

DOCTORAL THESIS

Romances of the self: single women, neoliberalism and the nationalist imaginary in Indian chick lit

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-2000s, novels written by Indian women featuring a single woman's adventures in work and romance joined a transnational genre of writing called "chick lit" epitomized by novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding 1996) and *Sex and the City* (Bushnell 1997). While chick lit has garnered some scholarly attention (Ferriss and Young 2006; Gill 2007; Harzewski 2011), studies remain largely focused on Anglo-American writing even while acknowledging the genre's global spread. There has been no in-depth analysis of chick lit written by Indian women in India, and it is this lacuna that this study seeks to fill.

The emergence of chick lit in India roughly a decade after economic liberalization makes the novels a useful lens through which to observe the formation of a new feminine neoliberal subjectivity – "the Indian singleton". I argue that the discourse of singleness in Indian chick lit novels is deployed not so much to solve the problem of being unmarried, but to resolve the tension between the demands of "Indian tradition" on urban, middle-class, young women and their desire for a selfhood inflected by transnational, neoliberal discourses of autonomy. By shifting my analytical focus away from the protagonist and her romantic partner to the mother-daughter relationship in the novels, I show how "tradition" and "modernity" are crystallized through discourses of food, fashion and the body. While "tradition" and "modernity" are conceptualized in these narratives as a binary, the protagonists seem to be attempting to articulate a selfhood that merges the two poles without having to pick a side. I draw on postcolonial, poststructuralist and feminist theory to argue that in their refusal to conform to ideas of Indian selfhood wherein individualism is circumscribed by community, the single women in Indian chick lit present, if not entirely represent, the idea of synthesis.

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