja tells her that he is applying for another US visa so that he can get to know her better. We do end the story by knowing that now that Lina is more in touch with her roots, more attuned to her culture, there might just be a happily ever after for her. Thus, in tune to Bhaba's theory, both Lina and Maya can break out of the insecure limbo they occupied in terms of their identities and embrace their cultural hybridity but only when they accept their Indian heritage, and which in both cases involves falling in love with an Indian man. There is a suspicion of being divorced from one's own cultural background and adopting another, and the host country's cultural contribution can only be accepted once the protagonists embrace the part of their identity that they had been neglecting till then.

Rayaprol claims that immigrant women's experiences should not be elided or included as part of the "immigrant experience" as a whole because women's immigration often depends on their husbands or fathers having to move for work. She calls the latter "dependent immigration" (15). This kind of immigration is portrayed in Kavita Daswani's *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2005) and Anne Cherian's *A Good Indian Wife* (2008). These novels adroitly capture the situation a new bride falls into when she is catapulted to the US from India after being married to a man she has met only once before the wedding. While mainstream chick lit featuring white middle class women usually portray the heroines looking for Mr. Right to settle down with, Indian chick lit often focuses on the life of the woman *after* marriage. However, this marriage is usually arranged between the bride and groom's parents, and thus, the beginning and not the culmination of the traditional love plot. The heroines have to negotiate a new culture and with

that also renegotiate their own cultural identities and embrace a hybridity in order to take their changed circumstances into stride.

A Good Indian Wife, Anne Cherian's debut fictional work, won the South Asian Excellence Award and the Italian edition was a finalist for the Premio Roma award as well as the Tropea Literary Prize. It portrays the amalgamation of two different cultures: Indian tradition battles against the American plethora of choices and proves dominant. In the book, Neel Sarath, thirty-five, is a successful anesthesiologist in a hospital in San Francisco, and has become a naturalized American citizen with his own condominium, expensive car and a blonde girlfriend. The only problem he has to deal with is the traditional family he left back home in a small town in south India who want an arranged marriage with a submissive Indian girl they approve of for their adored Suneel. When his mother calls to say that he should come home to see his dying grandfather, Neel goes to India to pay his last respects and returns to San Francisco with an Indian wife his family forced him to marry. Meanwhile, thirty-year-old Leila Krishnan has been patiently waiting for more than ten years for a husband, and having been constantly rejected due to her lack of dowry has resigned herself to lifelong spinsterhood. The reader is told that

> Leila blamed only herself. She had grown too tall, and every proposal had been withdrawn because of her behaviour. Daughters were not meant simply to desire marriage; they were supposed to do everything in their power to help their mothers bring it about. It was in the realm of the second expectation that Leila had failed Amma—and herself (Cherian 15)

Leila works as an English teacher in a school because that is what unmarried women did to kill time till they found a husband—only in her case, the situation seemed permanent. When the

Sarath family approaches Leila for a match with Suneel, her family is thrilled, not knowing that Neel himself is against the marriage. After a wedding where Leila and Neel had seen each other just once before the big day, Leila goes to San Francisco with him.

Leila is immediately very disheartened with her life with Neel and in the foreign country. Accustomed to the Indian idea that living in a house is superior to living in an apartment, Leila thinks Neel's spartan but expensive condo in Pacific Heights is just a "virtually empty flat" (Cherian 112). Since he also works long hours at his hospital and does not consummate his marriage with her on the day the *swami* said he should, Leila feels alienated and completely disconnected from the circumstances around her. She faces a culture shock when she tries to adjust to the new country, but trying to adapt to her husband seems an even more trying task. Neel keeps her at arm's length and Leila ends up feeling like an on-looking outsider who might never be able to quite blend in: "It was happening all over again. At home she was the outsider, the single girl who drew looks of 'What, not yet?' and 'Poor thing.' Here, too, she was sitting at the edge, watching the others negotiate the terrain with ease" (Cherian 241).

A Good Indian Wife is about making a traditional Indian arranged marriage work in modern American society characterized by high divorce rates and people who believe that falling in love is essential *before* the marriage. It is a contrast of Indian and America, modernity and tradition and how one often has to sacrifice one's individuality for the sake of community. It also explores diasporic experiences undergone by both an Indian newly arrived in the US as well as an Indian who has been in the country for a while but still feels uncomfortable not being American *enough* no matter how much he tries. Luckily for Neel, according to Paranjape, "[t]he

nature of the diaspora, its cultural location and politics, … depend on the nature of the host, not just on that of the diaspora. … A host country like the USA, for example, ostensibly, does not distinguish between immigrants and diasporic people. Officially, all are the same to her; and all those who enter have the opportunity of instant assimilation, of fashioning themselves anew" (8). Neel is forever involved in thus refashioning himself and Leila reminds him of the small-town south Indian background from which he obsessively wants to disassociate himself.

Even having achieved the mecca of American citizenship, Neel feels self-conscious since he is an immigrant in the US. He fetishizes white, blonde girls as the path to making himself somehow more American, to belong to his chosen country a little bit more. He feels like he will be accepted by Americans in general if he has a white girlfriend and it will be easier for him to move up the social ladder. He had had a girlfriend called Savannah with a WASP background, but her parents had snubbed him for being Indian and she had followed their lead and dumped him. He is currently with Caroline, a secretary who works at his hospital and who is very much in love with him, but does not have the educational qualifications or social background to be of practical use to Neel. While Neel's Indian friend, Sanjay and his American wife adhere to Indian customs as much as possible, Neel renounces everything Indian to the extent of changing his name from Suneel to the more American Neel, which sounds like Neil. However, although he wishes to relinquish his Indian roots, his culture seems to be embedded in him. He marries Leila to save his family from disgrace since they had given the Krishnans' word that he would, but he plans to get rid of her as soon as his grandfather dies. He does not mention his three-year-old relationship with Caroline to his family because he has no intention of marrying her and also, he knows they will not approve. As hard as he tries to escape, Neel's cultural heritage seems to have

him rooted. At times, "[h]e had the oppressive sense that India was stalling him with its customs and expectations" (Cherian 36).

Before moving to the US with Neel, Leila had only briefly allowed herself to fantasize about her future in the new country. Leila had had a very protected life in her thirty years with her parents, and nothing has prepared her for the life with a complete stranger; she realises in San Francisco that her marriage to the American doctor might not be as idyllic as she had dared to hope. She had been starry-eyed before her unexpected wedding since

> [m]en from America were the ultimate sons-in-law, fought over by the mothers of every nubile girl. ... She had been known as pretty and clever, … but once even the ugly girls got married, she had become the object of whispered conversations. People cruelly—and correctly—deduced she taught English only because she wasn't married. Everyone knew that colleges hired single women as cheap labor. Most girls' colleges had a constellation of aging, anxious women who had been forced to make teaching their career because the "Mrs." Career, the one they really wanted, had bypassed them (Cherian 17)

Once in America, Leila's diasporic experiences confuse her since she feels completely alienated in San Francisco without any family or friends to guide her. She was there because she was married, married to a man who barely talked to her, was not intimate with her physically, and treated her as an acquaintance, not a wife. She is shocked and humiliated when she finds out about Neel's affair with Caroline, but she does not sully her honour by fighting either Neel or Caroline. In her jealousy and heartbreak, Leila hits upon the correct reason for Neel not being able to break off relations with Caroline. She wonders, "What was it about Caroline that he could not keep away from? ... What did Neel like about her? Was it because she was white? Did he want a mixed marriage so he would not be intimidated by whites? ... Did occupation, status,

breeding, all the things that mattered in India not concern him as long as his wife was white?" (Cherian 278).

Tightly bonded with her family all her life, Leila knows she cannot turn to them in this hour of need because they would not be able to comprehend her feelings. Even if she told them the truth about Neel's extra-marital affair, her mother's response would be to tell Leila to stay put and adapt herself to the reality of her situation. She thinks:

> She could not say, 'Amma, I've suspected for a while that Neel is having an affair. But now I know for sure. His lover told me everything yesterday.' Amma knew Neel as Suneel, and the terms 'affair' and 'lover' were not in her vocabulary. Once she was made to understand them, Leila knew what her mother's response would be. She would tell Leila to stay with Neel and forgive him. Amma had been raised on stories of mythical women who forgave their husbands everything. According to Amma, Rama and Sita lived happily ever after in the *Ramayana* (Cherian 304).

Rama and Sita from the epic *Ramayana* have been culturally deemed as the perfect couple, thereby ignoring the misogynist reality of their relationship.[21] When Sita is held up as an example of the ideal woman and the ideal wife, it is to endorse female subservience to men. Leila's mother supports the Sita condition which encourages the subjugation of women in Hindu culture and female self-sacrifice for the happiness of the male partner. In a country where women are supposed to always submit to the whims of male fancy and never give primacy to their own

[21] Having been forced to live with the demon, Ravana for a year after he abducted her, Sita is eventually rescued by Rama. However, Rama's subjects cast doubt on her chastity and Sita has to go through a trial by fire to prove that she is still faithful to Rama. After living in happiness for a few years, there are murmurs about her impurity again, at which point Rama abandons the now pregnant Sita in the forest where she gives birth to twin boys. Rama is united with his sons after they grow up, but he still does not believe in Sita's chastity and hesitates to accept her, at which point Sita calls to her mother, the earth goddess, to open up the earth and subsume her.

feelings, Leila knows that she will not be able to go home to India and receive the maternal warmth or familial understanding she craves.

Leila had crossed over irretrievably into a different world when she went to the US after her marriage and her own thoughts and perceptions had changed. She, who a short time ago could never have imagined contemplating divorce, was now conscious of the practicality of the phenomenon in certain situations, one of which was unfortunately her own. In "Diaspora and its Discontents," Shiva Kumar Srinivasan uses a Lacanian paradigm to state that it is natural for a diasporic subject to miss the home country, but after the subject's encounter with the Real of the diaspora, physically returning home might not mend the gap between the Real and the Imaginary of the homeland. He writes, "once a lack has emerged in the locus of the Other, … [t]he subject ceases to feel "at home". Home itself is imbued with the fear and terror that is associated with the radical Other. It takes on the features of the "uncanny," of the *unheimlich* instead of the *Heimlich*" (56). In this case, Leila would no longer be at home even if she went back to India as she would be put in social exile. Her family would no longer recognize the Leila who had changed so much as to bring disfavour to the family by leaving her husband—a social taboo in conservative Indian society which is "a culture that does not respect a woman without a husband. ... It is better to have a husband, even a bad one, especially if you have children" (Cherian 222-3).

A Good Indian Wife is narrated from three points of view: Neel's, Leila's, and Caroline's. Neel avoids and neglects Leila and allows Caroline to imagine a future for the two of them after Neel's grandfather dies; Caroline is sure that she will outwit the submissive Indian wife Neel has brought home and win him for herself; Leila's integrity stays strong throughout the novel even

when she is faced with evidence of Neel's affair with Caroline. Neel's lack of honesty and Leila's confusion and lack of self-confidence create conflicts in their relationship. She tries to win him over, but he keeps himself distant, moving back and forth between her and Caroline. She thinks defiantly at one point: "Maybe Neel wanted a more American wife. He had become quite American. So could she" (Cherian 155). There is only one moment in the novel when the reader sees Leila break down under the pressure of her circumstances. She tears up her wedding trousseau, and breaks down in tears (Cherian 279-80).

After this epiphanic moment, Leila becomes a stronger person who realizes that in America, people encourage personal happiness and divorce would not make her a social outcast as it would in India where society triumphs over the individual. She eventually makes a new friend—an Indian-American who is also leaving an unhappy relationship— and also wins over Neel's friends while using her own resources to adjust to her new environment. While Neel completely rejects Indian culture, Leila is able to find a fine balance between Indian and American identities. She becomes more and more independent, impressing Neel by not being the typical clinging wife he had been expecting. However, it is only when Leila goes beyond wanting to please her reticent husband who refuses to be intimate with her in bed, and begins to explore her own desires and dreams that she slowly starts to gain confidence in herself and also wins over Neel's friends.

Neel begins to notice the gradual change in her personality and everyday behaviour, and starts feeling more comfortable and friendly towards his wife. He returns home from the hospital earlier than he used to so that they could eat dinner together and spend some time getting to

know each other a little better. He finally consummates their marriage, after which Leila finds herself pregnant. He is also able to gather the courage to end his relationship with Caroline. At the end of the novel, when Neel has finally learned to embrace his new life and let go of the old, the reader is told:

> He didn't know how or why, but he felt his old skin slip off, giving his brownness a comfort he had never felt before. And when that desire for a white wife left him, so did his anger. He hadn't realized how angry he had been. Angry at Caroline for not being the right white woman; angry at Leila for forcing him to become a husband and father (Cherian 362).

The novel ends with Neel's own moment of epiphany. *A Good Indian Wife* is one of the few novels which depicts Indian values triumphing over Western principles; other novels usually portray a tenuous harmony between Indian and Western traditions. One such example is *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, where Priya is a bride like Leila, who goes over to California after a marriage arranged by her parents.

In Daswani's novel, Priya needs to adjust to living with Sanjay, her new husband through an arranged marriage and his family in their house in California. She comes over to America as a new bride and has to understand how to cope with the cultural differences as well as living together with people she has never properly met before. Priya has to come to terms with juggling two sets of expectations from her in-laws: that she be a good Indian wife and do all the household chores as well as be an independent American woman and hold down a job. The caveat is that the job is only something that she does till she gets pregnant and the job itself has to be basic enough to not threaten the livelihood of her husband. It is usually not acceptable for

traditional Indian wives to work outside the home when the husband supports the family. However, since Priya is not able to obediently conceive a baby right after the wedding, the in-laws think that she might as well be allowed to bring in some extra money. Sanjay's mother, although a stickler for Indian particulars, tells Priya, "'This is not India. In [the United States], everybody works'" (Daswani 1). This dual set of expectations which Priya as a new bride has to fulfill leads her to feel confused as to how much of her Indian self she should retain while she transforms herself into an "American" working woman.

Sanjay's parents in *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* want Priya to hold down a minor secretarial job which will not make society "talk", but they are adamant that Priya does not become a reporter as she would herself like. She begins working as a receptionist in a gossip magazine, *Hollywood Insider*, but she is offered a position as a reporter soon after that. Although Priya wants her family to be pleased with her, she is gradually becoming a more assured, independent woman and decides to disobey their wishes and advance in the professional field. She has to keep her promotion a secret from her family. While Priya is the perfect Indian wife at home, the workplace becomes a vent for her, somewhere she can be herself and explore her new "American" traits. Once again, Priya has to adapt to a situation which arises because of her family's inability to understand that she would still be a good wife and daughter-in-law even if her original identity changed to incorporate some Western values.

