



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***EMBODIMENT OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ZEITGEIST IN
CHICK LIT***

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**EMBODIMENT OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ZEITGEIST IN
CHICK LIT**

By

DIANA ABU UJUM

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

January 2017

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DEDICATIONS

Praise be to Allah s.w.t.

Without the grace and love of Allah s.w.t., I would not have this opportunity to finally pen the following dedications to the individuals I cherish in a thesis I know would not 'be' without Him:

To my mom, Myrna Kiah, who read me my first favourite book.
To my dad, Abu Ujum, who bought it and every cherished book after.
I thank Allah s.w.t. every day you are my parents.

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To all those who thought Chick Lit was about little chickens. Or something chic.

And to you for picking this thesis up in spite of that.
I hereby leave you with my Pap's unwavering reminder:

“Slowly, slowly, catch the monkey.”

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

EMBODIMENT OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ZEITGEIST IN CHICK LIT

By

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January 2017

Chairman: Assoc. Prof. Rosli bin Talif, PhD
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Chick Lit, a particular genre of popfiction known as 'postfeminist fiction', provides an excellent avenue or stage for the discussion of the zeitgeist. This is the same zeitgeist that has been credited with respect to Chick Lit's popularity but never explicitly defined. There is a need to discover what the zeitgeist is in connection to Chick Lit and in turn, learn how it permeates this particular type of fiction, making Chick Lit a distinguishable brand of narrative form. The study of the genre through the usage of a new methodological tool can provide insight into the dimensions of popular fiction's plot constructions. Chick Lit is rich with new interpretations of the ideology of women to date as it tells the story of contemporary women by women for women readers. The most transparent way to study these new interpretations is to study female protagonists or 'postfeminist heroine' of Chick Lit novels and their character development. Ultimately, based on the depiction of changing times and the utilisation of certain real spaces (whether geographical or domain-based) that exist in Chick Lit novels, the question of what the zeitgeist truly is becomes important to answer to better define Chick Lit's value as a literary genre.

The study perhaps can lend more sociological import to postfeminism, and relate the significance of Chick Lit's narrative form and its potential. For these reasons, three best-selling Chick Lit novels are analysed as a narrative form that serve as a social commentary of the times. The research includes an examination of the plot constructions that allow for the development of postfeminist heroine's character traits to take place. The point of departure for this study is Scott McCracken's book on pulp fiction, highlighting that the study of popular fiction can still inform us of our identity and the social environment we live in. As McCracken points out, the study of popular fiction needs to be done in a more holistic fashion instead of in isolation. Keeping this in mind, I have applied a novel method by introducing a social network theory (Social Focus Theory) as a tool to determine the character development of the protagonist that is dependent upon the movement of the plot structure that uses the zeitgeist as a plot device. Upon determining the social foci that appear based on selected characters'

interactions, I have been able to trace character development and plot evolution from the existing network found within these novels and gauge the thematic parallels to these specific literary elements. The most exciting result of the research is the discovery that basic social network analysis can be utilised to dissect and explicate literature. Since Chick Lit is controversially known for being criticised for its questionable literariness, the study provides justification for the genre's potential contribution to literary analysis.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENJELMAAN ZEITGEIST ABAD KE-DUA PULUH SATU DALAM
'CHICK LIT'**

Oleh

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Chick Lit, suatu jenis fiksiyen popular yang dikenali sebagai fiksiyen 'postfeminis', memberikan pentas yang menarik untuk perbincangan mengenai zeitgeist. Ini merupakan zeitgeist sama yang dikreditkan dengan populariti Chick Lit tetapi tidak pernah diberi definisi yang jelas. Ada satu keperluan untuk mengkaji apakah zeitgeist yang boleh dihubungkan dengan Chick Lit dan seterusnya, mempelajari bagaimana ianya meresapi fiksiyen tersebut, maka menjadikan Chick Lit suatu bentuk cerita yang agak berbeza. Kajian genre ini melalui metodologi baru memberikan pandangan mendalam kepada pelbagai dimensi berhubung dengan pembinaan plot fiksiyen popular. Chick Lit kaya dengan penterjemahan ideologi wanita masa kini kerana ianya menyampaikan cerita tentang wanita kontemporari dari pengarang wanita dituju khas dengan pembaca wanita. Cara ternyata untuk menghasilkan interpretasi baru adalah untuk mengkaji protagonis wanita atau 'heroin postfeminis' dalam novel Chick Lit dan perkembangan karakter mereka. Pada dasarnya, gambaran perubahan zaman dan penggunaan ruang duniawi (samaada secara geografik atau kawasan yang berasaskan domain) yang wujud dalam novel Chick Lit, menimbulkan persoalan sekiranya zeitgeist yang timbul adalah penting untuk menentukan nilai Chick Lit sebagai genre sastera.

