

## Politicizing the Popular and Popularizing the Political: Interrogating the Making and Negotiations of the Neo-liberal Female Subject in Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor*

Aneesha Puri

### Abstract:

Feminists' most belligerent battle has been to secure equality with men while choosing, but a dissension seems to have widened between what is predominantly labelled as "academic feminism" and what is glorified and maligned in the same breath as "popular feminism." The patriarchal institutions and their manifold materializations have often re-furbished themselves to address the swift transmogrifications of realities and schools of thought owing to economic liberalisation and cultural globalisation. Therefore, they require resurrected counter-narratives with an even more nuanced understanding that can withstand and oppose the majoritarian ideology accompanying the neo-liberal subject-making in the urban, metropolitan cities of India. This paper purports to focus on the emergence of new paradigms of female subjectivities in what has been touted as one of the most celebrated Indian "chick-lits," Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* (2008) by analysing the discursive discomfort which is inherent in the manufacturing of a heterosexual female subject that simultaneously co-opts and shuns feminism, through an analysis of the representation of the eponymous protagonist as she grapples with complicated and often, contradictory emotions.

**Keywords:** Heteronormativity; Intertextuality; Matrimania; Popular Feminism; Self-Surveillance.

The urbane and metropolitan cities of India appear to beckon with their razzmatazz of swanky lifestyles, promises of upward social mobility, infinite possibilities and plethora of choices only if one is supposedly gung-ho about them. The female millennials who have been the beneficiaries of

liberal feminist reforms, acknowledge their ever-increasing dependence on the world of the internet where the mind-boggling explosion seemingly diminishes barriers of highbrow and lowbrow culture and consequently, triggers a vast spectrum of conceptual possibilities and scope for critical engagement. While the mass consciousness still appears to be under the tutelage of moral conservatism and traditional hierarchies, a minuscule minority claims to have attained some form of freedom from the -isms (that are generally and stereotypically considered to reside in academic bastions) and prefer to invest their energy and effort to strengthen the pro-choice bandwagon, the quintessential embodiment of it being the 2015 “My Choice” video directed by Homi Adajania for Vogue, starring Deepika Padukone.

Though feminists’ most crucial combat has been to secure an equal footing with men while choosing, a schism seems to have opened between what is dominantly understood to be “academic feminism” and what is celebrated and vilified in the same breath as “popular feminism.” The patriarchal institutions and their multiple manifestations have often re-invented themselves to cater to rapidly transitioning realities and ideologies in the wake of economic liberalisation and cultural globalisation and therefore, necessitate revamped counter-narratives with an even more nuanced understanding that can resist the majoritarian homogenised worldview with a thrust on neo-liberal subject-making. Keeping the given socio-cultural climate in mind, this paper intends to draw attention to the emergence of new paradigms of female subjectivities in what has been touted as one of the most celebrated Indian “chick-lits”, Anuja Chauhan’s *The Zoya Factor* (2008) which has also recently been made into a movie starring the self-proclaimed queen of Indian “chick-flicks” - Sonam Kapoor. The idea is to critically scrutinise the discursive unease that accompanies the construction of the heterosexual female subject that simultaneously incorporates and abandons feminism by analysing the representation of the eponymous protagonist as she often juggles the complicated and contradictory emotions while navigating the labyrinthine terrains that have been made accessible and rendered visible in the wake of a reality that is saturated with media images and popular cultural references.

Many critics have been downright dismissive of the politics of “chick-lits” and contend that characters of “chick-lit” in spite of being in an advantageous position owing to the larger feminist struggles often assume those gains for granted in their retrogressive approaches to femininity (Dowd, 2001). However, as it is now increasingly being foregrounded, such a condescending approach and refusal to engage with the production, consumption and contestation of meanings in the bildungsroman

of the “chick-lit” protagonist(s) generate a very limited conceptualisation of the politics of femininity and feminism and demand new critical tools to grapple with the contemporary socio-economic milieu. Undoubtedly, the “chick-lit” phenomenon cannot be deconstructed by divorcing it from the notion of “choice” predicated on neo-liberal subject-making. A similar sense of self-awareness about the problematics of neo-liberalism and the manner, in which consumerist ideology has become inextricably intertwined with the notion of subject-making, pervades *The Zoya Factor*. As Inderpal Grewal rightly cautions against the blanket debunking of neo-liberalism that lead to “a utopian search for the pure, uncommodified self or a modernist longing for the uncontaminated Other” (19), the intent in this paper is not to discover a pristine and uncontaminated exteriority vis-a-vis the manufacturing of neoliberal subjects, but to tease out potential avenues of resistances and moments of contradictions that rupture the broader narrative that represents the protagonist, Zoya and charts her romance with the captain of the Indian cricket team, Nikhil Khoda, in a somewhat Bollywood-like manner of the modern-day equivalent of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

