

INDIAN CHICK-LIT CONCEPT OF CONSUMERISM: ANALYSIS OF

GODDESS FOR HIRE

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ABSTRACT

This research paper critically examines Indian – US chick lit in order to illustrate its complexity and to point out why attention is to be given to this sub-genre of mainstream chick-lit. Indian chick-lit's adherence to mainstream chick-lit's conventions causes the articulation of the Indian heroine's hybrid identity to be very difficult. This also explores how Indian chick-lit problematizes chick-lit's invitation for the reader to identify with the female character when Indian chick-lit shows that assimilation to US culture is pointless. This paper examines specifically how the cross-cultural experience in the diaspora and its struggle are represented in one of chick-lit's major themes, consumerism. *Goddess for Hire* shows how the consumerism convention makes it very difficult for the female character to have a hybrid identity.

KEYWORDS: Chick-lit, Hybrid identity, Assimilation, Cross-culture and Consumerism

INTRODUCTION

The recent appearance of Indian – US chick-literature presents the Indian heroine's experience in the diaspora in a way that has not been done before. It examines the cross-cultural experience which includes the Indian female character's move from India to the US; her life in the US; and her return home to India after living in the US. Indian chick-lit portrays the Indian heroine's love conflict, the work conflict, the maturity conflict and the beauty conflict; the obsessive consumption of goods; and the identification with the homeland.

Chick-literature is a genre that portrays heroines in their late teens, their twenties, and their thirties, and it presents the pressures female characters feel from society and from their families to be romantically and professionally successful. It also depicts the stress that female protagonists feel to be thin, beautiful and trendy with a tone that is lighthearted and at times comical. Critics of chick-lit denounce this genre for these reasons. They are:

- It adheres to patriarchal ideology
- It's obsession with beauty
- It's infatuation with consumerism

Diaspora theory helps to formulate the understanding of Indian US chick-lit. Makarand Paranjape contends that if the diaspora is voluntary, it "must involve some significant tension between the source and the target cultures" (67). Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire* engages in diasporic experiences as the protagonist feels tension between the US culture that she chooses to adopt and the Indian culture that her family desires for her to retain.

CONSUMERISM IN CHICK-LIT

The Indian heroine's cross-cultural experience in the diaspora to the US and her struggles are portrayed in one of chick-lit key topics, consumerism. Juliette Wells asks, "Without shopping, could chick lit exist?" (62). Well's query suggests the importance of consumerism to chick-lit. The leading lady of chick-lit shops constantly in order to remain chic and in vogue; in chick-lit, fashion is a large part of the heroine's identity. Wells explores the connection between fashion and identity in chick-lit. "Consumer goods are essential to chick-lit heroines' self-conception and self-presentation, and writers commonly give as much attention to the obtaining and assembling of outfits as to the maintenance of faces and bodies" (62). However, Indian chick-lit's adherence to mainstream's chick-lit's consumerism convention disrupts the reader's invitation to identify with the Indian heroine. Though the Indian heroine shops fanatically, US society will not accept her.

CONSUMERISM IN *GODDESS FOR HIRE*

In chick-lit, the female protagonist's consumption is important to her self-conception, while in Indian chick-lit, the heroine's consumption of goods is imperative to her self-conception as an US citizen. In Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire*, Maya Mehra shops and buys popular products in order to fit in the US. Maya refashions her Indian identity in order to adopt an US identity. *Goddess for Hire* critiques chick-lit and shows that the chick-lit element, consumerism, makes it difficult for the female protagonist to have a hybrid identity.

Maya's cultural conflict revolves around her assimilation to US consumerism, while her loved ones resist it. Yet, Maya can never fully assimilate to US hegemony, nor can she ever possess an Indian identity; she rests somewhere in the middle between these two identities. The cultural battle is resolved when Maya relinquishes her desire to possess only a US fashionista identity and when she embraces her calling to become the Hindu Goddess Kali; her friends and family no longer care about Maya's adoption of US consumerism since she still holds on to her Indian culture.