Unhappy with her marriage, she actively tries to resolve the problems she faces, and chooses to ask a couples therapist for counsel. Sanjay is outraged that Priya would go to an outsider to discuss issues as intimate as marriage problems. Indians usually keep personal

problems to themselves and never voice them to a third person. He asks her, "'Tell me why you feel you have to go outside for help and advice to these stupid and useless workshops that are not for our type of people'" (Daswani 224), meaning that Priya has crossed an unspoken line and also insulted her Indian principles by going beyond the immediate family for help with something so personal. The workshops are automatically judged useless because they are not for his "type of people", i.e. Indians. It is the prioritising of American culture over her own Indian values that enrage Sanjay. Because many of the issues that Priya grapples with in her marriage stem from her suddenly being transported to the US and being expected to straddle the stereotype of the docile Indian woman at home and then be like an American woman who earns her own living at work, it is not unusual that the conflicted Priya seeks advice from an American source. She finds it difficult to find a mean in the situation which will satisfy her new family as well as give her peace: she is unable to embrace her nascent hybrid identity at this point.

Chick lit heroines are generally very concerned about their appearance as it pertains to facial beauty, weight, a toned body and fashionable clothes. This takes on a cultural dimension in Indian chick lit when the heroine has to decide whether she should wear Western clothes or stick to traditional Indian garb. In *Goddess for Hire*, Maya was born and brought up in California and naturally chooses to wear Western attire and defends her choice to her family. However, in cases such as *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* and *A Good Indian Wife*, where the protagonists come to America after their arranged marriages, the clothes become a matter of cultural choice because the women wish to don Western clothes in order to fit into the new country and not be looked at askance by others. After Priya first arrives in California, she wears her Indian clothes such as a "daffodil yellow sari" (Daswani 18) and a "light-blue-with-black-trim salwar kameez" (Daswani

48). Priya thinks she looks exotic in her colourful Indian clothes at work, but she feels humiliated when one of her colleagues tell her that she looks "like a gypsy on speed" (Daswani 81). Her colleague, Shanisse, takes pity on her situation and gives her a "Western" makeover, thereby helping Priya take a step towards assimilating into her new host country. It is important to note here that although Priya buys fashionable Western clothes for work, she keeps this a secret at home because she knows that her parents-in-law and her husband will disapprove of her not wearing Indian clothes. Something as basic as clothing is also a site for the struggle between Indian and American culture. Since her new family cannot accept the gradual hybridization of her personality, Priya cannot embrace it either and lives suspended in a sort of limbo where she is simultaneously both and yet not quite either Indian or American.

Her unhappiness with her marriage finally forces Priya to overcome her cultural prejudice against divorce and take the decision to leave her husband and go back to her family in India. As mentioned earlier, in India, divorce is proscribed and most couples would choose to struggle through their relationship rather than face the stigma of being divorced or separated. She thinks to herself, "'In America, there is no shame in divorce. In India, there is no shame in living in marital misery. Somehow I am going to find my place'" (Daswani 174). Showing a rare glimpse of determination and self-confidence, she comes clean about her Indian/American personality juggling act to her in-laws and says, "I am not who you think I am, but have become who I always wanted to be" (Daswani 240).

Priya, therefore, finally learns to fight for her own desires and not kowtow to what her parents or her husband's parents want from her. Bhabha refers to a "Third Space" that is the

"precondition for the articulation of cultural difference." This "inbetween space" enables the articulation of cultural hybridity and a move away from polarities to an integration of contraries (Bhabha 56). Priya gradually traverses the Third space that Bhabha refers to when she realizes it is illogical to stay true to Indian notions like the sanctity of a marriage even when it is very unhappy. Priya's diasporic experiences in the US away from the sheltered existence she had enjoyed all her life makes her the freedom to make her own choices, and when she returns to India she is not the stereotypical Indian submissive woman who had left a year ago. She might never be able to fully embrace the traditional Indian customs she had believed in earlier and neither might she be completely Americanized, but she would occupy a hybrid space as her new identity.

However, the return to the homeland is also fraught with tension although the alienation experienced by the Indian protagonist planted into the Indian American diaspora makes her feel that she can only reconnect with herself if she returns home to India. Mishra asserts

> Diasporas have a progressivist as well as a reactionary streak in them. Both forms of this "streak" centre on the idea of one's "homeland" as very real spaces from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible. Homeland is the *desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign or *videsh*. When not presented in this "real" sense, homeland exists as an absence that acquires surplus meaning by the *fact* of diaspora" (2)

Thus, the actuality of the diaspora attributes excess meaning to the void created by the absence of the home country. Priya laments, "This country [USA] is too big and the people too foreign and I don't know how to be alone here" (Daswani 248). When she decides to leave Sanjay, going back to India seems to be the only way to return to the happiness she once knew in the culture

that had always been familiar to her. Mishra argues, "The fantasy of the homeland is then linked, in the case of the diaspora, to that recollected moment when diasporic subjects feel they were wrenched from their mother (father) land" (423). Mishra feels that diasporic subjects undergo a sort of spiritual trauma when they leave their own country and thus, one's wish to go back home is partly due to the guilt/trauma experienced by leaving it in the first place because one believes that is where one belongs. Priya feels like she will regain her confidence and the happiness that she had before she got married and repair her identity that had taken a cultural toll. However, contrary to what she expected, "home" is no longer what it used to be for her and she realizes that her experiences living in the diaspora had changed India for her just as she had changed after she left it. She does not find the spiritual sustenance she was looking for because having left her husband, she is seen as a sort of failure in India. Her family is conservative and believes that a girl's aim in life should be to get married and stay married.

In accordance with Mishra's views about the fantasy of the homeland, Mardorossian asserts that in the diaspora "the traditional notion of 'home' as belonging and community is exposed as a myth" (22). Due to the constant state of flux in the origin country, one who leaves it can never really return to the same "home" that one knew. The sense of home that one creates in the imagination is what Mishra calls the "fantasy of the homeland;" it is simply a fantasy: the return to the origin country leads to a jarring awakening. Mardorossian argues that the subject's return to the homeland proves that Mishra's ideal can never be a reality, and Rayaprol concurs by saying that "[t]he 'homelands' people reconstruct tend to be fictive communities, part real and part imagined" (2). Priya's diasporic experiences modify her innately Indian values, such as her views that a woman from a good family should not work outside the home and unhappy relationships should not end in divorce. When she was an unmarried girl in India, it was not

acceptable in her to work because it was expected in her family that she and her sisters would get married and be looked after by their husbands: and "no woman in [her] family [...] ever worked" (Daswani 251). After her brief stint as a reporter in *Hollywood Insider*, she applies for a job in an Indian gossip magazine called *Vivacious!* because she has gained confidence in her capabilities, and wants to continue being an independent working woman. She has changed for India as much as it has changed for her. She is something of an outcast when she leaves her husband, and one of Priya's aunts speculates that "maybe [Priya] became too American" (Daswani 251) and that had consequently led to the end of the marriage. The estrangement she felt in America remains unresolved in India because now the homeland is *unheimlich.*

Hence, Priya is a changed person after her experience in the Indian diaspora in the US and feels like she does not fit in the place where she felt she would always belong. Priya returns to the US only when Sanjay moves out of his comfort zone as the obedient Indian son who follows his parents' orders, and learns to makes decisions for himself like an independent "American". He woos her for the first time and she decides to go back to California and keep working. The plot conflict is therefore resolved only when the family accepts the heroine's hybrid identity, in turn enabling the protagonist to also be comfortable with who she is: an amalgamation of two cultures. Thus the "village" bride with the associated values of conservatism and reverence for Indian tradition becomes the liberal "cosmopolitan" who is now comfortable in America.

IV

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion on the Indian chick lit novels, the trope of the arranged married is employed to explore issues of cultural tension. The protagonists reflect characteristics of the new liberal Indian woman—independent, liberal, sexually liberated, "Westernized". Although Leila and Priya are from more conservative families than the other five heroines, they have the spirit to attempt to assimilate through Westernization by slowly but surely gaining self-confidence and a degree of autonomy. The plot mechanism of the arranged marriage pits the protagonist against an unknown man and engineers the heroine's self-exploration of her conflicting Indian/Westernized identity. All the protagonists are characterised by their attempt to somehow occupy an Indian *or* an American position in terms of their identity due to resistance from their families or their romantic partner, and usually their inclination to abide by American principles leads to tension in the family. The protagonist, however, begins to broaden her outlook to take into account the principles of the neglected culture, and thereby reaches towards a hybrid identity.

Bhabha asserts that hybridity is like a stairwell which has binary black and white parts and sees the "stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, [that] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (Bhabha 5). Only when the protagonists can embrace this in-between liminal space which forms a connective tissue between two cultures and prevents them from being polarities, and accept both sides of their identities simultaneously can a truly hybrid identity be enjoyed by them. In most cases, the heroine initially prefers to align herself with

Western/American cultural principles and her male partner/family is against Westernization in general and specifically in her. Most conflicts relating to work, love, and everyday living that arises from this difference of opinion is usually resolved only when the protagonist gradually embraces her Indian roots.

A Good Indian Wife and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* provide slightly differing examinations of this cultural problem of hybridity. Only Neel in *A Good Indian Wife* requires his wife to emulate American values for the majority of the novel, but he too, in the end, comes to recognize the comfort and self-content that his hybridity provides him which then allows him to appreciate Leila's hybrid identity. Sanjay in Daswani's novel feels Priya is a traitor to Indian cultural values, but it is he who ultimately manages to overcome his traditional Indian worldview to appreciate his wife's hybridity.

Robertson opposes the global-local polarity, and writes that glocalization "captures the dynamics of the local in the global and the global in the local" (29). Rao believes that this idea serves as an effective framework to interpret the global-local nexus in Bollywood audiences. When applied to chick lit, the cultural hybridity achieved by the female protagonist is a function of glocalization, and is related to micromarketing. Robertson refers to the business sense of glocalization (see fn. 2) to comment on the construction of differentiated customer bases for the purchase of goods that are tailored to their tastes. Since "diversity sells," adapting products for increasingly differentiated local markets based on region, gender, ethnicity, society, etc. within the global market is a sound business plan (28-29). Thus, Indian chick lit satisfies—or even creates—the market for ethnic chick lit focusing on the Indian/diasporic Indian protagonist. It is

an adaptation of mainstream chick lit that enables Indian readers to identify to a greater extent with the social milieu and cultural choices of the protagonist. It provides an aura of the familiar, and for those readers living outside India for an extended period of time, it allows an indulgence in nostalgia. The circumscription of Westernization in favour of Indian values attests to the enjoyment of a hybrid space which enables liberal values in accordance with a sense of the Indian national identity.

Marwan Kraidy complicates the notion of hybridity by claiming that both local and global cultural formations are inevitably hybridized as a result of globalisation ("The Global" 459-60), and that hybridity is constructed in a hegemonic way so that it serves the interests of the dominant classes of society ("Hybridity" 7). He also asserts that hybridity can be conceptualised "as *glocalisation*, at the intersection of globalization and localization" (Kraidy, "The Global" 472). Bhaha's notion of hybridity does not invalidate the asymmetrical power relations that underlie it, but the third space is rooted in power that frequently threatens the strength of the dominant power structure. Kraidy's idea of hybridity ties in with Bhabha's notion when he argues that hybridization does not create "nonpower zones of cultural mixture," but that the hegemonic framework of hybridity reveals the insidious workings of power in transnational contexts ("Hybridity" 16). Indian chick lit demonstrates the operation of hybridity as both the affirmation of differences as well as the simultaneous assertion of an "Indian" identity. While there is cultural negotiation against the feared homogenization of culture by the West, there is also the re-inscription of the Indian female protagonist—as well as the readers—within the "local" Indian hegemonic domain. Hall claims that global culture is an odd form of capital that can only "rule through other local capitals" ("The local and the global", 28). The "Indianization"

of mainstream chick lit showcases the consent formation along with the localised meaning-making that serves to strengthen the cultural hegemony of the Indian nation state amidst globalization.

AUSTENTATIOUS APPROPRIATIONS: JANE AUSTEN IN CHICK CULTURE

I

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall broaden my focus from chick lit to "chick culture" in general; an explanation of chick culture follows below. My research will involve an examination of the different ways of capitalizing on Jane Austen in chick culture. The Austen-derived commodities have a cannibalistic relation to the classic Austen novels and, in this sense, commodify the earlier texts. For example, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) are modernizations of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and the Fielding's sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999) is a reworking of Austen's *Persuasion* (1818). While Austen's *Emma* (1815) was adapted into *Clueless* (1996), the Indian film, *Aisha* (2010) adapts both *Emma* as well as *Clueless* in a process of double-commodification. I will study questions of commodity, and the global circulation of popular literature and culture as manifested in the Anglo-American and Indian—representing the "West" and the "East"—derivatives of Austen novels. I aim to study the various derivatives of the Austen novels as sites of cultural globalization.

The use-value of Austen's classic text to the contemporary author is its importance as a resource for "raiding" it for aspects which can be extended or accentuated. The reader identifies and is fascinated with some features of the new work, which are usually the similarities with the original. This is the psychological aspect of the commodity fetish by which individuals internalize the general system of exchange-value. I will use Gerard Genette's idea of

hypertextual transposition to explore five contemporary derivatives of Jane Austen novels—*Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000) as a *Sense and Sensibility* derivative; *Pride & Prejudice* (2003), *Jane Austen in Boca* (2003), and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) as derivatives of *Pride and Prejudice*; and *Aisha* (2010) as a derivative of *Emma*. While *Jane Austen in Boca* is a chick lit novel (widow lit to be precise), the other texts are "chick flicks." Three of the texts are set in an Indian background, while *Pride & Prejudice* and *Boca* are set in Mormon and Jewish communities respectively. The contemporary film adaptation is a commodification of the classic text which is exploited as a source for the readers'/viewers' consumption. The transmedia practice represented by the films here brand the movies as chick culture through their colourful pastel-dominant trailers, glamour, and the centrality of women to the plot. The first and the last texts mentioned above are also linguistic transpositions.

In *Chick Flicks*, Ferriss and Young argue, "chick culture can be productively viewed as a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty- to thirtysomething middle-class women. Along with chick flicks, the most prominent chick cultural forms are chick lit and chick TV programming, although other pop culture manifestations such as magazines, blogs, music—even car designs and energy drinks—can be included in the chick line-up" (1-2). They trace the starting point of chick culture to the establishment of chick lit as a genre. The TV series *Sex and the City*, based on the book by Candace Bushnell, appeared at approximately the same time and is another contributor to chick culture's origins. As a trend dating from the mid-1990s, the chick culture explosion both reflected and promoted the new visibility of women in popular culture.

The products of chick culture are all addressed to women, usually young, urban, and upwardly mobile. Ferriss and Young write, "This intentional address to female audiences advocates an increasing appreciation for women's importance in contemporary culture. The media reflected and even shaped women's complex social positioning—with its continued restrictions and its new freedoms—and their aspirations (*Chick Flicks* 2). During the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, words such as "girl" and "chick" were thought to be insulting terms, infantilizing women and making them seem like frail beings who needed to be protected and cared for by men. While second-wave feminists rejected terms like these in an effort to create a gender-equal society, third-wave feminists have embraced words like "chick", "girl", and even "bitch" to signify empowerment and solidarity.[22] Thus, chick culture is closely connected with postfeminism. This connection has been examined in more detail in Chapter 1.