Working as a mid-level client servicing executive in India’s largest advertising agency, Zoya’s character portrayal is premised upon self-deprecating humour and an ironic self-awareness that are considered very characteristic of the genre of “chick-lit.” She often quips about herself in the novel, “chubby-cheeked, twice-jilted, not-smart-enough-to-crack-the-CAT-status” (Chauhan 124). The first-person confessional tone of the narrative further bolsters the novel’s “chick-lit” credentials by concretely locating it in the spatio-temporal location of contemporary Delhi with an occasional deployment of *Hinglish* and generous popular culture references which are cheekily and self-referentially directed at all-knowing “chick-lit” readers who are assumed to be equally familiar with popular culture and are in a position to understand the inherently interdisciplinary nature of allusions ranging from Shahrukh Khan to Darth Vader, from the cultural capital supposedly inherent in South Delhi and blatantly missing from Karol Bagh, to Gotham City.

The rhetoric of happily-ever-after plays out slightly differently in this narrative compared to the plot of a traditional romance. The female protagonist, Zoya, maintains an ironic distance from love and regards herself as too sophisticated for the cliched plot of romance. She is very careful to disassociate herself from anything that would make her seem, in her own words, “uncool.” But the cynical consciousness that operates here is split between knowledge and desire. There is an awareness of the perils that could ensue as a consequence of too much investment in heteronormative

script that could easily transform into a story of female subordination. This kind of ironic self-awareness gets manifested when she often muses over the odds of Nikhil falling in love with her, “Okay, so I’d been ... ‘ogling and Googling’ Nikhil Khoda a bit. I’d checked out all his stats on the Net, proving myself to be a masochistic loser who obsessed about people who were super rude to them” (Chauhan 95). The cynical consciousness, however, represses this knowledge in favour of a possibility of heterosexual romance. What eventually gets ridiculed in the dry banter of this novel is the excess of sentiments that is a socio-cultural symptom of “uncultured” middle-class. Sentimentalism is tantamount to an inability to reason with clarity and if taken to its logical extreme, it would imply a lack of self-reflexive consciousness and ironic distance (Ebert 106). While like a typical “chick-lit” protagonist, Zoya, turns to her job to provide meaning and fulfilment, in spite of working at AWB (which is modelled on JWT) and all the glamour it holds, her job is full of drudgery and pays low as she often cribs “two lakh per annum.” No wonder, in a moment of reverie and self-indulgence, Zoya muses: “Maybe I really was a Goddess of the pitch. I was born at the stroke of the auspicious hour... Maybe this was my ticket out of the boring, safe, middle-class life I’d lived so far. Maybe this was how I’d become rich and famous, appear on magazine covers, and have lean mean cricketers grovelling at my feet” (Chauhan 124).

The hyper and the over-the-top media obsession about celebrity weddings recently, be it *Virushka*, *DeepVeer* or *NiYanka*, have also significantly foregrounded not only the engrossment with marriages but also the ever-increasing emotional investment in the aspirational fairytale script which speaks volumes about not only gender but class politics. The unprecedented media hype could be labelled as one of the most severe cases in recent history of what has been called “matrimania” (DePaulo). This romanticised reclamation of heterosexual narrative has commercial as well as ideological implications and all of this gets tangled with the emotional economy and crucially affects how women juggle feminism and the gendered subjectivities that have been made accessible in the new millennium. It is important to delve deeper into the socio-economic flux that has enveloped the metropolitan cities recently, to make sense of the character portrayal of Zoya and her cultural resonance. Since the onset of the noughties, the urban middle-class heterosexual woman has suddenly metamorphosed into a hyper visible presence in popular culture. A new subjectivity for women seemed to be gaining cultural prominence in media culture (Taylor1). These women are the beneficiaries of liberal feminist reforms and their participation in the public sphere and capitalist avenues is taken for granted. Hollows and Moseley contend that “most