Kajian ini mungkin dapat memberikan import sosiologi kepada postfeminisme, dan menghubungkaitkan kepentingan bentuk cerita Chick Lit serta potensinya. Dengan sebab demikian, tiga novel Chick Lit terlaris dianalisa sebagai bentuk cerita yang berfungsi sebagai komentari zaman kini. Kajian ini merangkumi pemeriksaan pembinaan plot yang memperbolehkan pembangunan ciri-ciri karakter heroin postfeminis. Garis permulaan untuk kajian ini adalah buku Scott McCracken mengenai fiksiyen popular yang menekankan kajian fiksiyen popular masih boleh mendedahkan identiti dan suasana sosial masa kini. Seperti mana ditunjuk oleh McCracken, kajian fiksiyen popular perlu dijalankan secara holistik dan bukannya secara terasing. Oleh itu, saya telah menggunakan kaedah baharu dengan memperkenalkan teori rangkaian sosial (Social Focus Theory) sebagai cara untuk menentukan pembangunan karakter

protagonis yang bergantung kepada pergerakan struktur plot yang menggunakan *zeitgeist* sebagai peranti plot. Setelah menentukan “social foci” yang timbul berdasarkan interaksi beberapa karakter terpilih, saya telah berjaya menjejak pembangunan karakter dan evolusi plot dari rangkaian yang wujud dalam novel Chick Lit dan menentukan persamaan tema kepada elemen sastera tertentu. Hasil merangsangkan dalam kajian ini adalah penemuan bahawa analisis rangkaian sosial boleh digunakan untuk meneliti dan menghuraikan sastera. Oleh sebab Chick Lit sering dikaitkan dengan pelbagai kritikan tentang nilai kesasteraannya, kajian ini memberi justifikasi tentang potensi genre ini kepada analisis sastera.



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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 18 January 2017 to conduct the final examination of Diana Abu Ujum on her thesis entitled "Embodiment of Twenty-First Century Zeitgeist in Chick Lit" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CoS	Confessions of a Shopaholic
TDWP	The Devil Wears Prada
IGN	I've Got Your Number



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“The product of paper and printed ink, that we commonly call the book, is one of the great visible mediators between spirit and time, and, reflecting zeitgeist, lasts as long as ore and stone.”
—Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*

“We live in ... the era of the woman. Never in the history of the world have women been more in control of their destiny.”
—Oscar de la Renta, “Tribute to Oscar.”

1.1 Preamble

Chick Lit is predominantly postfeminist writing and according to growing consensus contemporary women’s writing and popular fiction, yet distinctive of popular romance fiction. Some writers have claimed that it is both romance and comedic writing, not unlike the cinematic version (i.e., romantic comedy or rom-com) of this genre.

Chick Lit texts have been treated to in-depth consumerist, feminist, post-feminist studies and linguistic analyses. The genre is championed by dominantly popular, romance and pulp fiction writers, who are regarded as a lowbrow community of writers, and, in most regards, has been seen in a negative light and labelled non-literary by high-brow literary writers. However, Chick Lit is not to be taken lightly, despite literary critics who especially view the genre’s narrative features unfavourably. It is, however, the genre’s narrative features that bring out the positive value of Chick Lit in informing about the literal space and time of the past two decades—the zeitgeist of the early twenty-first century.

At the heart of most rationales for writing Chick Lit has always been the zeitgeist, or the spirit of the times, of the early twenty-first century. This thesis recognises that this zeitgeist to which writers consistently refer has yet to be actually defined because such rationalising has not included framing the term within specific parameters for operationalising the zeitgeist with regards to this thesis. Hence, categories for operationalising the zeitgeist must be established.