In this dissertation, I have consistently understood feminism and postfeminism in terms of continuity instead of conflict. Although there are various definitions of postfeminism, the most ubiquitous form—aptly called "chick" postfeminism—is the most germane to the exploration of chick culture (Ferriss and Young, *Chick Flicks* 3). This postfeminist subgenre questions the established sexual and social roles for women, highlights the positive aspects of female camaraderie and friendship, and demonstrates the complexities women struggle with in their desire to "have it all." The acceptance of girliness does not imply the loss of female independence and power: femininity and feminism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is, however, important to note that femininity functions in different ways in patriarchal culture and

[22] Instead of taking the term "chick" as a derogatory label that disparages this category of women's films, Jo Berry and Angie Errigo accept it as a positive term to describe films that bring pleasure to women, stressing on the importance of female desire in the phrase "movies women love" in their book, *Chick Flicks: Movies Women Love* (Ferriss and Young 14).

in feminist culture. Therefore, when one wishes to be feminine as a feminist, one needs to possess the awareness to enact femininity discerningly in a patriarchal context.

In addition to the short description of chick culture, a brief synopsis of the different modes of transposition is necessary here and lays a foundation for the discussion of texts through the lens of Genette's hypertextuality in the latter half of this chapter. A palimpsest is defined as "A parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing" (*OED* 2013). In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), Gerard Genette, French literary critic, historian, and structuralist theorist, explores the interrelationships between literary works and explains literary devices such as parody, antinovels, pastiches, caricatures, commentary, allusion, and imitation. For the author, later literary works or "hypertexts" are transpositions of earlier "hypotexts." *Palimpsests* is the second of a trilogy—the other texts are *Introduction a l'architexte* and *Seuils*—where Genette provides a structuralist analysis of the primary elements of "transtextuality," which is what he calls the "'textual transcendence of the text", or "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1). Genette is aware that the greater challenge to critic and theoretician, and the most important hypertextual category is transposition, "by far the richest in technical operations and in literary applications" (30), and he dedicates the second half of his book to it.

Palimpsests studies what Genette calls hypertextuality, that is, "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5). Moreover, in

Palimpsests Genette investigates "the sunnier side of hypertextuality: that in which the shift from hypotext to hypertext is both massive (an entire work B deriving from an entire work A) and more or less officially stated" (9). Whereas metatexts or commentaries explicitly mention the hypotext(s) around which they orient themselves, in the case of hypertextuality, a text B may not "speak" at all about text A and yet still not be able exist, as such, without A. Thus hypertexts derive from hypotexts through a process that Genette calls *transformation*, whereby text B "evokes" text A more or less perceptibly but does not necessarily mention it or cite it. Genette proposes two kinds of hypertextual relations: transformation and imitation. Each of these has a playful, a satirical, and a serious mode.[23] We shall limit ourselves to a discussion on the serious transformation of the hypotext in this chapter, a phenomenon that Genette terms "transposition." The various swerves from precursor texts involve such acts as excision or concision, extension, expansion, continuation, changing the motivation, place, or time of action or the gender or character of the hero/ine, translation, versification, prosification, and so on. Genette identifies five types of transtextual relationships,[24] of which hypertextuality is the most significant. One aspect of hypertextuality is transmodalization, a term that implies "any kind of alteration in the

[23] Playful transformation is parody, satirical transformation travesty, and serious transformation transposition. Playful imitation is pastiche, satirical imitation is caricature, and serious imitation forgery. The contrast between transformation and imitation in Genette's approach yields a grid of six possible hypertextual modalities, exemplified in a more or less pure or mixed form in the world's literatures.

[24] Intertextuality is the actual presence of one text within another, by way of such mechanisms as quoting, plagiarism, and allusion. Paratextuality refers to the pragmatics of textual transmission; the paratext can include titles, subtitles, prefaces, forewords, book covers, "and many other kinds of secondary signals, whether allographic or autographic" that help establish a generic contract between the author of the text and the reader. Metatextuality names the relation by which one text bears critically on another. Architextuality refers to "the entire set of general or transcendent categories—types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres—from which emerges each singular text." And then, there is hypertextuality, as defined above, and is the main topic of *Palimpsests*.

mode of presentation characterizing the hypotext" (277). Austen's plots are transformed by placing the current social experiences and aspirations of women at the centre, accompanied by a resolution of the tension between women's romantic desires and career dreams.

Genette attempts to pluralise the text's semantic potential. Inquiring into the internal structures of texts makes it possible to see literary works in new contexts of interpretation, thereby increasing manifold their transtextual depth. The chick culture texts I study are hypertexts that bear the palimpsestic imprint of Austen modernized to reflect the socio-economic changes that have occurred in the past two centuries. However, her original plots are still very relevant in the present day; *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* Genette argues, "the habitual movement of diegetic transposition is a movement of proximization: the hypertext transposes the diegesis of its hypotext to bring it up to date and closer to its own audience (in temporal, geographic, or social terms)" (304). All the transpositionsto chick culture discussed in this chapter are such modernizations where the contemporary texts make the classic Austen novels more relatable to the modern audience. It is important to remember the factors that an Austen modernizer needs to work with: significant changes in culture brought about by developments in technology, globalization, and differences in cultural standards.

Following the rapid industrialisation and commercialisation of the world brought about by the Industrial and Consumer Revolutions, the next great change was brought about in the social realm with the Feminist movement. The Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood prevalent in pre-Civil War America and Britain was a value system which emphasized femininity, separate spheres for men and women, and believed that the "true woman" would be blessed with four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, domesticity, and

submissiveness (Welter 152). These naturalised assumptions were challenged in the late nineteenth century by First Wave feminists who advocated women's rights, and fought especially for universal suffrage. The figure of the New Woman emerged as a counter-response to the Cult of True Womanhood (Welter 174). The subsequent Second Wave feminist movement fought for property rights and reproductive rights. With the advent of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s, women were finally able to take control of their bodies and fertility, and thus, the pill became a key player in women's modern economic role. It led to rise in college education for women, an increase in female employment, as well as later marriages (Bailey, Hershbein, and Miller). One of the most drastic social changes is that of women's position in the social and economic spheres, and thereby the financial, social, and legal avenues they have access to. The proximizations of Austen's novels also portray the important role played by globalization in the modern world.

II

Jane Austen as a Hot Commodity

A good example of the cultural commodification of Austen is "The Republic of Pemberley" website where a section is dedicated to lists and reviews of published sequels of Austen novels by professional writers. The list contains forty-nine modern sequels to *Pride and Prejudice* alone, many of which are simple extensions of the original plot and character histories, such as *Postscript from Pemberley* (2000). There are also more refined transpositions, involving other subgenres, such as Stephanie Barron's mystery series, starting with *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor* (1996), and Paula Marantz Cohen's clever production, *Jane Austen in Boca* (2003), which relocates the story to a Jewish retirement complex in Florida. Cohen portrays the Bennet sisters as a group of elderly widows with a bossy daughter-in-law

anxious to find them husbands from amongst the retired, eligible widowers. The novel is interspersed with witty references to academia and literary criticism, including a seminar on *Pride and Prejudice*, which produces an ironic, self-referential observation on how Austen is received by non-academic readers today. Another subdivision of "The Republic of Pemberley" urges Janeites to write their own fanfiction sequels and circulate them electronically for others to contribute the next instalment. Austen's own six novels are now so entrenched in contemporary reading cultures that they have become fertile ground for revision, both on page and screen, as well as paraphernalia. "The Republic of Pemberley" has its own "Pemberley Shoppe" where one can purchase Austen memorabilia including stationery, tote bags, mugs, t-shirts, calendars and iPad cases.

The largest circulation of Austen's work is not through the written word but through the screen. There was a wave of screen adaptations of Austen's novels in the 1980s and the 1990s, a trend which, with three serializations in the UK ITV's 2007 Jane Austen Season, shows no sign of reduction. The more recent adaptations have become increasingly self-referential and engaged in a sort of cross-commodification of previous Austenian films. Working Title, the production company for the movie adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 2005, revisited its source with a new filmic version of *Pride and Prejudice*, which clearly drew on its screen predecessors. The film is characteristic of the contemporary versions that presume an informed reader, familiar not just with Austen's novels but with their subsequent cinematic adaptations. *Bridget Jones's Diary* deftly utilizes its different media representations: the clever casting of Colin Firth as Mr. Mark Darcy is a calculated reference to Firth's casting in the BBC serial (1995).

Austen-derived media products serve as Genette-esque palimpsests for the accomplished Austen reader, knowledgeable of eighteenth-century literary conventions, the quirks of the original text, and the idiosyncrasies of cinema. Of these, both *Clueless* (1995), Amy Heckerling's tribute to *Emma*, and Gurinder Chadha's *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) expertly reprocess popular cinematic forms: the teen comedy and the Bollywood musical. The movies transpose the plot onto modern times in favour of the cultural hybridity which is both their subject and their homage to Austen. Contrary to expectations, it is by their disposal of textual conformity that they recall Austen's own light, ironic tone, that is sometimes lost in the period loyalty of the heritage film industry because their foreign settings defamiliarize Austen and reinterpret the novels in ways that are more nuanced than many traditional versions. The position of cinema as a popular art form for the masses in modern Indian culture itself blurs the distinction between the high culture Austen "classic" and the mass culture Bollywood musical extravaganza. It is significant that by keeping the title of *Bride and Prejudice* recognizably close to the Austen novel, Chadha expects the discerning Austen readers in the Indian movie-going audience to pay attention to the successful transdiegetization of the classic which makes the Regency marriage plot accessible and relatable to postcolonial, postfeminist Elizabeth Bennets.

However, in spite of the heterogeneity of her following, Austen's artistic reputation remains unharmed, recognized by readers both inside and outside the academy. The market for Austen derivatives and memorabilia exists due to the universality and timelessness of her plots. She wove intricate social commentary into the marriage plot, and instead of being "simple" romances, her novels deal with key issues of class and money including the social and economic ramifications of marriage for women, multi-dimensional female characters, as well as the

position of women in society. The BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1995 helped to kickstart the Austen mania since a spate of screen adaptations have followed since then. Caroline Westbrook quotes Ian Freer, associate editor of *Empire* magazine, to explain the thriving market for all things Austen: "These are beautifully constructed stories of heartbreak and happiness populated by good-looking people and adorned with period finery which is the stuff of populist movies. The fact that they also come with a set of social restrictions that can be translated into any environment… increases their appeal as they still feel contemporary and relevant" (Westbrook). There is a mass of Austen-inspired paraphernalia available on the market, and buyers of Austen consumables partake in a subculture communicating by means of culturally-coded signifiers. The Austen mug and t-shirt advertise the owner to a group of imaginary Austen friends, while simultaneously declaring a set of tastes and attachments that distance at least as often as they attract. It is significant that except for those in the gift shops in designated tourist spots, Austen objects are largely available not through the sociable act of shopping in stores but through online and catalogue shopping—like an exclusive club.

While Austen married romance with social criticism, the contemporary chick flicks typically examine society's demands on women to conform, but also demonstrate how women now demand professional fulfilment instead of simply the right man to settle down with. Genette's "transposition" is in line with Barthes's idea of the death of the author because once the text is created, the text belongs to the author only to a degree since it can be remade or rearranged in different ways by other authors. This "borrowing" from already existing texts to recreate them instead of preserving the original is one of the main vehicles of artistic creation. The focus for such re-creation has been shifted to Jane Austen only recently since the initial

adaptations of Austen into film concentrated on being faithful to the originals. Meagan Morris writes, "[w]hen any and every text can be read indifferently as another instance of 'strategic rewriting'...something more (and something more specific) is needed to argue how and why a particular event of rewriting might matter" (5). This is where the commodification of Austen in the capitalist framework of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is important.

W. J. T Mitchell notes that in contemporary capitalistic society, "the common thread of both the marketable and the unmarketable artwork is the more or less explicit awareness of "marketability" and publicity as unavoidable dimensions of any public sphere that art might address'" (375). Therefore, in order to shine the spotlight on adaptation and set the hypertext into a relation with the hypotext, it is impossible to not attribute some kind of intelligence at work which makes the most marketable choices when it comes to deciding the extent of preservation and reworking of the original text. Jane Austen is an eminently marketable cultural commodity in this sense because even to those unfamiliar with her work, the name itself evokes certain expectations due to the cultural cache that surrounds her: romance, Regency England, decorum, propriety. John Wiltshire writes, "The mere title 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1989 MLA presentation and 1991 essay, flaunting the same incongruity, was attacked by conservative commentators, disturbed at the linkage of the familiar cipher for placid elegance and furtive, unsanctioned sexuality" (8). This "Jane Austen" is a brand name, and you can use it to sell anything from nightgowns to travel mugs.[25]

[25] Pemberley Shoppe

"Jane Austen" signals a kind of domesticity, a fascination with the lives and times of prim English ladies and chivalrous gentlemen, a concern with manners, and a prudish conservatism. In the chick culture transpositions I explore in this chapter, these themes have been modified in a globalised context, although it is interesting to note that the texts have been adopted by cultures which are usually claimed to be more conservative; for example, Mormon culture, Jewish culture, Indian (Hindu) culture. Wiltshire remarks, "This 'Jane Austen' is irredeemably conservative and middle-class" (8). However, this inherent genteelness, the focus on an anachronistic importance of decorum and breeding, the localism of the plots, might make others see Austen as a sign of English neo-imperialism, colonising the international market by the distribution of her novels through broadcasting giants such as the BBC. The recent transpositions of Jane Austen—the cinematic versions are all categorized under "chick flick"—attempt to rescue Austen from the potential tarnish of her name due to her enforcement of convention and conformity. The recent modernizations show how Austen can be exported to an international stage, how she can be made postcolonial, religiously and culturally diverse, and yet remain faithful to the basics of her plots to reinforce the idea of her continued relevance.

The derivatives of canonical Austen works involve reinterpretations of the hypotext (the "original"), capture the changing socio-political milieu, and the interface between the earlier and the current approaches to literary representation. These transpositions also revise the Foucauldian "author function" by producing new readings of the foundation texts. The repackagings of the original make the authorship go beyond the basic attribution of the discourse to the author, and the characters of the books are actualised and endure due to the continued life given to them by critics, and the author herself becomes an isolated, constructed persona. The various potential

interpretations of the Austen text are multiplied during its circulation as a commodity through its different transpositions. An understanding of this intertextuality between the hypotext and the hypertext highlights the interaction between the consumer and the hypertext-commodity. It is the consumer's fetishism of the Austen text that produces the social value or the consumable value of the hypertext-commodity. The consumer identifies and appreciates those elements in the hypertext that are appropriated from Austen, and it is his/her fetishization of those Austen components that assigns an exchange-value to the hypertext. However, this also reduces the hypertext to those facets which meet the requirements of consumption by Austen aficionados. The fetishistic remaking of the hypotext already anticipates a certain kind of reception in the literary marketplace because of the presence of the glimpses of Austen in the new text.

III

Jane Austen in Chick Culture

Although Austen's novels did not become bestsellers in her own lifetime, her six novels have maintained high sales and have been adapted into the full variety of modern media. The cinematic versions of all the novels which have proved to be successful at the box office have created new audiences for her work. However, the revisions of Austen's work in different media which have garnered so much mass appeal have provided the biggest impetus to increase her popularity. The internet especially has encouraged a form of dedication through websites about Austen, her life, her work, and the world around her. The best-developed of these websites is "The Republic of Pemberley" which calls its members "Janeites," in reference to Rudyard Kipling's story "The Janeites." A passion for Jane Austen is thus necessary for acceptance into this elite group.