Maya shops extravagantly in order to prove to society that she is a member of a high socioeconomic class. Thorstein Velben asserts that expensive clothes are "evidence of pecuniary success" and "social worth" (104). Maya buys her extravagant and pricy purchases of clothes and shoes in order to prove to the people of Beverly Hills that she connects with their exclusive crowd. Maya's possession of a Hummer implies that she has the money to afford it and the money to maintain it. If the Indian heroine is unemployed, then together her unemployed status and her obsessive shopping habit augment her social worth; her unemployment, coupled with her shopping habit, shows that she can afford to shop without a job. Velben's insight of unemployment, shopping and social status indicates that a person who does not need to work and who continues to shop is worth even more in society.

Singh's description of Maya depicts the heroine's jobless status and her social worth as she shops on her birthday. She spends heaps of money on clothes, she has no less than "eight shopping bags" (2). Even if her birthday were on a weekday, it would not matter because it's "one of the benefits of being unemployed" (2). If she shops on her birthday and does not have a job, it suggests that she comes from a very affluent family that is willing to pay for her extravagance.

Velben examines the importance of an in-style wardrobe and its significance for the leisure class: "Dress must not only be conspicuously expensive and inconvenient: it must at the same time be up to date" (106). Throughout the novel, Singh describes Maya's clothes and associates all of them with a particular brand name and designer. Singh's emphasis on

Maya's obsession with name brand items also alludes to Maya's longing to belong in the US. Maya is different from her family. In that she desperately yearns to enter Beverly Hills' leisure class.

In Indian-US chick-lit, the heroine's up-to-date closet characterizes her in a negative manner: it shows that she is a self-indulgent character. Velben's outlook indicates that it is waste for an individual to buy new clothes every season instead of recycling their wardrobe. Maya's adoption of US consumerism negatively is portrayed clearly. With her craze for a fashionable closet she spends an outrageous amount of money on clothes and accessories. Ultimately it causes friction between her and her parents. Maya's parents disapprove of her indulgence in US consumerism and the US lifestyle, they do not push her to be a traditional Indian; however, they do push her to adopt aspects of an Indian identity, such as proper Indian clothing at family events. But Maya's desire to embrace an US identity makes it very difficult for her to have a hybrid identity.

Homi Bhabha asserts that mimicry is "the sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" ("Of Mimicry and Man" 266). Bhabha's theory of mimicry suggests that the Other changes its identity in order to mimic instances of colonial power so that it can gain power. In Indian chick-lit, it is the Indian heroine' who is the Other and who mimics US ways of life. However, Maya's rejection by the elite class demonstrates that mimicry is pointless; if the socialites will not accept her, then it is not worth trying to be like them.

Maya alters her traditional Indian dress in order to mimic and dress as the fashionistas in Beverly Hills. When Maya realizes that she is the Goddess Kali, she is not sure what to wear when she captures the evil men and women of Beverly Hills and she expresses her qualm: "What does a Goddess wear to kick ass? In Style magazine (has) yet to cover the issue, so it (is) all up to me" (135). Since the fashion world has yet to discern what is appropriate for a Goddess to wear, Maya is apprehensive about her apparel and finds it difficult to make her own decision: Maya's mimicry of Beverly Hill's fashionistas is an act of complicity and it characterizes her as wanna-be, Maya chooses to follow others' fashion sense instead of her own.

Bhabha asserts that "in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" ("Of Mimicry and Man" 266). Bhabha's notions indicate that mimicry is supposed to produce a difference between the Other and what it mimics. The subject is apparently different, while it also looks similar. Maya is aware that she is culturally different. She hates country clubs for their "homogeneous membership"(99). Maya's assertion indicates that the members of country clubs discriminate against people of color without taking into consideration socioeconomic status. Once inside Camino Real, Maya's marginality and her "otherness" are magnified when Gwen exclaims to Maya, "You're not a member!" (103) Even though Maya puts forth a great effort to look like all other fashionistas, they still reject her. It is pointless for Maya to mimic fashionistas if they refuse to accept her.

CONCLUSIONS

Chick-lit writers don't condemn consumerism. Wells points out that "the genre as a whole does not cast any lasting doubt on the notion that self-indulgence is a key to a rewarding life". Her argument suggests that critics should not condemn the heroine for her guilty pleasure. In regards to Indian-US chick-lit, the Indian heroine's adherence to US, consumerism also indicates that she follows US hegemony. Yet, the Indian protagonist's adherence to US hegemony

denies her Hybridity. Since US society rejects the Indian leading lady and considers her a wanna-be, Indian chick-lit suggests that assimilation is pointless.

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