1.2 Background of the Study

This section highlights the origins of Chick Lit, the contention and controversy that arise with regards to the genre’s standing as women’s fiction, specifically post-feminist

fiction, and a summation of the definition and categories that construct the Zeitgeist of the twenty-first century.

1.2.1 The Trouble with Chick Lit

Popular fiction such as thriller novels, science fiction, detective stories, and romance novels have always received criticism from the public and academia alike. The experience of readers of popular fiction are also regarded differently from the experience of readers of ‘classics’ and literary works deemed as ‘high’ culture. The basic argument against popular fiction or ‘popfiction’ is that it does not possess merit, contains the “simplest moralities, the crudest psychologies, and ... few philosophical pretensions” (Nash 3). So, when the phenomenon that is ‘Chick Lit,’ also termed as postfeminist fiction, boomed in the late 1990s and continued to catapult its way into the twenty-first century, bursting into what Kate Zernike of *The New York Times* described as waves of “commercial tsunami” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 2), this new branch of popular fiction did not fare any better from the judgement of likeminded critics (Whelehan 23).

Although the derogatory label of Chick Lit was initially an ironic coinage by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell¹, the name stuck to paradoxically honour contemporary women’s fiction written by women for women. They could not foresee how “[their] tag would be greasing the commercial book industry machine” (Ferriss & Young 18). In 1996, British journalist, Helen Fielding published *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the ‘pioneer’ novel that catapulted into mainstream contemporary women’s writing brandishing the label Chick Lit and going on to trigger the much debated and commercial success of the new literary genre. The novel, written in a modern confessional narrative style from the perspective of a 30-something singleton, who comically details in her diary her various daily struggles with her weight, alcohol, cigarettes, career, and love life, single-handedly changed the look of popular contemporary women’s writing. The novel launched a following based on an enormous reception by the masses, and soon Chick Lit became big business. Since the debut of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, many Chick Lit novels have inspired and produced even more Chick Lit novelists who aspire to replicate Fielding’s commercial success. In less than a decade, *Publishers Weekly* reported 240 new novels “with chick-lit imprints” were annually churned out by five mainstream publishers (Ferriss & Young 26).

In spite of all its popularity and commercial success, with each accolade, Chick Lit received waves of backlash ranging from the way the novels are marketed (e.g. colourful paperbacks depicting an outline of a young woman in mini-dress and stilettos holding the customary handbag) to its questionable literariness—the quality that separates literary fiction (i.e. classical literature) from non-literary works (i.e. popular fiction). More often than not, these criticisms come from feminists and contemporary women novelists from the likes of Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing and multiple Booker Prize nominee Dame Beryl Bainbridge, who do not wish to be associated to

¹ Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell used the term as the title of their published compilation of women’s writing of the late 1990s and early 21st century (i.e. *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995)).

such “froth[y]” fiction that supposedly sets women back to the pre-feminist era (Ferriss & Young 1).

“It is a froth sort of thing. What is the point in writing a whole novel about it?” she asked BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme during a discussion between women writers. “As people spend so little time reading, it is a pity they perhaps can’t read something a bit deeper, a bit more profound, something with a bit of bite to it” (“Bainbridge”).

Literary grandee Doris Lessing agreed with Bainbridge’s verdict on Chick Lit, asking why women write such “instantly forgettable” books.

“It’s a pity that so many young women are writing like that. I wonder if they are just writing like this because they think they are going to get published,” she said.

“It would be better, perhaps, if they wrote books about their lives as they really saw them and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on” (qtd. in Ezard).