There is a large Austen-inspired subgenre that exists in the broader realm of chick lit/chick flicks, which need to be scrutinized as participants in chick culture. Chick lit is traced back to *Bridget Jones's Diary* but Fielding admits to basing her plot on *Pride and Prejudice*. Therefore, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is indirectly the original ur-text of the genre. Reading chick culture in this light, Austen then established the main themes that chick lit explores now: female introspection, self-discovery, and self-development. Suzanne Ferriss writes, "Fielding's *Bridget Jones* novels emulate Austen's in presenting the interior states of their female characters. Both writers present intelligent but misguided women who learn the error of their perceptions of men and discover true love in the process" (*Chick Lit* 75). Other chick lit novelists follow Fielding's path.

Apart from chick lit, the other avatar of chick culture I discuss in this chapter is the chick flick. Ferriss and Young note that "chick flicks are commercial films that appeal to a female audience" (*Chick Flicks* 2), and Jo Berry and Angie Errigo in *Chick Flicks: Movies Women Love* define a chick flick as "a film made specifically to appeal to a female audience" (1). Ferriss and Young elaborate that "Chick flicks illustrate, reflect, and present all of the cultural characteristics associated with the chick Postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girlpower, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girlie goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories" (*Chick Flicks* 4). The films discussed here maintain a continuous dialogue with Austen, but instead of simply being modernizations, the texts can be read as participating in the chick culture that chick lit contributes to. They use the format of chick culture to portray the Austenian themes of female agency, female interpersonal relationships and personal aspirations, evoking the central motif of female self-awareness and self-discovery as a result of a few pivotal

decisions. There is usually a riot of colour in the *mise-en-scene*, most protagonists struggle to balance their professional desires with their interest in finding Mr. Right, and some heroines—notably Aisha in the eponymous *Aisha*—are also featured indulging in conspicuous consumption.

Although Austen's plots are very local featuring small villages consisting of a few families, the themes she examines in this small society enable current adaptors to enact Austen's plots on a global scale. Looking for the right partner and one's relationship with one's family are general themes that are performed in every culture. Two features that are changed in most contemporary Austen re-interpretations is the function of the family and the significance of the heroine's professional success (Troost and Greenfield). It is now unsuitable to depict the female protagonist as simply on the lookout for a good husband without concentrating on her career, as well as to show their families as being obstructive influences on their lives instead of havens of support. In Austen's novels, the heroines get personal validation from the love of a good man, but because of the status of women in the Regency period, they do not get any opportunities for any sort of professional success. It would, indeed, be a sad turn of events if a heroine did need to work for her living. For example, the good-natured but bumbling Bridget Jones is a career woman; even her mother, Mrs. Jones, leaves her long-term marriage for a career in television. Simply getting a man is not an accomplishment. The chick culture modernized transpositions attempt to provide female professional development and thereby adapt Austen's plots to the changes in women's socio-cultural politics since her time. Jane Austen has become the oxymoronic "modern classic" and is in high demand by film directors who want to modernize her.

Austen is also popular because of her representation of the socio-economic problems, the stifled personal desires and romantic inclinations of women amidst a male-dominated society, and it is perhaps ironic that those situations are relevant in the modern world that chick lit explores where women still face various oppositions due to a patriarchal society. Chick lit creates a sort of shared inclusive space for female readers since it is a genre where women write about women for predominantly female readers. Although one of the films I discuss in the chapter, Andrew Black's *Pride & Prejudice*, is created by a man, as Jennifer Mary Woolston notes, the central characters are all female, the female voice—Elizabeth's—is always at the focus of the narration, and Black carefully foregrounds female self-growth as it pertains to the main characters (Woolston). Women's contemporary social experiences and aspirations are located at the centre of these modernizations, thereby creating a revised women's tale for an audience of women. These re-interpretations bolster women's need to share their diverse experiences, giving us cheerful commentaries that are very similar to Austen's own. What Jocelyn Harris said about *Clueless* is equally apt for the Austen-inspired derivates I discuss here: "[i]mitations (uniquely) do not obliterate the parent text. They recall it. Jane Austen is both absent and present in this [text]" (65).

The packaging of chick lit is important to the high sales it commands, and one of the most basic aspects is the use of colourful "pastel covers and titles written in loose cursive script" (Gyenes). The eye-catching covers promise the reader slight variations on the paradigmatic romance, and is the main marketing tool for the genre, apart from the blurb. Chick flicks follow a similar publicity mechanism where instead of the colourful cover and arty graphics, they use the cinematic trailer to achieve a similar kind of branding. Just as the name of a well-loved chick lit novelist creates a brand, casting famous actors in the title roles creates a comparable persuasive

allure for the film. Knowing that the beautiful Aishwarya Rai will play Elizabeth Bennet in *Bride and Prejudice* already leads to heightened levels of expectation in the target audience. The colourful pastel wardrobe, background, and props serve to remind the audience that what they are watching or reading belongs to the world of chick culture.

In the next section, I will trace the palimpsestic nature of the Austen hypertexts, and the way they "cash in" on the "cash cow" that is Jane Austen. I shall focus on five products of the worldwide Jane Austen franchise—one novel and four films—and chart the commodification-through-transdiegetization that makes Austen a commercial property centuries after her death. The Austen plot imported to different socio-cultural milieus allows the reader/viewer to retain a sense of the familiar while being simultaneously defamiliarised due to the foreign context. The timelessness of Austen's plots facilitates their commercial appeal as filmmakers can use the tried and tested plots and transpose them to a different spatiotemporal framework. The consumer latches on to what is uniquely Austenian in the transpositions, and the new context allows for an intensification of pleasure due to the newness attributed to what was old and well-known. The pluralisation of interpretations made possible by the transpositions gives them worldwide consumer appeal.

Each of these five texts discussed here transports Austen to widely differing cultural and geographical contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A list of Jane Austen textual and cinematic adaptations would fill a book, but I will focus on those trandiegetizations that seek to rejoice in the differences from Austen's originals and showcasing their potential for being suited to a globalised world, instead of those which intend to faithfully replicate them in their entireties. With respect to the films, as Jocelyn Harris has noted, no modern version of Austen's

novels can be purely mimetic because as soon as the medium is changed, the original hypotext is displaced in a sort of metaphoric or metonymic process (51). She talks of these as imitations, where the term "imitation" is different in meaning from Genette's use of the same word. Harris includes Genette's idea of the serious transposition in her "imitation" without embracing Genette's notion of an imitation as forgery. According to Harris, the transposed imitation of Austen's novel emphasises the difference from the original to display the creativity of the author. The imitation diverges from the original while simultaneously echoing it. Instead of following Austen's words, it works with the plots, characters, and themes (Harris 51). The difference between the two versions is the locus of the pleasure of the text for the reader/viewer. The readers'/viewers' happiness rests in reading the old favourite from the perspective of the new version, viewing it in a new context which shows us possible interpretations that they had not seen before.

IV

Jane Austen's Chick Culture Transpositions

Kandukondain Kandukondain: *Sense and Sensibility* in South India

Kandukondain Kandukondain (2000), the Tamil adaptation of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, shows that the contemporary Austen heroine needs personal success to have a sense of fulfilment and is not satisfied with a wealthy marriage to an intellectually equal partner. At the beginning, it is difficult to draw the parallels between this south Indian film and its Austenian hypotext, especially since the film starts with a battle scene where the soldier is wounded in the leg in a landmine explosion. This belligerent scene is a far cry from Austen's staid, feminine pastoral space. However, an Austen aficionado will soon recognise the plot parallels between the

two texts to understand that the battle scene tells the viewer how the Colonel Brandon character, Major Bala was wounded in battle. The film then shows on the family that shall be the focus of the plot. After the patriarch of the family dies leaving the family estate in favour of his son, the penniless daughter and the three granddaughters are left at the mercy of loathsome relatives. The mother takes her daughters, Sowmya (Elinor) and Meenakshi (Marianne) and moves to Chennai to find jobs so that they can support themselves. They suffer economic hardship, distress in romantic relationships, but ultimately find personal financial success and love.

The scene where we first encounter the two sisters contrast their personalities as well as their sensibilities regarding romantic love. They discuss their expectations from romantic relationships; Meenakshi follows Marianne Dashwood in craving passion and poetry in her relationships, while Sowmya is like Elinor in wishing for more realistic romantic experiences. Meenakshi declares, "I want lightning, rain and storm. From that a celestial man will come. He'll sing Bharathi's poetry." Sowmya just wants a good man, and believes she will know him when she looks into his eyes. In response to Meenakshi's question whether Somya shouldn't choose a man just like the one she wants, Sowmya answers, "This face, this body, my femininity, I didn't select any of these...Then why should I select my husband?" She is happy to follow the arranged marriage path her mother wants for her. This distinction between the sisters is further manifested in a song which follows after their discussion. Meenakshi's poetic nature is shown by setting her dance choreography amidst a verdant rural setting where she goes through several sari changes and is surrounded by many back-up dancers in colourful traditional dress. The Indian cultural imagery and the agrarian backdrop seem to celebrate Meenakshi's sensibility, unlike Austen's text which clearly places more favour in Elinor's sensible disposition.

Both Sowmya and Meenakshi are united with the men they love, after suffering a similar chain of trials that Elinor and Marianne have to undergo, but only after they attain their professional success first. While Meenakshi begins a career in singing and quickly becomes a star, Sowmya progresses from a low-level clerical position in a multi-national company to their best computer programmer. At the end of the film she is offered a job in the company's US location, but it is not clear whether she accepts it. It does attest to her professional capabilities and her potential to navigate a transatlantic move to a different lifestyle. It is now a characteristic of the neo-liberal Indian woman, and of women across the globe, to earn their own living instead of being dependent on the men in their lives, and Rajiv Menon includes this work ethic in this Austen adaptation. Although Sowmya and Meenakshi belong to an upper class family, falling on hard times brings out the latent resilience and desire to be financially independent in them. This fact is underscored when the family rejects the opportunity to return to their estate because they are so involved in their careers in the city. The move from the pseudo-feudal landed estate in the country to a bustling city where they can earn their own keep is also of central importance in modernizing the hypotext to chime in with contemporary culture. It is only after they find self-validation through their professional success that they settle down with their lovers.

Kandukondain Kandukondain initially did not have a global focus at all, and was targeted at a markedly local Tamil audience. It does not claim to be an adaptation of a Jane Austen novel on the DVD cover or anywhere in the credits, and the subtitles are imprecise and not in sync with the action. If one looks at the cover of the original DVD released in 2000 for the Indian diaspora in other countries, there is no English title to attract non-Tamil-speaking viewers because the main title is in Tamil with just a transliteration into the Roman script. However, Rajiv Menon's film became very popular because its recognisable connection to the Jane Austen industry paved

its way to international success. A new version of the DVD was released in 2005 which obviously aimed at a much larger audience than the first avatar (Troost and Greenfield). The cover itself now has an English title—*I Have Found It*—and includes a heading that declares it to be "A Bollywood Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*." This sophisticated version has updated subtitles that are grammatical, correctly translated and timed with the action depicted on screen.

While the plot that Menon localises to suit Indian tastes derives from *Sense and Sensibility*, it is heavily influenced by Emma Thompson's adaptation of the same and contains scenes from the latter which do not appear in the Austen original. Thus, Menon effectively manages a double-commodification of Austen by using both the master text as well as Thompson's adaptation of it. For example, Major Bala gives Meenakshi the sitar she had been yearning for, and Sowmya starts crying in front of Manohar (Edward Ferrars) when she finds out that he does still want her and has not married another woman as she had erroneously believed. Their Bollywood-style double marriage that follows Sowmya's promotion and Meenakshi's newfound popularity is another nod to Thompson's adaptation. The semanticity of the classic Austen text is therefore multiplied during its circulation as a commodity through its cinematic adaptations and its "blockbuster" status.

The global culture-local feel juxtaposition can also be viewed in the song sequences that pepper *Kandukondain Kandukondain.* Although the collage of widely different geographical locales, costumes, and dance styles can seem like a confused mishmash to Western audiences, there is method to the madness. Juxtaposing hallowed English literary tradition (represented by Austen), Thompson's contemporary interpretation of that tradition, Michael Jackson-inspired

choreography, and setting as exotic as Egyptian pyramids, with the "local" Tamil lyrics, *Kandukondain Kandukondain* embodies the glocal. Menon demonstrates that postcolonial India welcomes globalism and can incorporate it into local culture. While the filmmakers have cashed in on the potential success the label "Jane Austen" will provide worldwide, part of the acclaim can be attributed to the conscious choices that the film makes: localising global culture by recognising the importance of career in a woman's life, the mother figure is shown as resourceful and capable instead of the helpless Mrs. Dashwood, and the film brands itself as an Austen adaptation in its marketing.

***Jane Austen in Boca*: *Pride and Prejudice* in Florida**

Dr. Paula Marantz Cohen, Distinguished Professor of Literature at Drexel University, has produced an unusual modernization of *Pride and Prejudice* in her *Jane Austen in Boca*. This is the only novel that remakes the central characters into elderly but vivacious Jewish septuagenarians living the retired life in a retirement community in Boca Raton, Florida circa 2008. Cohen confesses that this original idea struck her when she was visiting her in-laws in such a Boca community: "I was struck at the time by the similarity of their retirement community—a very sociable one inhabited by Jewish seniors—to the closed world of the Jane Austen novel. Here too, was a plethora of gossip, visiting, meals and romance (given the number of widows and widowers seeking partners). Jane's 'two of three families in a country village' could easily be translated, I believed, into 'four or five seniors in a Boca Raton club'" (Fernandez 5D; qtd. in Salber).

Cohen's straightforward title, *Jane Austen in Boca*, functions on different levels—Boca is the location where the central characters re-enact Austen's novel, the place where Austen's work

is taught by Stan Jacobs (Mr. Darcy) and studied by the retirees, and the place where Austen's work is adapted. In "Jane Austen Now Through the Lens of Boca Festa," Cecilia Salber writes, "Actually, Boca is timeless, Boca is everywhere" (Salber). *Jane Austen in Boca* is evidence that Jane Austen created a story that is universal and can transpire anywhere at any age. It is an innovative updating of *Pride and Prejudice*, and it includes social commentary on topics such as the present financial status of women, current family relations, generational role reversals, and the emotional welfare of a demographic group that is frequently ignored. Cohen's characters are testament that Austen is still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Cohen has persuasively altered the Bennet sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, and their friend Charlotte Lucas into septuagenarian widows May Newman, Florence Kliman, and Lila Katz respectively. By concentrating on the older generation, Cohen makes the socio-political developments that have occurred in the last two centuries directly evident to the reader. The children of the retired community are prosperously settled in the New York and the New Jersey suburbs, complete with thriving careers, gorgeous homes, talented children, and sufficient disposable income. However, the Boca residents understand with the perspective of age that all the wealth and prosperity they enjoyed in their youth and their current luxurious surroundings do not recompense for the isolation of widowhood. Cohen attempts to follow Austen in her observations on the way money functions to forge relationships between people. Like Charlotte Lucas, Lila Katz understands the economic constraints she faces if she remains single, and with admirable practicality confesses that she needs to find another husband for her financial upkeep. While May, Flo, and Lila have a girly discussion on the gentlemen in the Boca Festa community, Lila remarks, "Well I'd take one with a nice pension in a minute" (Cohen 12). Although May

and Flo are comfortably off on their pensions, Lila does not have their freedom to choose to be single unless she meets a man she likes for more than his bank balance.