people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture,” and “for many women of our generation, formative understanding of, and identifications with, feminist ideas have been almost exclusively within popular culture” (2). However, a single woman continues to be a source of anxiety but in novel and often, contradictory ways that simultaneously acknowledge and then eschew feminism. Singleness as a gendered form of difference gets manufactured and is then expected to manoeuvre the mainstream milieu through a means of “disciplining” in the Foucauldian sense. The intertextual network of mainstream culture comprises contradictory discourses around women which need to be put under critical scrutiny and laid bare. Hardly ever a single woman in popular culture is represented to be reconciled to her singleness, itself one of the significant ways in which the potential threats she supposedly embodies gets suppressed (Taylor 8-10). For all the revolutionary attempts to move on from the subservient, passive heroines bereft of any complexity and too willing to sacrifice their being at the altar of male affection, women’s enfranchisement has barely attained completion in the actual sense. The crisis of navigating between the allure of traditional accoutrements of femininity and buzzwords of agency, constitute the dilemma of this novel’s protagonist. Zoya ruminates, “People are always saying *so cute!* when they see me and grabbing my cheeks and squeezing them with gusto, which is okay when you’re a moppet in red corduroy dungarees but not so good when you are a working woman ... and twenty-seven years old to boot. By that age, people should be more interested in squeezing your butt, right?” (Chauhan 3).

For a long time, popular feminism was, “dismayed in favour of an authentic feminism which is “elsewhere” (Brunsdon 101), it is now becoming pretty obvious that mainstream media culture functions as one of the primary domains that constitutes and propagates feminism by often taking away the “sting” from it and rendering it more “palatable.” Zoya is often critical of the institutionalized privileges of hyperfemininity and within the first-person narrative, romance and coupledness are not valorised in a simplistic manner especially when Zoya is juxtaposed with the Miss India-Universe who, unlike her, has mastered the art of investment in the heterosexual ideals of femininity:

So, what I did was, I got into the Miss India-Universe’s room (her name was Ritu Raina, and she was heart-stoppingly beautiful: glossy ironed-hair, high-cheekbones and all). ... I did kind of wonder why she’d risked her life and flown Biman air to Dhaka then. ‘Because it’s another whole trip when he comes back to me all sweaty and flushed with victory,’ she said, her eyes shining. ‘I

feel like a prize then.’ Okay, that was a pretty corny thing to say, but she was only nineteen, after all, and probably did not know any better. So I forgave her (Chauhan 82).

It is possible to recuperate the tensions and fissures from the margins and understand the narrative as a locus where multiple meanings jostle for supremacy. Comedy is strategically exploited to camouflage the protagonist’s sloppy and clumsy demeanour during the progression of her life. In fact, humour arises when the ideals of feminism are often juxtaposed with the general vicissitudes and messiness of modern life. Reading *The Zoya Factor*, is equivalent to entering a carefully curated world of dreams and daydreams, with the threat of social blunders hovering around. But the stereotypical expectations associated with the genre of “chick-lit” ensure that the deconstructionist logic does not get too bleak. Of course, eventually a relationship with the captain of the Indian cricket team is foregrounded as a viable and teleological outcome. Though Zoya often indulges in male-bashing and underlines the troubles of modern dating and despite the lack of an overwhelmingly economic motive to marry, the enduring charm of “to be the mistress of Pemberley might be something” gets transformed into its modern equivalent of the fascination of dating the captain of Indian cricket team.

Though Zoya’s unmarried status at the age of twenty seven, is not really a cause for celebration among her family and relatives and she is often sent to meet young eligible men from her caste (like a quintessential text seeped in neoliberalism, the novel as a whole is conspicuously silent about caste and obsessed with class), there is no overwhelming panic hovering over her to get married. As Zoya says:

My father likes to believe he’s ‘broad-minded.’ He’s kept the same standards for Zoravar and me right through school and college. He’s cool with the fact that I’m still not married. He’s proud that I’m working. I think he knows I’ve had boyfriends and stuff, and the policy we’ve been following since I was about seventeen is that he doesn’t ask me about it and I don’t tell him about it (Chauhan137).