These renowned second-wave feminists fear that this would be the only kind of writing women would be celebrated for. Since then, others have followed their lead, and the depth of blatant disrespect has not diminished over the years. For example, Curtis Sittenfeld, renowned for her best-selling literary novel *Prep*, gave a “fuming” (Coburn 2005) worthy opening in her book review of a recent novel published by Melissa Banks, who was herself renowned for her best-selling collection of stories entitled *The Girl’s Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999)—the book that puts Banks on the map as one of the most celebrated Chick Lit pioneers and literary writers. Sittenfeld does not shy away from sharing her ‘fun facts’ of what the tenets of Chick Lit are to her, and apparently what she assumes Chick Lit is to her readers, as well:

To suggest that another woman’s ostensibly literary novel is chick lit feels catty, not unlike calling another woman a slut—doesn’t the term basically bring down all of us? And yet, with “The Wonder Spot,” it’s hard to resist. A chronicle of the search for personal equilibrium and Mr. Right, Melissa Banks’s novel is highly readable, sometimes funny and entirely unchallenging; you’re not one iota smarter after finishing it. (Sittenfeld “The Wonder Spot”)

Their criticism extends to writers who perpetuate the supposed lamentable state of contemporary women's fiction, and even worse, their readers who encourage the continual market for such works. This is not an altogether original tune. Such disdain for this 'kind' of writing dates as far back as the Victorian Age, when George Eliot showed concern for the gender stereotype of women writers and women's fiction with regards to 'romance fiction' in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," which opens with her criticising how popular women's fiction of her time (mid-nineteenth century England) were advocating a "quality of silliness" in the mixture of "the frothy, the prosy, the pious" and "the pedantic." This, in turn, was the sum total of "feminine fatuity" that Eliot fully blamed "lady novelists" for largely producing then (Eliot 140; Weisser 301). In recent times, low praise from writers of 'high' fiction is still in fashion, and such lack of support from the same gender just adds insult to injury and brings to question female solidarity among women writers.

Naturally, not everyone shares Bainbridge and Lessing's viewpoint. Critics John McRae and Ronald Carter proclaim that it was strange for Lessing and Bainbridge to "be so dismissive of the phenomenon, because in many ways it is as old as the novel form itself," and proceed to demonstrate an example of intertextuality between Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (125). Other earlier defenders of Chick Lit who have no quarrels against the genre include literary writer Jeanette Winterson², who is quoted as having "no problem" with the controversial genre, and professors of literature, who are still known to use the genre as part of their syllabi when teaching postfeminist fiction at universities (Ferriss & Young 19). Professor Pamela Caughie of Loyola University in Chicago states how characters in postfeminist fiction could be "seen as confident, independent, even outrageous women taking responsibility for who they are, or as women have unconsciously internalised and are acting out the encoded gender norms of our society" (21). Apparently, she regards Chick Lit as containing the kind of substance suited for her Women's Studies and Postmodern Literature classes.

Yet, the biggest problem that Chick Lit still contends with is its definition—more specifically what it does not contain in contrast to 'real writing' that depicts real human experience (Merrick). However, this observation is debatable. Primarily, Chick Lit is defined as fiction, usually written in the first person, containing some element of romance, and depicting young, single, heterosexual, professional women in their late twenties and early thirties who live in metropolitan areas. Naturally, numerous definitions have been put forward to describe the genre as it has diversified over the years into varied spin-offs or subsets of Chick Lit. However, in general, this genre has been critically acknowledged for the core concepts of "consumerism, love and fashion" it encapsulates (Kent 1). These concepts resonate with Chick Lit readers as fanciful ideals, which in part, are based on certain realities of most young urban women's lives of this century. Chicklit.us, one of the first websites dedicated to Chick Lit writers and books, testifies that the novels reflect "the lives of everyday working young women

² Novelist Jeanette Winterson admits to writing high fiction, yet defends Chick Lit: "I am unashamedly high art ... There is such a thing and we need it in our lives. But I also like entertainment. Chick lit? No problem. *Bridget Jones's Diary*? Love it, just great. I feel completely easy with all that" (qtd. in Allen).

and men” and appeal to readers who “want to see their own lives in all the messy detail reflected in fiction today” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 3). Moreover, Lessing has been quoted to say that women writers should instead “[write] books about their lives as they really saw them.” It is noteworthy to point out that some of the best-selling Chick Lit novelists, like Marian Keyes, Sarah Mlynowski, Candace Bushnell and Lauren Weisberger, have confessed to using real life experiences concerning their love, work, and economic situations as inspirations for their works of fiction. An even more interesting twist in inspirational real-life experiences is a confession made by Cathy Yardley, a Chick Lit novelist, in *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* (2013) about how Lessing, or more specifically, Lessing’s monumental novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962), inspired Yardley to write Chick Lit that she felt, and still feels, is reminiscent of Lessing’s writing—about intelligent women who still struggle with men, love, and life:

I remembered that novel, and her, as the prototype—the first book that really captured the emotion that Chick Lit should cover. A balancing act, a coming-of-consciousness, a way to become whole by recognising the dumb things we do and still accepting them. That novel was *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing. And, to me, it’s one of the finest examples of Chick Lit out there. (And won’t she just be thrilled to hear that one?) (153)

Other than writers’ inspirations from real life experiences, there is also evidence of how the times change to cater to the pace of real technological advancements as they appear within the plot of Chick Lit novels during the time in which they are written and published. The result of these real-time technological advancements, ranging from the engineering of better mobile devices to better transportation systems, allows the management of time to be handled differently. Suddenly, a letter that would have taken three days to reach a character in the storyline, would now be delivered instantly in whatever varied form the message is sent in, for example, email or SMS. This element becomes key in demonstrating the extent that Chick Lit novels take advantage of real technologically induced abruptness resulting from a faster, more efficient and more convenient approach of carrying out an activity that further impacts the plot.

There are also thematic patterns that are criticised as formulaic which appear within a vast array of Chick Lit novels, where reality merges with fiction, as flawed professional women tackle daily obstacles in friendship, career, and love. Yet, the flaws are usually realistic, as are the social connections made at home, the workplace, and other public spaces. The metropolitan spaces used for the settings of these novels are usually places that exist and are popularly linked to the fast-paced lifestyle of the new century, such as big cities like New York City and London. However, it is noteworthy to underline that despite the genre’s alliances to reality or contemporary real life as we know it, such as writers’ real life experiences, realistic character flaws, realistic social connections, real, existing spaces as settings, and real-time technological advancements, Chick Lit is not regarded as literary writing. The shortened ‘Lit’ in Chick Lit is not coincidental but regarded as a deliberate demarcation from pure literature. It was initially an ironic

coinage by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey Deshell (1995) to refer to the ambiguous nature of their collection of contemporary women's literary writing, but is now used to refer to popular fiction of "city girl" novels (Yardley 3) or contemporary humorous romance novels written by women for women about the love, careers, and lives of single women. As Juliette Wells articulates:

Chick lit is certainly one of the next generations of women's writing but, in spite of its capacity to invoke the questions that long swirled around women's literary writing, it is not the next generation of women's literature. (49)

Be that as it may, it is no small coincidence that Chick Lit engenders more Chick Lit novels as the years go by, as Helen Fielding observes when asked about the Chick Lit explosion in other parts of the world in that "it had far more to do with zeitgeist than imitation" (qtd. in Donadio). Her comment on the zeitgeist is enigmatic in nature as she presents an observation without further elaboration, but she is not alone. In a recent interview with another Chick Lit heavyweight, Sophie Kinsella, reporter Decca Aitkenhead points out how Kinsella's use of today's technology (i.e. the mobile phone) has worked its way as a plot device in a recent novel *I've Got Your Number* (2012), which displays her "sharp eye for the zeitgeist" (Aitkenhead). For all the mention of this zeitgeist, or spirit of the times, in connection with Chick Lit, there is yet research to be done with regards to finding out what this zeitgeist truly is and the implications it carries. These observations on the zeitgeist point to the proposition that in order to recognise Chick Lit's value as a literary genre worthy of study, there is a need to thoroughly determine this current zeitgeist, its ties to Chick Lit, and how the real world prefigures in the construction of Chick Lit's plots and characters.

1.2.2 Definition of Zeitgeist

The zeitgeist is the dominant idea that is consensually shaped from the time and place a group of people inhabit. Harry Ritter defined 'Zeitgeist' alongside 'Climate of Opinion' as terms closely related and "associated with the procedures of Periodisation and Colligation," and their "[e]xplicit use today is encountered mainly in the work of journalists and popularisers and only occasionally—usually with caveats—in the writing of academic historians" (457). He further details:

Zeitgeist ... designate[s] the idea that thought in a given historical period may be understood in terms of an underlying identity, a 'genius' or animating principle that pervades and conditions mental behaviour, conscious and unconscious alike. Zeitgeist (Ger., "spirit of the time") means the psychic reality characteristic of a historical epoch.