The narrative begins with May Newman's daughter-in-law Carol, who, although in northern New Jersey, is extremely well-versed in news that might be applicable to her friends and relatives in Boca. She happens to learn that a casual acquaintance, Norman Grafstein, had become a widower and now lives in Boca Raton. Being a well-meaning although somewhat bossy go-getter, she travels to Boca to "get things moving" between Norman and May because she thinks May has a right "to be loved, to be happy, to have someone to take her to dinner" (Cohen 1-2, 5). Alan follows his predecessor Mr. Bennet's philosophy of giving way to Carol since he "saw no point in swimming against the tide of this powerful and well-meaning force that was his wife" (Cohen 3). Compared to Carol's determination, Mrs. Bennet's entreaty that her husband pay a visit to Mr. Bingley is very meek indeed (Austen 3-5). When she reaches Boca, she tidies up May's apartment and invites all May's friends and acquaintances—including Norman—over for brunch (Cohen 23, 34). Carol's resolute matchmaking leads seniors May and Norman to begin a courtship that follows the trajectory of Austen's Jane Bennet and Mr. Bingley's relationship.

As mentioned earlier, Lila Katz needs the financial security that Flo and May do not, and she reminds one of Charlotte when she marries the abhorrent Hy Marcus for the prosperity he can give her. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the sensible Charlotte Lucas knew that "Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome. ... But still he would be her husband.... [M]arriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be

their pleasantest preservative from want" (Austen 122-23). Although Hy is certainly not as obnoxious as Mr. Collins, he boasts about the success of his children and embarrasses Lila on numerous occasions. Fortunately, in a comic and very twenty-first century twist, Hy takes a dose of Viagra two months after their marriage and dies, thus leaving Lila free and with enough money to live a comfortable life (Cohen 212).

Cohen draws a picture of the social advances women have made since Austen's time, when Flo, who had a successful career as an academic librarian feels jealous when she sees her great-niece's opportunities that she herself did not have. Austen's Elizabeth Bennet was bright and intelligent, but needed a moneyed marriage for a secure future since she could have no opportunity to earn a living. Two hundred years later, the improvement in women's economic independence is still slow. Cohen tells the reader that Flo "still suffered pangs of envy when she saw women a generation younger who'd been able to embark more aggressively on their own paths. And her envy turned to awe when she looked at the present generation of young women, as exemplified in her great-niece Amy. Amy was twenty-one, a film student at NYU with an unshakable sense of her own worth and an openness to the possibilities of life that struck Flo as breathtaking (Cohen 55). Cohen makes academic Stan Jacobs her Mr. Darcy, who is Professor Emeritus at a local college, and still teaches literature part-time (Cohen 38). He is the only character who does not live in a retirement community, since he has his own home that he had shared with his much-loved late wife. Although it is a far cry from Pemberley, May calls it "charming." The details that Cohen provides about the pretty garden that is "beautifully cultivated," and a library brimming with books (which include "half a dozen" editions of Jane Austen) call attention to the parallel with Pemberley (Cohen 201-03).

As expected, Flo and Stan Jacobs are at odds from their first encounter. Their successive exchanges are regular and unpleasant, and their relationship evokes that of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy although Mr. Darcy was more obviously displeasing than Stan Jacobs. Flo's life experience and age does not come to her aid here and make her more insightful, but instead, she, like Elizabeth Bennet, is a flawed judge of character. She too falls for the obvious charm of Mel Shriver, *Boca*'s Wickham (Cohen 88). There is a simmering air of hostility between Shriver and Jacobs although the former's previous association with Stan Jacobs is somewhat forced. Flo realizes how shallow Mel is only towards the end of the novel, and she ultimately agrees with Stan's initial warning to her that "to most decent women, he's [Shriver] a menace" (Cohen 234).

When Flo's niece, Amy, is looking for an apt topic for a documentary, she hits upon her great-aunt's retirement complex as the perfect subject (Cohen 168, 172) because Boca Festa is "an enclosed, homogeneous community in which very intricate and elaborate relationships are generated. It's the ideal narrative material with visual appeal for a postmodern age" (Cohen 172). What Amy sees as a site of postmodernism, Flo recognizes as an Austenian setting, and describes it as "Jane Austen's 'two or three families in a country setting,' updated and up-aged" and realizes that a film on her community could be "damned funny" (Cohen 172). When Amy artfully convinces the Boca Festa board of the prospect of an Academy Award nomination for her documentary film, she gains undisputed consent to start filming (Cohen 186).

Cohen includes an entertaining segment where the Boca Festa seniors take a class titled "Jane Austen and Her Adaptors" which Stan Jacobs graciously agrees to teach them privately in Boca Festa since Florida Atlantic University has an administrative policy restricting the number of seniors who can enrol in a class. Flo jokingly asks, "didn't Austen have some Jewish blood?

Something about missing a good potato knish while her family was vacationing in Bath?" (Cohen 247), while Norm sportingly agrees to give Jane Austen "the old college try" since his friend, Stan, thinks she is "hot stuff" (Cohen 243). Cohen's academic background is evident in Stan Jacobs's tongue-in-cheek self-reflexive class description: "The class will engage in a close reading of Jane Austen's most famous novel, *Pride and Prejudice.* We will discuss how Austen's romantic, domestic plotline has been adapted to best-selling novels, television soap operas, films, and facets of our daily lives" (Cohen 246). However, it is doubtful how many of the other students read the book, and Jacobs encourages them to give the book a try or to at least watch the most recent BBC production because the Laurence Olivier/Greer Garson adaptation is not as faithful to the novel. Norman retaliates, saying, "'Well I love that movie, … and I think that Jane Austen could take a lesson from it'" (Cohen 255).

The reader is told that when Stan Jacobs discussed the socio-economic circumstances that women were subjected to in Austen's period, they responded with "astonishment and sympathy", but the Boca seniors reacted with "less shock and more identification" (Cohen 249-50). These senior students have far more experience than Jacobs's undergraduates, and can put themselves in the situation of each of the central characters of *Pride and Prejudice* to reach a deeper understanding of their personalities. Gert Kaufman says, "'It reminds me of how my mother felt when Grandpa Abe left the bakery to his cousin Leo, who didn't know white from rye'" when the class discusses the unfortunate situation where the Bennet property is entailed to Mr. Collins instead of the Bennet daughters (Cohen 250). Lila appreciates Mr. Collins's effort to make things "right" by offering to marry one of the Bennet girls (Cohen 251), and all the students agree that Mary Bennet and Mr. Collins would make a great match (Cohen 252). The female seniors understand the anxiety Mrs. Bennet must have undergone with five daughters and a family estate

that was entailed to the next male heir. "'I had four sisters, too,' noted Pixie Solomon. 'My mother didn't stop shvitzing until we were all married. I feel for that Mrs. Bennet'" (Cohen 250). Jacobs attempts to bring the conversation back to a literary discussion by asking his students what Austen herself would have thought of Mrs. Bennet, but Pixie Solomon responds in an affronted tone, "'What are you talking about?... What has she got to do with it? I say that woman Bennet had her work cut out for her, marrying five daughters and with a husband always hiding away in the den.'" Mr. Bennet, as the absentee husband, is a figure that several women are familiar with. Dorothy Meltzer says, "'Herb was like that with the children … He went into the den with a sandwich whenever Melissa and I would start screaming. Even now, when there's noise, he can't digest.'" Her comment is answered by nods from other women as they, too, "had known men to hide in the den with a sandwich. Mrs. Bennet had their sympathy" (Cohen 250).

Stan Jacob's class at Boca Festa is thus a hilarious example of reader response criticism where the seniors cannot see beyond how Austen's novel relates to their own lives. Jacobs attempts to get his wayward students to comprehend "the full force of Austen's satire on the subject of Mrs. Bennet," by reading Austen's description of Mrs. Bennet slowly as the students follow along. "She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (Cohen 251); the Boca community dismisses Austen's judgement of Mrs. Bennet's character, and the unanimous opinion is that Mrs. Bennet is to be sympathised with, and that she will have to suffer even more problems later. "And now it's waiting for the grandchildren," Lily Posner added. "Janet is thirty-six years old. They say the eggs start turning into raisins by the time they're thirty-five" (Cohen 251). Everyone understands that Charlotte did not have any other choice, and appreciate that "she did get her own room, which is important" (Cohen 252). Elizabeth Bennet, usually the favourite Austen heroine for most Janeites, is criticized by the

seniors for being "too sarcastic," "stuck-up," and "very snooty" (Cohen 252). The consensus seems to be that since Austen was a spinster, she must necessarily have been unaware of the reality of such circumstances: "'That Jane Austen doesn't know what she's talking about,' stormed Pixie Solomon." "'She didn't marry or have children, did she?'" asked Dorothy Meltzer. "'So how would she know what it's like to have five daughters that need to get settled if you're going to have any peace of mind? I can't tell you what I went through waiting for my Sheila to find someone" (Cohen 251).

Amy had been filming the Boca Festa community for her documentary, and she concludes her film—and Cohen concludes her novel—with May and Norman's wedding. By this time, Flo and Jacobs are living together. Although Amy does not win an Academy Award, she does place second at the NYU Student Film Festival.

Cohen has traced connections between Austen's restricted social community and that of a modern-day closed society of septuagenarians. Her examination of a retired community and the economic and marital concerns that dog women from their twenties into their seventies is an angle that has not been explored before. The energetic involvement of the seniors with Austen's novel when they do their best to make parallels between the plot and their own lives, demonstrates the internalization that most serious readers attempt. Cohen's *Jane Austen in Boca* certainly deserves a place in a college syllabus on Jane Austen adaptations.

***Bride & Prejudice*: *Pride and Prejudice* in Amritsar, India**

Bride and Prejudice (2004) is a British film directed by Gurinder Chadha, famous for her *Bend it Like Beckham*, and is heavily influenced by Bollywood. Aishwarya Rai, the same actress

who played Meenakshi in *Kandukondain Kandukondain* now channels Elizabeth Bennet, and there is a clash of cultures not just of personalities when the Indian Lizzie Bennet meets the American Will Darcy.

Although Chadha's plot follows the main lines of Austen's novel, she shifts the central concern from class conflict to cultural conflict. The tagline for the film, "Bollywood meets Hollywood," signals the cultural tensions that will unfold over the course of the narrative. The casting of an Indian Elizabeth and an American Darcy allows Chadha to examine the cultural prejudices held by each. Cheryl Wilson has described the "cultural difference as the foremost source of social tension" (328) in this film, and Chadha does highlight the cultural tension in the uncomfortable courtship of Lalita Bakshi (Elizabeth) and Will Darcy, the seduction of Lakhi (Lydia) by the English Johnny Wickham, and the character of the Americanized Mr. Kohli (Mr. Collins). Chadha is aiming for a multicultural audience, and by juxtaposing elements of Bollywood and Hollywood film, she can provide "each viewer with something that is familiar and something that is not" (Wilson 324). The cultural hybridity that marks the film through the interaction of American/Indian/English characters and locales is represented by the stylistic blending of the Hollywood and Bollywood cinematic techniques and Austen's highbrow literary tradition with elements of popular Indian cinema.

While Elizabeth and Darcy's clashes are smoother, Lalita's disagreements with Will seem somewhat forced at times. On their first encounter, she seems to deliberately misunderstand his idea of his perfect woman, thinking that he wants women to be "subservient" but she does rightly understand that he thinks India is inferior to the US. He represents a Eurocentric attitude towards Indian "native" culture as backward and primitive, describing

traditional Indian dance routines as "you screw in a light bulb with one hand, you pet a dog with the other." The class- and race-based conflicts that are navigated by the characters in the film are foregrounded at this moment when Lalita lashes back, "I think you should find someone simple and traditional to teach you to dance like the natives." While *Kandukondain Kandukondain* depicts the easy acceptance of some Western ideas, *Bride and Prejudice* has a more complex relationship to Western values and is concerned by the threats associated with Westernization. Chadha describes Will as "a handsome American, as opposed to an ugly American, but he has enough attitude to need a good Colonialism/Imperialism 101 from Lalita" (Roy-Chowdhury). Lalita does her spunky Lizzie Bennet impersonation and rebukes Will for being an "imperialist" while defending her Indian culture. She says that foreigners like Will do not see the "real India" but employ an Orientalist viewpoint to turn it into an exotic "theme park" to be enjoyed by the West. Embodying American imperialism, Will is censured by the self-confident neo-liberal Indian woman who can balance global modernity with Indian culture, while defending herself—and her country—from Western cultural domination. Will does, however, recognise the imperial implications of his proposed business scheme and discourages the company from buying a luxury hotel in Goa.

When Lalita and Will are eventually able to move beyond their mutual distrust and the barriers imposed by their cultural and class-based biases, the film progresses towards cross-cultural harmonization. The film begins with Darcy having trouble with the drawstrings on his Indian trousers at an Indian wedding, symbolic for his struggle with adjusting to the Indian culture, but one of the final shots of the film has him playing an Indian drum while dressed in Western clothes for another Indian wedding ceremony. The fact that he is so much at ease in the kind of crowded confused Indian gathering that used to make him so uncomfortable, and the

combination of Western garb with Indian music stands in for how he has achieved a fine balance between Western and Indian cultural traditions. He has not assimilated into Indian culture completely, but has taught himself the way to straddle both cultures with success. Lalita, at the same time, also changes her initial cynical view of globalism. She tempers her prejudice to understand Darcy's perspective.

However, *Bride and Prejudice* does not level cultural tensions so straightforwardly. While Lalita enthusiastically defends Indian traditional values in her conversations with Will Darcy, she rebels against the conservative aspects of the aforesaid "tradition" when she talks to Mr. Kohli. While inter-cultural conflict with an upper-class white man might be negotiated with comparative ease, intra-cultural conflict between middle-class Indians are more difficult to resolve. *Bride and Prejudice* shows the comedic aspects of cultural hybridization gone too far in the character of Mr. Kohli (Mr. Collins). He is an accountant in California, and has the Green Card coveted by all non-resident Indians. He leaves the United States, where he has done his best to assimilate, to go to India where he hopes to find a bride who is "traditional" and not "outspoken and career-oriented." While an American Darcy might exoticise Indian tradition due to his unfamiliarity with it, an Indian man with claims to Americanization equates tradition with conservatism. Kohli is an amalgamation of American consumerism and Indian male bigotry who has pretensions of being liberal due to his Green Card but at heart wants a quiet submissive stay-at-home wife.

Mr. Kohli introduces the idea that cultural hybridity can potentially be detrimental, although the mingling of culture in the contemporary multicultural global society is unavoidable. Lalita believes that foreign investment in India exploits Indian culture in a negative way, but

Bride and Prejudice also portrays how Western values can be harmful to Indian values. Johnny Wickham, who is characterised as an English backpacker in this adaptation, is invited into the Bakshis' home, befriends the girls, and thereby is able to incorporate himself much more into everyday Indian society than the rich aloof Darcy. However, it is his relaxed Western sexual values which almost corrupt Lakhi who is unable to understand that his interest in her is merely sexual while he cares more for Lalita. Hence, the film seems to caution viewers that individuals need to be vigilant in the contemporary culturally heterogeneous society in order to shield their alterity from being corrupted by Western cultural hegemony. However, as will be discussed below, the danger of the corrupting influence seems to lie only in the middle- and lower-middle class bracket.