However, a new kind of panic assumes prominence in Zoya’s life, as critics have highlighted that female subjects embedded in the logic of neoliberalism are inflicted with new kinds of anxiety - singleness (McRobbie11). Consequently, they often feel the need to actively participate in disciplinary regimes associated with self-grooming and bodily improvements (Gill, 2007; Negra, 2009). Similarly, as a subject always in the process of becoming, Zoya not only wants to remedy her singleness but also her-

self which completely coincides with the neo-liberalist feminist rationale. For instance, she remarks, "That night I had a bad attack of oh-my-God-I-look-ugly-in-whatever-I-wear changed my clothes a million times and didn't get down to gym till twenty past eight" (Chauhan368). But though Zoya fails to completely extricate herself from the constant "self-surveillance," she often critiques the restrictive and gendered grooming that women must do in order to make themselves attractive objects of consumption in the dating market. This is what many critics following Zizek have labelled as an informed involvement in many social performances that position one in a subordinate status even though one is consciously aware of this ideological indoctrination (Dorney13). As Zizek puts it, "they know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it" (29). This affective investment becomes all the more pronounced in case of discursive formations surrounding the dominant narratives of love and romance. Zoya, like a typical beneficiary of liberalism often questions how fitting domestic ideologies are to her current lifestyle and often wonders about her own ability to live up to the prescribed standard or her ability to achieve those sentiments associated with domesticity when she imagines herself married and leading a typical middle-class lifestyle with a man found by her relatives:

I had a sudden vision of Kattu and me at a honeymoon hotel in Goa, him all cocky and expansive in swimming trunks...And me, with *sindoor* in my hair, a *mangalsutra* dangling demurely, modestly encased in a prim *salwaar kameez*...Later...we would...make a couple of Kattu-like kids. I would feed them every single meal by hand, like a good mother should. Naturally, I would have to give up my job, start wearing long *kurtis* to hide my flabby, scarred -by-a-million-stretch-marks tummy....(Chauhan 130).

She is quick to snap out of this nightmarish vision and announce that "I wanted excitement. I wanted adventure. I wanted out" (Chauhan 130). Educated in the broader tenets of feminism, Zoya is sexually liberated (for instance, when she gazes upon Nikhil Khoda's shirtless chest as a desiring subject and calls it "totally biteable, sculpted toffee, awesome," (Chauhan 47)) and financially independent (even though the job for all its glamour does not pay very well) and seemingly autonomous. Through pedagogy performed by a vast array of socio-cultural apparatuses, women like Zoya are often taught how to perfect the process of becoming a "woman" and this ceaseless act promises opportunities for constantly bettering oneself (Negra 5). The concretisation of consumerism along with thrust on self-presentation exploits the idea of "becoming" a woman for the ever-expanding consumer industries (Gill5). This is often intermeshed with

a tendency to invoke the holy trinity of what is dubbed as neo-feminism - choice, individual agency and consumerism. This highlights a shift from the goal of self-fulfilment propagated by the second-wave of feminism which also placed a lot of onus on social responsibility. Au contraire, the concern of neo-feminism is with the individual woman's self-advancement (Radner9). On multiple occasions, Zoya, in moments of self-introspection mobilises the catchphrases of self-sufficiency and self-respect rather than waiting for male validation. For instance, when she tries to raise her spirits by saying "C'mon, snap out of it, stop brooding, do the bungee. Don't let other people take control over your happiness..." (Chauhan233). However, she frequently finds herself consumed by insecurities and low self-esteem in spite of her intermittent proclamations of happily unmarried status. One minute she proclaims "Life suddenly seemed flat" (Chauhan 214), the very next minute, "Just then my phone beeped and I looked down and saw a message flash...Instantly the world became a better place" (Chauhan216-217). All it takes is a text from her male love interest to undercut the precarity of her seeming agentiality.