The ideas are clearly manifest in the common practice of classifying periods according to a particular “style,” or mode of thinking—for example, ‘Baroque age,’ ‘age of Enlightenment,’ or ‘era of Liberalism’ (Stromberg, 1975: 567-69)—and they may appear in a variety of guises (e.g., ‘intellectual climate’ [Skinner, 1969: 38] or historical temper of the time’ [Snyder, 1976:27]. (qtd. in Ritter 457)

In short, the zeitgeist is to be experienced. Those who inhabit the same space and time of a popular ideology, sentiment, or practice are able to better define the zeitgeist they are currently experiencing within the context of their spheres of concern or interest.

The social, political, or artistic milieu of the era is felt as the spirit that permeates the works of intellectuals, artists and writers of the times. Ritter highlights that ‘Zeitgeist’ is the result of *Geist der Zeit*, which is “current among German intellectuals in the late eighteenth century and inspired by the French expressions *spirit du siècle* and *spirit du temps* [trans. spirit of the century and spirit of the times] (employed by Voltaire and Montesquieu in the mid-eighteenth century)” and its supposed “earliest date of use was in 1789 as cited by Grimms’ *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (trans. German Dictionary)”.

Zeitgeist came to define the characteristic spirit of a historical era taken in its totality and bearing the mark of a preponderant feature which dominated its intellectual, political, and social trends. (qtd. in Ritter 458)

Herder, Kant, Schiller, Fichte, Goethe, Hegel, and Marx are credited to have explicitly and implicitly utilised the concept of zeitgeist in their own philosophical works. Furthermore, the term is aligned to “German idealist historiography and philosophy of history, which posited the movement of ‘reason’ or ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) behind the course of human events” (qtd. in Ritter 458).

The zeitgeist’s first English usage is documented by the Oxford English Dictionary to have appeared in Matthew Arnold’s 1893 edition of *Literature and Dogma*, but Ritter counters that it was more likely introduced in England as early as Thomas Carlyle’s usage of ‘spirit of the age’ in 1830 and John Stuart Mill’s usage of the translated phrase of ‘Zeitgeist’ in 1831 to mean “the ‘character’ or dominant idea of any age and to imply the idea of ‘comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come’”. Mill acknowledges the zeitgeist to also mean “an age of change” (qtd. in Ritter 458).

The current usage of the term ‘Zeitgeist’ in journal and scholarly articles is uniformly used to demonstrate a summed up idea of the popular trends within the articles’

context. For example, in a sociological paper, Austin Harrington introduced the zeitgeist without preamble or justification for how it came to be the zeitgeist:

At a time when Freud launches his revolutionary studies of dreams, neurosis, hysteria and the unconscious, when Wittgenstein and the Logical Positivists proclaim the bankruptcy of metaphysics and the unsayability of theology, or when expressionist painters such as Schiele and Kokoschka depict the anguish and yearning of the tortured and alienated human self, and Schonberg revolutionizes traditional European tonality in music in the turn toward dissonance, Musil captures this Zeitgeist in a unique prose of probing and equivocal complexity. (57)

It is also the only time the zeitgeist is mentioned throughout the paper. To illustrate the enigmatic nature of the usage of the term, here are other examples taken from a diverse range of publications that demonstrate its utilisation within an academic sphere without thoroughly defining the term once:

For all his idealism, Harris's rendering of the Zeitgeist is unremittingly bleak. The twentieth century, he repeatedly laments, is a record of human arrogance and destruction; far from learning the lessons of the past, 'man' (one of Harris's many self-consciously anachronistic terms) remains 'blinded to [his] own historical and philosophical misconceptions', paralysed by an all-pervasive nihilism which he has neither the spirit to countermand nor the courage to resist. (Huggan 269)

Despite their different ways of reading symbols, both Anna and Will express the secular Zeitgeist of modernism, the conviction that the essence of life can neither be separated from its physical manifestation nor reduced to sensory knowledge. (Wexler 175)