Chadha says, "I want to show a multicultural blend in the film. I do not have a home in India but I love Punjabi culture. I want to show it on a global level and make it popular" ("Gurinder"). She seems to want to counteract the prejudiced views that Western audiences might have of India—a la Will Darcy—and make them understand its positive values. Since Chadha aims to make her film have global success she adopts global themes. The Hindi title of the film, *Balle Balle! From Amritsar to LA* emphasises Chadha's popularising of Punjabi culture, where "Balle Balle" is the cry that accompanies the traditional Punjabi dance, bhangra. The Bakshi family's international travel literally transports Punjabi culture from Amritsar, the locus of Punjabi culture in India, to both England as well as the US. Chadha's film is the only transposition I have come across that depicts the hallowed Darcy-Elizabeth pairing as an interracial couple. Instead of having Indian men pair up with both Jaya (Jane) and Lalita, Balraj (Bingley) is Indian-American and Will, as mentioned before, is American and white. These two couples give Chadha opportunities to explore issues arising from cultural mixing—this might be

her nod to "multiculturalism." Like the easy-going Jane and Bingley, both Jaya and Balraj do not cause any friction, but the Will-Lalita union plays off against the prospective Kohli-Lalita union. While Kohli is an Indian national residing in the US, his green card allows him a position of power—as an "American"—in the Indian marriage market, which in turn allows him to stereotype Indian women just as Will does. Lalita is thereby given the chance to rise to the fore to defend both her country as well as the status of Indian women.

There is also a class conflict that is subtly presented through the two white male characters that play rivals for Lalita's affections: Wickham and Darcy. Since Darcy is rich and upper-class, pride in his social stature and prejudice against Indians are the faults attributed to him. Johnny Wickham is depicted as a middle-class backpacker who is guilty of low morals that allow him to betray the Bakshi family's trust and hospitality by corrupting Lakhi's reputation. While Will overcomes his drawbacks, Wickham does not seem to repent for his behaviour. Both Wickham and Kohli are estranged from Indian values—the former is morally lax while the latter is grossly Americanized. Only Will, who is able to blend his American spirit with Indian customs wins Lalita's hand. Lalita might be Westernized enough to want to be independent and be married to a partner who is her intellectual equal, but she has Indian values at heart. Thus, multiculturalism is given the stamp of approval only when it bows to Indian tradition. While Lalita serves as the mouthpiece for some postcolonial ire at Anglo-American weaknesses, she ultimately celebrates the positive aspects of both east and west when she falls in love with Will.

In the song "No Life Without Wife," the four sisters sing and dance to lyrics which demonstrate that they—perhaps unconsciously—support Western values. They are all dressed in light, flowy, white nightgowns, unlike the typical saree-clad Bollywood heroines one might

expect from a film where the heroine repeatedly stands up for Indian customs. While the audience is not given any scene or dialogue where Lalita voices the desire to have a career, in this song she claims that she certainly does not want to be a housewife who cooks (the traditional Indian dish of Aloo Gobi[26]) for her husband while he is earning their keep. She declares she wishes for a modern—"Western"—marriage: "I just want a man with real soul / Who wants equality and not control." The claims Lalita makes about the kind of partner she wants is very similar to the desires of Meenakshi in *Kandukondain Kandukondain* in the scene where the two sisters are introduced and speak about the husbands they wish for. While *Kandukondain Kandukondain* does not require the audience to have a prior knowledge of *Sense and Sensibility*, the Austenian influence in *Bride and Prejudice* is apparent from the name itself. The audience's familiarity with the hypotext is desired, and Chadha wants to take a step further and introduce the Indian context of her adaptation to viewers worldwide.

Another nod to contemporary global culture lies in the easy acceptance that a woman needs to be financially independent. Chadha, being a successful professional woman herself, understands that a woman's career should be a given even if a woman has a husband to support her. There is an unstated recognition of the importance of a career in the lives of the young women, where Mrs. Bakshi eagerly wants her daughters to get married to men living in the UK or the US because the plethora of opportunities abroad will enable the girls to earn more money. Compared to the impending financial situation of the Bennet girls in *Pride and Prejudice* due to the entailment of their estate to the next male heir, the Bakshi girls have much less at stake economically. While Mrs Bakshi certainly finds it unfortunate to have four unmarried girls when they cannot afford a reasonable dowry, they appear to have a farm that is maintained by the

[26] Potato and cauliflower curry

family and do not seem to be afraid of dispossession or financial ruin in the future. Lalita is depicted as helping her father run the farm as well as with the accounts. Since the Bakshis have no son and Jaya seems to be the most likely of the daughters to marry and marry well, Lalita might be her father's successor. Thus, although there is no concrete evidence for this hypothesis in the film, the lack of any threat of imminent financial ruin and the characterisation of Lalita as someone invested in the family farm, she is potentially capable of taking care of the family. This implies that unlike the Elizabeth-Darcy union, Lalita's marriage to Will will simply be a union of love between intellectual equals instead of also a path to financial deliverance for her family. Wilson recognises that "because he is outside the context of nineteenth-century restrictions on women's personal and economic independence, Chadha's Darcy is not in a powerful position from which he can 'rescue' Lalita" (329). Her self-sufficiency demonstrates that she does not need to be "saved" by the rich white man—Lalita even accompanies Darcy on their search for the errant Lakhi—and the cultural blending is reflected by their growing fondness for each other.

The modern adaptations of Austen demonstrate a shift not only in the professionalization of the heroines but also in the way the families of the heroines are depicted. Sowmya and Meenakshi's mother in *Kandukondain Kandukondain* is prudent and thoughtful, and does not have any obvious faults. While Austen's novels are essentially about family, her portrayals of the family members are often not very kind, an aspect that modern filmmakers are consciously changing to suit their audiences and the changing importance given to the family unit in current society. In *Bride and Prejudice*, although the family move across three countries, the Bakshi family is always at the centre of the film's narrative focus. Mr. Bakshi is a far cry from the irresponsible and absent figure of Mr. Bennet, and as Barbara Seeber has remarked in "A Bennet Utopia," there is really nothing one can criticize about him. There is a stark contrast between the

family closeness demonstrated by the Bakshi family, and the broken American family that Darcy is from. Seeber comments that *Bride and Prejudice* critiques how "in its quest for material success the West has lost its sense of family. The closeness of the Bakshis is part of the film's challenge of U.S. superiority" (Seeber). Austen's ironic treatment of the family is usually toned down or even absent in the contemporary adaptations of Austen novels like *Pride & Prejudice* (2003). Overall, although Mrs. Bakshi and the younger Bakshi sisters bring the two older sisters much embarrassment, and Mrs. Bakshi is potentially as destructive of her daughters' chances as the original Mrs. Bennet at certain scenes in the film, the Bakshi family are given a better portrayal than the Bennets (Seeber). Lakhi, playing Lydia's character, is a tremendous flirt and runs away with Wickham, but unlike her original, she understands that she has acted wrongly and feels remorse. Maya—Mary Bennet—wants appreciation for her many accomplishments (in one scene she performs a funny cobra dance for the Bingleys and Darcy and brings immense embarrassment to her family), but she is neither pendantic nor holier-than-thou like Austen's Mary. Although Austen emphasizes the family structure, she portrays ineffective parents, and many filial relations are satirized with very few actually receiving any positive treatment. Modern day filmmakers appreciate Austen's attention to local details since that can be translated well into any geographical and cultural realm, but deviate from her depiction of the family unit.

One of the principal reasons for which Austen's tales are so popular worldwide is the intensely local nature of the tales—the focus is on the small town family that has somewhat restricted connections to the larger world. Thus, the global attraction of Austen's tales derives from her localism (Troost and Greenfield). Ferriss and Young write that *Bride and Prejudice* shows that "the conventions of femininity and romance characteristic of the chick flick are present in Indian culture, despite the persistence of arranged marriages" (*Chick Flicks* 9). The

film was made for Anglo-American audiences, and therefore manoeuvres Indian traditions to conform to the chick lit formula without charting the complexity of women's position in the developing world. The exporting of chick conventions into the eastern world demonstrates the ease with which they can be adapted into different cultures.

Pride & Prejudice: *Pride and Prejudice* in Utah

The 2003 Mormon version of *Pride & Prejudice* set in Utah compares the mannered world of the Bennet sisters in Meryton to the lives of modern-day female roommates in Provo. The main characters of this film are four housemates—Elizabeth, Jane, and sisters Kitty and Lydia who attend university. Their interests are those of other Mormon college students—classes, parties, church, but most importantly, looking for a husband, although the last does not apply to Elizabeth. Genette remarks, "An almost infallible sign of diegetic faithfulness is the preservation of the characters' names, which is a sign of their *identity*—i.e. of their inscription within a diegetic world" (297), and this transdiegetization maintains not only the name of the novel but also those of the main characters, thereby vouching for its authenticity as an Austen modernization.

Like the transpositions discussed earlier, *Pride & Prejudice* focuses on professionalising the heroine, and in its bid to avoid a satirical rendition of family, it eliminates the family completely. Similarly to *Bride and Prejudice*, the social difference in class between Darcy and Elizabeth is modified to a difference in nationality and therefore culture. Darcy is English and he meets Elizabeth while he is in the United States to meet his American friends. However, the cultural differences between the two are not foregrounded in this modernization, and the social

differences—Darcy is, of course, very rich—are negotiated through their conversations about Elizabeth's desire to be a writer and to publish her first novel.

In its bid to professionalize Elizabeth, the film gives her ambitions to become a novelist. The audience is given this information in the voice-over at the beginning of the film, and we see Elizabeth working on her novel in several scenes. When she is not hard at work at her potential bestseller, she works at a bookstore which is the venue for her meeting with Mr. Darcy, a customer looking for a book by Kierkegaard. This encounter has all the hauteur on Darcy's part and all the outrage on Elizabeth's as present in the Austen's Meryton assembly where the pair meets each other. In this professional setting, Darcy meets Elizabeth, and irritated by her chatter while he is looking for a certain book, he jumps to the conclusion that she must be too foolish to know who Kierkegaard is and must be responsible for shelving books incorrectly. The specific mention of Kierkegaard instantly instils Darcy with cultural capital, and suggests that he must be from a superior social class—one that he assumes Elizabeth cannot belong to due to her ignorance of Kierkegaard.

Elizabeth's vocation as a writer remains central to her dealings with Darcy thenceforth. After she completes her novel, it is finally accepted for publication after facing a few rejections, and she is invited to have lunch with the editor. In a classic movie twist, the editor turns out to be Mr. Darcy himself, since he owns the publishing house. This scene set in a restaurant called Rosings is a good parallel to the proposal scene in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, because Darcy points out to Elizabeth each little defect in her novel, although he still deems it publishable after his suggested revisions are implemented by her. The modern day Elizabeth takes outrage and rejects Darcy's offer of a publishing contract. Troost and Greenfield remark, "Like the novel's

Elizabeth Bennet, who rejects Darcy's offer of marriage when her family is insulted, the offended author rejects Darcy's offer of a publishing contract when her work is insulted." The Rosings incident does prove to the audience that Elizabeth has talent as a writer if a big publishing firm is prepared to publish her first novel. Although Elizabeth rushes to defend her efforts, the audience understands that it is logical for writers be asked to make some revisions, and that it does not imply lack of skill. Unlike the other Mormon girls in the film on the lookout for a good match, Elizabeth seems wholeheartedly focused on her novel, and her work is an extension of her identity. When Darcy criticises her novel, she feels humiliated as if it were a criticism of herself. Therefore, although it is her dream to have her first novel published, it must be published the way she wants it to be. At the end of the film, Elizabeth receives the offer to work as a teaching assistant in her university's study abroad program in London, demonstrating that she holds her own even in academics. The romance formula dictates that once she meets Darcy in London, she will probably marry him in due course.

Director Andrew Black and producer/co-screenwriter Jason Faller declared in their June 2003 interviews that with *Pride & Prejudice*, they hoped to reach viewers who were both members and non-members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to which both belong. They said, "We're [trying] to make a film that appeal[s] to both insiders and outsiders. … It's almost like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* where the culture is just a backdrop ("A Novel Approach"). This comment, that the LDS culture is only the "backdrop" for the film, is important because Black and Faller refrain from any explicit reference to Mormonism in the film. There is no given denomination of the church that the characters attend, the university featured in the film is left unnamed, and even the subtitle—*A Latter day Comedy*—which accompanied the release of the film in theatres, was removed from the DVD release (Wells 164). Therefore, the film

portrays a few young Mormons—from the marriage-crazy Lydia to the ambitious Elizabeth Bennet, and the religious Collins and Mary, without actually ever labelling them as Mormons.

Pride & Prejudice attempts to replace the popular notion that Mormons are somewhat peculiar by depicting contemporary Mormonism as likeable and gratifying instead of constrictive and odd. The characters in the film are able to embrace LDS life in the manner that suits their own personalities and ambitions. Black and Faller wished to update Austen's most popular novel, especially since it is so appealing to women. Faller told the *Desert News*, a Salt Lake City daily newspaper, that *Pride and Prejudice* was "kind of like *Star Wars* for women" (Hyde). Faller describes this film as a "Mollywood" movie or a "Mormon chick flick" (Hyde). Austen's novel provides a good avenue for legitimizing the Mormon subculture since it is both a canonical text and a text popular with the mass audience. Juliette Wells notes that this choice is unique among recent LDS films since no other LDS filmmaker has selected literary adaptation (167). She notes that LDS filmmakers take the opportunity to present alternate images of their subculture to the stereotypes propagated by Hollywood, and attempt to legitimize it by channelling it through mainstream texts. Black and Faller feel that the world of Austen's novel has the ability to fit comfortably with that of the young Mormons featured in their film. Black says that Austen's tale "would be hard … to work in a secular culture, but in an environment like LDS culture, it is a great fit" (Culver). However, since *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bride and Prejudice* are two major updated and wildly successful adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, the first set in modern-day London and the latter in present-day Amritsar, India, it is not just Mormon subculture, but mainstream contemporary culture, into which Austen can be transposed productively. Using Austen's name as a way to gain recognition, especially from viewers outside

the LDS community, Black and Faller aimed to demystify the Mormon subculture to the world. In the words of Harriet Margolis, the "Austen's cultural status, her cultural capital translates into commercial success and economic capital for producers such as BBC, or Columbia, or Miramax, or A&E" (29) because any media text that has the Jane Austen brand name will be guaranteed an audience.