The plot deploys the usual clichés of an insecure and a generally well-meaning woman who makes interesting errors due to her inherently bumbling personality (which highlights the dual nature of the protagonist as both exceptional yet ordinary) and traces the trajectory of her encounters with a difficult and elusive man (who in the end turns out to be protecting her in a quintessentially Darcy-like but not in an overbearingly patriarchal manner). Zoya does not overtly practise self-effacement and abnegation like the traditional heroines of romance novels. But it is significant to factor in that only in moments of romantic bliss and male validation, Zoya actually gets an ego-boost and given the narrative logic, the male attention is coming from none other than the captain of the Indian cricket team who literally and metaphorically holds the key to a seemingly long life of uninterrupted luxury and hopefully love too and this becomes overwhelmingly obvious when the novel reaches its closure and he visits her and says "My crores are your crores" (Chauhan508). So even though being comically illiterate in cricket, before meeting Nikhil for the first time for the ad shoot, Zoya thinks of him not as the cricket captain, but as the guy "with a cute butt," Nikhil Khodha's class privilege and considerable wealth and the eventual unfolding of their romance has ideological implications for heterosexual power dynamics.

While the distinctive trait of the narrative trajectory is its ability to make fun of itself, while simultaneously, perpetuating the subject of its mockery, there is a need to re-examine agency in the context of deconstructed identities as well as commodification of feminism. As Gill argues that the

fact that women are “required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct and to present their actions as freely chosen” (Gill and Scharff7) embodies the quintessential subjects of neo-liberalism. Zoya for all her *woke* attitude, is far from the angry voice of female dissent who is trying to turn patriarchy upside down. But the question arises as to how to study the Catch-22s of the contemporary milieu in which feminist tenets have seeped into the mainstream media and are often voiced in potentially paradoxical ways. Thoroughly marked and informed by interdiscursivity and intertextuality, feminism has come to embody a multiplicity of meanings now and it is difficult and not even desirable to pin it down to a narrow definition because the impact of patriarchal institutions varies depending on the location and positionality of the subject in the neo-liberal scheme of things.

In spite of many flaws and risks of co-optation by market logic and commodity culture, what makes *The Zoya Factor* interesting is that it actively, though a bit self-critically, participates in neo-liberal ethos and frequently blurs the boundaries between academia, media and popular culture and highlights both the glories and challenges for contemporary feminist politics. While it is definitely crucial to pay attention to “a shift from an external, male-judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze” (Gill 258), it is also paramount to understand that it is a time for both hope and anxiety as the future manifestations of what one understands by “popular feminism” cannot be predicted in advance and for these very reasons it should not be brushed aside without any critical engagement, especially in a country where violence against women has assumed an unbelievably high magnitude both as an index and consequence of denial of “choice.” The situation demands not an outright dismissal but a widening and diversification of the parameters of “popular feminism” by unpacking the connotative aspects of both the words - “popular” and “feminism” and their intersection. Most importantly, there is an urgent need to understand identities, as a dynamic process in a continuous state of negotiation with their socio-cultural and political environment and always necessarily characterised by ambivalence and contradictory rhythms

## Works Cited

Adjani, Homi, director. “Deepika Padukone – “My Choice” Directed By Homi Adajania.” YouTube, uploaded by *Vogue India*, 28 Mar. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtPv7IEhWRA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtPv7IEhWRA).

- Brunsdon, Charlotte. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, Routledge, 2006, p. 101.
- Chauhan, Anuja. *The Zoya Factor*, Harper Collins, 2008.
- DePaulo, B. *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatised, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*, St Martin's Griffin, 2006.
- Dorney, K. "Shop Boys and Girls! Interpellating Readers as Consumers in Chicklit and Ladlit. ." *Diegesis: Journal of the Association for Research in Popular Fictions*, vol. 8, no. Winter, 2004, pp. 11-21.
- Dowd, M. "Of Divas and Ditzes: Gone with the Diary." *The New York Times*, 18 Apr. 2001.
- Ebert, T. L. "Chick Lit: Not Your Mother's Romance Novels.", *The Task of Cultural Critique*, University of Illinois Press, 2009, pp. 97-117.
- Gill, Rosalind Clair. *Gender and the Media*, Polity Press, 2007.
- . and Christina Scharff. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 19.
- Hollows, Joanne, and Rachel Moseley. "Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism." *Feminism in Popular Culture*, edited by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, Berg, 2006, p. 2.
- McRobbie, A. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Asian Women, 2009, p. 11.
- Negra, Diane. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, Routledge, 2009.
- Radner, Hilary. *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture*, Routledge, 2011.
- Taylor, A. *Single Women in Popular Culture: the Limits of Postfeminism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 2008.