The film's opening line distorts Austen's own opening sentence to *Pride and Prejudice* and makes Elizabeth's ambitions clear from the beginning: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a girl of a certain age and of a certain situation in life must be in want of a husband." She feels alienated from the flirtatious, marriage-dominated culture that she is surrounded by, and Wells writes that she feels the pressure "amply evident in Austen's novel as well—imposed on a woman of an advancing age in a culture that considers her to be settled only when she is married" (Wells 174). The "certain situation" might be a reference to her religious background which stresses the importance of family and marriage. Elizabeth is invested in being independent and making a name for herself on her own merits by becoming a talented writer. Her professional ambition takes precedence over marriage, a desire that does not match that of her colleagues and friends. It is not that she is not interested in romance, but her studies and professional accomplishments are more important. Unlike Lydia, she discriminates among her prospective suitors, and rejects George Wickham because he gets too physical with her. Elizabeth's reluctance to get physically more intimate with Wickham, her distaste for the determined man-hunting ways of the girls around her, her displeasure in the high sales of the "Pink Bible"—a how-to handbook for hunting a husband—that the bookstore she works in stocks due to popular demand, all serve to make us understand the reason Collins sees her demeanour as "forward feminist."

Elizabeth does not preach any liberated feminist ideas about relationships or sexuality, but she feels complete without having a man to validate her. When Collins proposes to her, she calmly but surely rejects him. She does not feel thrilled at the prospect of having a man ask for her hand in marriage, as her idea of personal achievement lies in realising her dream to be a writer instead of being a traditional wife to a conservative man. There is no obvious proselytizing that we get from the principal character, but there is one scene where Elizabeth is shown to be addressing an audience of presumably church members. She stands in front of a group of people with a thick book in her hand, perhaps a book of scripture, gesturing and speaking while appearing confident and at ease. Juliette Wells writes about this scene that it "thoughtful, ambitious Elizabeth feels at home in her church and is listened to by fellow members constitutes this film's strongest positive portrayal of Mormonism" (175). This is just one of many scenes that are presented to show the audience how she takes control of her life after a short period of dejection, but it demonstrates that she is willingly accepted by her community as a spiritual teacher.

The major departure from the hypotext that this film makes, which no other Austen adaptation does, is the formation of a romantic relationship between Collins and Mary Bennet. Rather than having Collins marry the Charlotte Lucas character instead of continuing down the line of Bennet sisters after Jane and Elizabeth to get to Mary, Black and Faller follow through with the indication that Austen provides that the self-righteous Mary finds the equally self-righteous Mr. Collins a good match.[27] The casting call for the two characters shows how similar

[27] "Mary might have been prevailed on to accept him. She rated his abilities much higher than any of the others; there was a solidity in his reflections which often struck her, and though by no means as clever as herself, she thought that if encouraged to read and improve himself by such an example as hers, he might become a very agreeable companion" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 130).

and well-suited to each other the filmmakers find the characters: William Collins is described as "self-absorbed, self-righteous, anxiously seeking wife" and Mary Haywood as "self-absorbed, self-righteous, anxiously seeking Collins" (Casting Notice). Both Collins and Mary are shown to be very old-fashioned characters. While Collins takes a church magazine circa 1978 to a casual party where he is the only one dressed in a formal suit, Mary takes a cross-stitch of her family tree to the same party. Collins reads from the magazine to Elizabeth, and she sneers at everything he reads to her. She shows her discomfort in her facial expressions and body language, thereby emphasizing Collins's old-fashioned mentality. In this adaptation, Collins is not made a leader of the LDS church, and while his old-fashioned views estrange Elizabeth, they make him more appealing to Mary. He refers to a re-enactment of the pioneer trek in order to invite Elizabeth on a date, but Mary jumps into the conversation because of her enthusiasm for the re-enactment and her family association with the pioneer trek. This is another instance which helps to link Collins to Mary.

It is never explained why Collins is so attracted to Elizabeth, but he tells her while proposing to her that although he had always wanted to "marry an old-fashioned girl," he found her "forward feminist ways very exciting." Elizabeth politely but firmly rejects Collins's proposal of marriage—"I'm really flattered, but you wouldn't make me happy, and I know I wouldn't make you happy."[28] Soon after he goes on a date with Mary, and they get married after a long courtship. By uniting Mary and Mr. Collins, Black and Faller avoid the sacrifice of happiness that the practical Charlotte commits when she marries Collins. Elizabeth never quite

[28] This is a close approximation of the original Elizabeth Bennet's declaration: "you could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so" (*Pride and Prejudice* 112).

accepts that her best friend could be so pragmatic in the face of love, as she herself could never have sacrificed her happiness for monetary comfort. The LDS Elizabeth, who values her dream to be a writer so much, would certainly not be able to come to terms with such a course of action.

The casting call describes Elizabeth as "frustrated by the society she lives in, but not rebellious" ("Casting Notice"). She does not actively transgress any of the social boundaries which constrain her spirit, but she does rebel against societal expectations that direct her to prioritise settling down with a man over professional dreams. *Pride & Prejudice* modernizes Elizabeth by letting her triumph over her professional goals before landing in the arms of Will Darcy, like Sowmya and Meenakshi in *Kandukondain Kandukondain*. Since chick lit is often chided for its inclusion of heroines who are passive recipients of male desire, Elizabeth's agency removes her from this problematic grouping.

Aisha: Emma Meets *Clueless* in New Delhi, India

In the *New Yorker* Ian Crouch notes how greatly *Aisha* depends on Amy Hecklerling's *Clueless* (1995), and Theresa Kenney remarks that *Aisha* alludes to its other cinematic antecedents constantly, and these include *Clueless*, of course, as well as Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996) starring Gwyneth Paltrow, and the Bollywood blockbusters *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge* (1995), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), and *Kabhi Khushi, Kabhi Gham* (2001). Although the list of film precursors that influence *Aisha* make it not completely *Clueless*, the eponymous heroine, Aisha is more like Cher Horowitz than like Austen's Emma. The film is set not in rural England in the 1800s but busy, cosmopolitan, urban New Delhi in 2010, and the film's heroine, Aisha is rich, self-involved, and spoiled. However, unlike Heckerling, screenwriter Devika

Bhagat and director Rajshree Ojha attempt to maintain the storyline closer to Austen's plot. Aisha's characterization and gradual change from a clueless self-absorbed socialite into an introspective, caring heroine traces Emma's own trajectory of spoiled, rich matchmaker to a more self-aware woman who gradually realises her love for Mr. Knightley.

Emma is transposed not only from England to India, but from a rural to an urban locale. Austen's novelistic worlds have been criticised as being too limited, but it is the smallness of the world that is an important aspect of her novels as it provides a fitting backdrop for the interplay of several themes. The extremely local setting where everyone knows everyone else, and where manners govern that polite society is central to Austen's themes of class privilege. While Emma is a rural English protagonist, Aisha frequents urban upmarket locations such as Defence Colony and Connaught Place in New Delhi, a far cry from Austen's pastoral Donwell Abbey. Although Emma is rich and tops the social hierarchy in her small village of Highbury, she is certainly not the sophisticated socialite that Aisha is. The previous adaptations of *Emma* before *Clueless* have made a concerted effort to maintain the Englishness of the countryside and the lush verdure that Emma clearly delights in: "It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive" (*Emma* 220). Theresa Kenney wonders, "If Emma ceases to be the queen of English verdure and becomes the empress of a cosmopolitan Indian scene, can we say that this Bollywood Emma is still in any way Austen's Emma?" (Kenney).

Like *Clueless*, Aisha shops in huge shopping malls, drives her bright yellow car precariously on highways, and like the Gwyneth Paltrow *Emma*, Aisha tends to a pretty garden now and then, which is the only greenery we see in the film. The lavish lifestyle that is featured

in *Aisha* with its over-the-top houses—fit to be featured in MTV *Cribs*—is not equivalent to the understated elegance and class denoted by Hartfield and Donwell Abbey. Compared to the restrained elegance of the English estates in the novel, *Aisha*'s backdrop seems very nouveau riche. Kenney laments that Aisha becomes "a heroine of surfaces and mirrors" when she is portrayed in her natural habitat of shopping malls. We do not have access to her mind till the latter half of the film. Austen concentrated on the psychology of her characters and not on their clothes or houses while Bollywood has shifted a large part of the focus onto the markers of extreme wealth and social status that Aisha hails from. In an interview with the BBC, Sonam Kapoor offers an explanation of the signifiers of class that are at play in the film:

> Victorian society's rules and regulations, and the class system is [sic] still prevalent in our country and I think is prevalent all over the world. It's about having the right address, the right cars, wearing the right clothes, getting married to the right guy, having enough money. …I think you can relate to it, because these are situations you can never get rid of ("Bollywood's Adaptation of Austen's Emma").

The proximization of *Emma* to suit an Indian audience, therefore, depends on attraction through opulence. Once the social power of the community is established, the second half of the film focuses on character development.

Although the film is set in New Delhi, a far cry from the restricted geography of Highbury, *Aisha* still manages to replicate the privileged social group in the modern setting due to the focus on the wealthy social elite that make up Aisha's world. Moreover, it is Aisha herself who serves as the instrument to centre the various strands of the film. Whether the film captures scenes in shopping malls or camping trips, Aisha is almost always present to direct the viewer's

concern. It is not simply Emma's own self-absorption which makes her think Highbury society revolves around her, and Sonam Kapoor's Aisha, commands the admiration and affection of all who know her. Although Aisha needs must alienate herself from the sympathy of the audience at certain points in the narrative, her liveliness, beauty, and intelligence win the audience back in her favour. We see her vanity, her self-indulgence, her snobbery, softened by what is certainly real affection for her friends and family. She is misguided in her meddling with other people's affairs, but essentially well-meaning, and regains audience sympathy when we see her struggling to realize the love she has always felt for Arjun (Mr. Knightley) and her understanding that her matchmaking had caused pain to several people. Her professional and personal talents are established within the first few scenes when she has a gallery show for her paintings—which are sold out—and the audience is also told that she has started her own event management firm. After her worth as a professionally successful modern young woman has been recognised early in the film, she does not have to speak of her career interests again during the course of the movie.

Austen explored the stratifications of class adroitly in *Emma*, a theme which would be eminently transferable onto a society as classist and caste-based as India. However, *Aisha* just focuses on the display of magnificent wealth in the micro-community of the New Delhi social elite without dwelling on class segregation at all. Every character seems privileged and removed from any potential awkwardness due to their class. Randhir, *Aisha*'s Mr. Elton, is not a social climber but one who is truly in love with Aisha. Aarti (Jane Fairfax) lives in the United States and is financially successful, and will certainly not suffer Jane Fairfax's fate of having to teach for a living if Dhruv (Frank Churchill) does not marry her. Dhruv seems to be born into wealth as there is no mention of a middle class background like that of Frank Churchill. There is also no

secret engagement or tender nuances between Aarti and Dhruv, simply sexual chemistry. The class underpinnings of the Highbury society is an integral strand of *Emma*, but *Aisha*'s insistence on the highly polished rich surfaces of urban Delhi society results in the elimination of much of Austen's social criticism from the plot. Because Miss Bates is absent from the film, Aisha never commits the serious mistakes of meanness and disrespect, but limits her faults to misguided matchmaking and making the ignorant and socially inferior Shefali into a photocopy of herself (Kenney).

The latter part of *Aisha*—a large part of it set in Mumbai—takes a turn for the better in terms of an Austen adaptation by increasing Aisha's introspection. After Aisha rejects Randhir's proposal of marriage and Shefali is rescued by Arjun when she has an accident on a camping trip, *Aisha* attempts to move away from *Clueless* and towards *Emma* by including scenes from the novel depicting Emma's relationships with Harriet and Mr. Knightley which do not exist in Heckerling's film. Along with scenes derived from Bollywood favourites, Kenney notes that the second half focuses on "the passages in Volume III, chapters 11 and 12, wherein Emma contemplates falling from favor with Mr. Knightley" to add more depth and emotional interest to the movie. Aisha experiences the threat of being supplanted in Arjun's affections by someone else—especially someone socially inferior like Shefali. Aisha goes through another similar moment when she realises her love for Arjun. A lot of *Emma*'s action—Shefali reacts angrily and leaves when she learns that Aisha does not think her good enough for Arjun, Aisha falls out of favour with Arjun because he misunderstands why Shefali leaves, Aarti and Dhruv meet each other and feel a spark, Aisha misinterprets Arjun's departure from Mumbai thinking he followed Shefali—is compressed into Mumbai and brings the film which had been more of a *Clueless* remake till then back on the lines of Austen's *Emma.* The second half of *Aisha* shows the

characters, especially the heroine, in moods of introspection. The urban location and confusion is now in the background and the internal thoughts and emotions of the characters take centre stage. We, the audience, witness this complexity of emotion through the camera's focus on facial expressions. With the exclusion of the clamour and noise of the city, the social community shrinks to the proportion of Highbury, devoid of mirrored shopping malls.

Aisha ends with the typical Hollywood/Bollywood "I love you just the way you are" romantic ending, because although Aisha shows her development as a character to be able to appreciate her own faults, she will be loved for who she had always been. One of the key dramatic "Bollywood" moments in the movie is Aisha's declaration of love for Arjun on stage at a couple's engagement party where she incorrectly believes Arjun is in the audience. Even for such intimate moments, Aisha prefers to be in the limelight, and her frank announcement of her love is over the microphone. Her impassioned speech about her devotion for Arjun, of her debt to him in terms of his care and attention towards her over the years, is not recognizable to Austen's discreet "What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does" (*Emma* 263). Kenney says that her confession of love "becomes the 'save me' of a damsel in distress," a great contrast to the ladylike prudence and delicacy exercised by Emma herself. Aisha's impassioned declaration reminds the audience yet again that she is the centre around which all the characters and the action revolve.

IV

Conclusion

I triangulate Austen, chick culture, and Genette in this chapter to demonstrate how chick culture transpositions of Austen commodify Austen to make "her" a valuable commodity as well

as becoming valuable commodities themselves due to their popularity—and therefore economic success—in the global chick media marketplace. With the ease of distribution of media facilitated by globalisation, people from different social classes now have access to the cultural capital associated with Jane Austen. Besides blurring the distinction between the highbrow and lowbrow, the localised-modernised transdiegetizations of Austen lure consumers from all socio-economic backgrounds to become Janeites. The localisation of the global/universal themes in her novels subtracts from their "authenticity" as adaptations yet simultaneously makes them more "authentic" in terms of experience with readers/viewers who occupy the cultural space into which the hypotext was transposed. Combining the commercial commodities of Austen and chick culture—which necessitates a transposition—benefits the contemporary culture based on exchange-value.

The film directors base the setting, style, and character of the films discussed here on the typical chick lit formula: the prominence of pastel and bright colours like that of chick lit book jackets; female characters engaged in consumption—of goods or of men; female protagonists who work or desire to work in glamorous professions such as event management, singing professionally, or being a novelist, while also looking for love; and, the protagonists go through a process of introspection and self-discovery. Since Austen highlights the importance of economic pressures in the lives of women, the directors incorporate the socio-economic tensions in the lives of the contemporary Austen heroines and the importance they place on having a career. Jennifer Mary Woolston points out about *Pride & Prejudice* "Pastel hues serve to remind viewers that they are enmeshed in the world of Chick Lit, even though they may not immediately categorize the film as belonging to the emergent genre. Black's color scheme labels the film as part of the Chick Lit marketplace" (Woolston). Movie audiences do not have the opportunity to

look at any supplemental material such as book covers since the DVDs are released several months after the films are released to theatres. However, film trailers function as book jackets whereby they communicate the tone, plot, and thematic components of the film, and convince the viewers of the suitability of the film for them.

The chick flicks discussed here use bright colours for wardrobe, props and general styling of the backdrops, exotic locations, and all the glitz that is associated with chick lit's colourful book jackets and quirky artwork. The riot of colours are present from the first few scenes, such as when we follow Aisha in her bright yellow Beetle through the crowded streets of Delhi or when Meenakshi breaks into song amidst a field of sunflowers. These texts enfold the audience, mostly female, in the world of chick culture, and as Austen transpositions, they are stories told by a woman about women to an audience of women. Being chick cultural media, they appeal to the women viewers who identify with the films' plots, and therefore, the diegetic spatiotemporal frameworks of the films reflect the extra-diegetic setting of the real world. Women are now giving equal importance to being self-sufficient by having their own careers while attempting to find a romantic connection. While Kitty and Lydia in Black's *Pride & Prejudice* treat marriage as an exchange of commodities where they want to trade in the wealthiest men, Sowmya and Elizabeth are focused on their careers. In *From Prada to Nada*, a modernization of *Sense and Sensibility* which locates the Dashwood sisters in East LA, Nora (Elinor) has a ten-year career plan for which she rejects every prospective suitor.

Genette argues, "*transdiegetization*—can of course not occur without at least some changes in the action itself. ... Diegetic transposition thus inevitably and necessarily entails a few pragmatic transpositions..." (296). These Austen transpositions discussed in this chapter reward

the potential of the heroines with professional and romantic fulfilment. The texts discussed here transpose Austen's plots into very different cultural and geographical locales, but ultimately, the different backdrops are similar in terms of the Austenian localism it allows for. The writers/filmmakers make use of Austen to commemorate the romantic and professional victories of the female protagonists, and also use the Austenian bandwagon to celebrate family and community while remaining aloof from the ironic treatment she meted out the latter. However, it must be noted here that that the Indian, Mormon, and Jewish cultures discussed here are usually stereotyped as having traditional close-knit family structures. The attempt by the media producers to give the consumer a slice of the familiar—the reason behind localising the narratives—might be the motive for eliminating Austen's satire of the family.

Austen is a marketable commodity and using her name is a vehicle to box office success in most cases. As Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield note, "A common global culture shines through these highly localized adaptations." Austen can be easily altered to fit the contemporary socio-cultural scene, and therefore, the adaptations from the US, England, and India have common strands running through them reflecting a shared culture. The localization of social themes ties in with Genette's idea of hypertextual transpositions since the latter allows for both temporal proximization as well as cultural translation. The structural innovation facilitates a transcultural space where the localised figure of the new global woman—even if she is in her seventies as in *Jane Austen in Boca*—can be celebrated.

By achieving global success, chick culture has become more heterogeneous with regard to social and cultural co-ordinates. The women featured in the texts discussed above are denizens of a global modernity. While Jewish and Mormon cultures are not as "alien" to Western norms

as South Asian cultural practices, transposing Austen to "foreign" contexts demonstrates how these protagonists occupy a global cultural space. There is a complex interaction between the local and the global, international and the vernacular as they work themselves out against an intricate backcloth of modern popular culture and venerable tradition. However, the chick culture demonstrated in these texts does not represent an indistinguishable global (consumer) culture, but brings out the socio-cultural differences hidden underneath the outward similarities. Although the female characters in Cohen's *Jane Austen in Boca* are septuagenarians, they reveal an inherent modernity in their mindset and the decisions they make. They understand the consumer goals of the contemporary world and skilfully negotiate the demands placed on them by their environment. Lila Katz is the best example, of one who does manage to succeed at the elusive goal of "having it all" by marrying Hy Marcus for his money and then being miraculously widowed and left to enjoy her newfound wealth at her own terms. It can be argued that she is dependent on the patriarchal notion of the man having to "save" her by giving her financial security, but at her advanced age, this is the only pragmatic option left to her.

The women depicted in the chick culture texts discussed here are exposed to two brands of globalisation simultaneously: the totalising nature of pop culture and the particularities of difference. This capacity to manipulate the global and adjust it to local situations executes the work of effective transposition and even translation, whereby difference is familiarised and different local modernities are produced which can communicate with each other on a global basis. Chick lit, with its globally profitable formula and local offshoots is one of the best vehicles of popular fiction/culture to study glocalization created as a scene of diversity and cultural modernity. The simultaneous familiarisation and de-familiarisation of the familiar Austen is the site of pleasurable re-interpretation. In the global backdrops portrayed in the five chick culture

texts explored in this chapter, the female protagonists as well as the female readers/viewers are aware of the age, race, religious, or cultural differences from Austen's protagonists that inform their everyday lives as they negotiate their jobs, their romantic relationships, and their relationships with their families and friends.

While prior research on chick lit has retroactively co-opted Jane Austen as the progenitor of chick lit, no one adequately discusses how chick lit or chick culture in general exploits the Jane Austen's oeuvre to join with the industry that feeds off her. The glocalisation of Austen's Regency period plots to suit different social circumstances and render them more "familiar" is simultaneously an act of strategic marketing. The elements of Austen which are transposed in the hypertexts serve as the marketing platform. The professionalization of the female protagonists in the comparatively more traditional cultures discussed here works to negotiate against "local" hegemonic ideas of romantic love and marriage being the best choices for women's lives, but the hybridization of Austen into a more localised paradigm is "an important element of transnational corporate multiculturalism" (Kraidy, "Hybridity in Cultural Globalization" 12). Since Kraidy claims that hybridity is the same as glocalisation due to the impossibility of true local and global realms, niche markets are won by such micro-marketing as practiced by the Austen hypertexts examined in this chapter ("The Global" 472). Thus, the Austen-based chick culture texts are capitalist artefacts that execute the transnational neoliberal ideology of glocalisation to overcome local barriers to market expansion.

CONCLUSION

Chick lit can be read both as an escape as well as a source of empowerment. As formula fiction, chick lit is written primarily for entertainment value, and does not necessarily have to provide solutions to the dilemmas such as the conflict between family and work. It can simply allow readers to find an "escape" from real-life problems in the pages of a novel where they know that everything will work out for the best—which might not happen in their own lives. Through the rhetoric of choice and individualism, chick lit advocates that any woman can make the choices the heroine does, which allows the readers to heave a sigh of relief. I can live such a life! I can have such a man! However, this "empowerment" might not be translatable into real life. The resolutions of chick lit plots, as is the case for most genre fiction, provide shallow, conventional endings which enable readers to see themselves as independent women who have the freedom of choice to empower their own lives. The reader's fears about the efficacy of dominant ideologies to offer personal satisfaction in her life are allayed by such superficial endings. In reality, however, the reader is just left with a postfeminist fantasy. Chick lit runs the risk of speaking only to those women who are privileged enough to exercise their right to choose; "choices" might not be possible for all women. The way in which heroines find empowerment is a question worthy of further examination, especially as it relates to the influences of race and class and how those factors can affect one's agency.

As discussed in Chapter 1, chick lit is often accused of upholding the status quo and traditional ideology as part of its postfeminist celebration of pre-feminist ideals. However, in *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski argues, "even the contemporary mass-produced

narratives for women contain elements of protest and resistance underneath highly 'orthodox' plots," and although "the popular culture heroine and the feminist choose utterly different ways of overcoming their dissatisfaction, they at least have in common the dissatisfaction" (Modleski 25, 26). Although the elements of protest are recuperated and the status quo is established at the end, Modleski believes that the voicing of the dissatisfactions is a positive aspect of such mass-produced texts as chick lit.

However, it is the dissatisfactions which chick lit does provide which I wish to address in this concluding chapter. By examining the lacunae in chick lit, we can reveal the ideologies encoded in the genre, the ideologies which the writers themselves might be unaware of propagating. Marxist critic Louis Althusser argues that ideology is "not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (165). The three principal "truths" or common ideologies by which chick lit novels function are romantic love, the joys of consumerism, and the importance of friends and family. Since it is impossible to live outside ideology, one is always situated within it and is unconsciously governed by those beliefs. Moreover, the concealing of the ideologies at work is central to the existence of ideology. Terry Eagleton remarks that ideology reveals itself through the silences of the text: "An ideology exists because there are certain things which must not be spoken of" (11). The partial truths and gaps in chick lit presents the ideas which should be kept silent.

Since the chick lit protagonist is meant to be a figure that the readers identify with, the protagonist's portrayal is central to the functioning of ideology. Chick lit protagonists usually fall

into two camps: the ditzy, scatter-brained woman, or the super-ambitious, controlling woman. The genre presents these two stereotypes of women, and there does not seem to be a figure in between these two extremes, a figure which would be closer to the personalities of most real life women. Also, the stereotype of the successful and ambitious woman is not shown in a positive manner—this woman is almost always cold and lonely, and therefore, in need of romantic love. These heroines, for example Kate Reddy in *I Don't Know How She Does It*, usually end up downsizing or leaving their high-powered city jobs altogether in pursuit of a happy family life in the suburbs. The other stereotype shows drifting, naïve women who are loving and have many friends—but are also looking for romantic love.

The scatter-brained, quirky kind of protagonist usually holds an entry-level job and daydreams of being a successful professional woman with a nice office of her own. Bridget Jones or Emma Corrigan from Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret* are apt examples of this type of protagonist. They do not display any drive to improve their professional positions, and only pretend to be busy at their computers. For example, having decided that it would be a good idea to network and build connections at a book launch hosted by the publishing house she works at, Bridget says, "Wish to be like Tina Brown, though not, obviously, quite so hardworking" (Fielding 83). This quote from the iconic chick lit text demonstrates the dreams of glamour with the lack of accompanying responsibility and work which characterize many chick lit heroines. They are on the lookout for an easy way out, and this is almost always given to them by the end of the novel, and often through the intercession of the hero. Both Bridget and Emma go through multiple careers without being successful at any of them, and yet they do not seem to try to be good at what they do. They enjoy seeing themselves as contemporary, postfeminist successful

women, but it is an idealized version of their real selves that they see. In the future, chick lit needs to depict successful, intelligent, active women who are self-confident and improve their lives on their own merit without help from their families or boyfriends. They should act with authority and responsibility on any issues they need to tackle.

The chick lit novels distract the reader with glitzy shopping sprees, and designer clothes, and trendy hotspots from questioning the ideologies being reinforced by the texts. Readers do not question how the protagonists should work harder to change their lives, or how they could improve their own. Chick lit does portray an idealized version of real life, but this idealization excludes many unfavourable realities. Or, when it does portray adverse realities such as debt, the debt situation is quite easily resolved with a sudden new high-paying job, like Becky's TV gig in *Confessions of a Shopaholic.* The fictional world does not speak of current events, relevant politics, multiculturalism, or poverty. Although there is ethnic chick lit in its embryonic stage, the vastly more popular is the mainstream novel featuring a white, middle class woman in a big city. In such novels, minorities are present only as shadowy secondary characters—perhaps a friend or a colleague at work, and they are not developed, round characters. Religion, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality—issues which are problematic concerns in real life—are almost completely effaced in the world of the chick lit novel. While the protagonists might have a gay male best friend, this friend is like another fashion accessory. They usually do not have a sub-plot of their own, and only serve to help the heroine work through her work and relationship problems. I have personally not seen any lesbian characters in the prototypical chick lit novel, although an offshoot of lesbian chick lit is slowly growing. Chick lit sexuality is always heterosexual, with other sexual identities secondary or just adding colour to a scene.

As discussed in Chapter 1, chick lit readers do realize that the novels they read are not true to life, but present a fantasy version of real life. However, their awareness of what is unreal, automatically makes them assume that the rest is real or natural, which in turn prevents them from questioning social constructs and pervasive ideologies. Readers do live within the ideologies which work in society and which the novels reflect. The celebration of romantic love is an ideology that is presented as natural, although several of my survey participants did oppose that idea. Chick lit presents several aspects of life as if they were natural or common sense, or a mirror image of real life. It is "normal" that everyone living in London and New York are white and upper middle class. It is also "normal" that everyone finds true love in the big city. It is "normal" that everyone indulges in extravagant consumption. Barthes asserts that myths remain hidden through the inoculation of readers: "One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion" (150). Readers know that the fantasy endings to the novels could never be true in life no matter how much they share the experiences of the protagonist. However, the readers' awareness of the constructed reality is how the cultural myths inoculate them.

Chick lit, like all popular fiction, is literature of escape. However, when one is escaping from real life, one should have something worthwhile to escape to. The perfect chick lit form would allow for escape while also directly confronting the women's issues it claims to deal with, instead of distracting readers from giving serious attention to the real life societal problems. Radway's readers found an escape in their romance novels and were also able to exert an amount

of control over their problems through that escape. Women need to escape to the world of chick lit due to the dominant ideologies at work in their own lives, but the genre does not provide any innovative solutions. Chick lit, with its wide reader base, is an apt platform to discuss modern women's problems, to aid decision-making, and their results. Chick lit needs to show strong, successful women who do not feel incomplete without a man in their lives. Why is Bridget, a scatter-brained underachiever a figure that has become everywoman? Chick lit has the potential to describe women who don't stick to the formula; discuss issues that contribute to current problems in a noteworthy way; or provide a fictional world that functions as a meaningful world to escape to. Chick lit has potential to teach readers something significant about life without just allowing the reader to forget about her own problems for a few hours.

While chick lit offers an alternative to the strident aspects of second-wave Anglo-American feminism, its lack of engagement with liberal politics—equal pay concerns, the health system, reproductive rights, child-care support—is a shortcoming. Although it seems to endorse libertarian politics with its focus on the individual and one's personal freedoms, the liberal political issues mentioned above are significant to one's personal autonomy. Since chick lit claims to reflect real life scenarios, the ongoing debate in the real world about the gender-wage gap, women's right to abortion without government interference, and affordable healthcare are very relevant. Chick lit heroines enjoy their sexual freedom and financial independence, but they might not have the right to choice in the chance of an unplanned pregnancy and women earn 77 cents on men's dollar as of 2012 (Bassett). We need to see protagonists in jobs that are usually male-dominated. While protagonists' media-related jobs are good fodder for glamorous city plots, writers should be aware of the social repercussions of the media they produce. Chick lit can still be escapist fiction but without encouraging women's physical or personal insecurity.

Instead, it can advance a self-improvement drive where women channel their energies into performing well at their workplace in order to get promoted without resorting to deus ex machina schemes. As chick lit has a proven wide reader base, it need not fear that it will lose support networks if it adds more scope with the trade-off of less glamour to its repertoire. At the same time, the genre needs to maintain its vivacity in order to maintain its fortunate position in the literary marketplace.

APPENDIX

Appendix I:

This is the list of the chick lit novels mentioned most by the survey participants. Each novel has been mentioned at least 3 times.

Confessions of a Shopaholic
Watermelon
Something Borrowed
Something Blue
Can You Keep a Secret
Bridget Jones's Diary
Jemima J
The Devi Wears Prada
Love the One You're With
I've Got Your Number
Bergdorf Blondes
Bridget Jones: Edge of Reason
Good in Bed
The Undomestic Goddess
Chasing Harry Winston
One Fifth Avenue
The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing
P.S. I Love You
The Other Side of the Story
Heart of the Matter
Trading Up
Sushi for Beginners

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