Since then at times a modernistic, at times an anti-modernistic Zeitgeist has prevailed but both of them have always been present at the same time, often mixed in ambiguous ways. ... The grammar of rationalization is an all too powerful device to be abolished just by a change in Zeitgeist. Therefore—and not only for the socially biased perception of vacationing—it is a fallacy when tourist experts and

sociologists herald the dawning of a “new,” a “post-modern” or “post-Fordist” age. (Spode 128-143)

Chick Lit writing, at its peak, loosely encapsulates a period in time. Thus, Chick Lit writers seem to collectively utilise the same elements unique to a stretch of time and space, which is what defines and makes recognisable what constitutes a Chick Lit novel—contemporary women’s writing about the early twenty-first century woman’s realistic adventures in career, love, and life. The fact that the term ‘zeitgeist’ is used during interviews to justify Chick Lit’s existence but is never actually defined points to it not being easily defined, perhaps because it is no small feat to define the zeitgeist without properly establishing what constitutes it. Therefore, categories that comprise some parts of the zeitgeist that can be operationalised for the purpose of this study must be established (refer to 1.2.2.1).

The significance of the zeitgeist to the study is how it transparently reflects verisimilitude or the appearance of being real or true. Marjorie Boulton equates verisimilitude to “likeness to truth” whereby “the serious novel in some sense portrays real life” by displaying this element in the work.

We know the things did not happen, but must be made to feel that they could have happened. Since real life experience is not the same for us all, some people will find one novelist more convincingly true to life, others another ... However, we can feel in general that the good mainstream novelist is intending to give some kind of true picture of life. He is something like a historian. (15)

As it turns out, Chick Lit is fiction that reflects verisimilitude. Dominant thoughts and trends encapsulate the oeuvre of a group of writers who call themselves Chick Lit novelists as they absorb and take great effort to reflect the generalisations of a period of time experienced by their likeminded readers. Incidentally, as this study will show, Chick Lit novelists, like historians, document major trends and patterns experienced by realistic characters against the backdrop of real settings—all of which encapsulate the zeitgeist of the early twenty-first century.

1.2.2.1 Categories that construct the Zeitgeist

Based on Ritter’s definition, readings of works that utilise the term, and what constitutes a timeline’s popular trend, the zeitgeist is essentially made up of the following:

1. real places*, times**, and/or events;
*Real places are spaces or scenes or locales that are mentioned in the text that physically exist in the real world, or names of actual places and locales that have not been changed in the text (e.g. London and New York City). Refer to Appendix 1 (Real Spaces vs Fictional Spaces Utilised in CoS, TDWP and IGN) for a comprehensive list of examples extracted from the selected texts for the study.
**Real times include clock time, and actual conventional day, date, and/or time (e.g. Wednesday, 3.30 p.m., next week, April 14, 2001).
2. obvious and undeniable social and cultural patterns; and
3. a period framed or labelled as an age or era of the dominant influence or trend that defines the times.

1.2.3 Postfeminism, Post-feminism, or Third Wave Feminism

In the 1960s and 1970s, second wave feminism rose to the forefront as an organised political movement battling for women's equality, which included public demonstrations against the 1968 Miss America beauty contest and 1970 Miss World competition (triggering the misconceived association of feminists as angry bra-burners), and the formulation of the four demands against sexual and physical oppression: equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour nurseries, and free contraception and abortion on demand (Thornham 30-31). This vocal uprising, which connected "political agenda and vision," required a "new language of theory that would encompass both" (31). While first wave feminism (late nineteenth to early twentieth century) and its early campaigners of the Women's Suffrage Movement during the Victorian era narrowed their campaigns to specialised feminist causes concerning the "plight of intelligent middle-class women," which included "legislative and social changes" for wives and daughters in a patriarchal society, hence, garnering the right to vote in the process (Sanders 27-28; 22-23), second wave feminism was more aggressive in the vocalisation of equal rights for women and radical in their efforts to bring consciousness to civil rights as well as women's sexuality and reproductive rights that continued well into the 1990s. Second wave feminism gathered momentum with Betty Friedan's publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and Gloria Steinem's journalistic undercover work and exposé of the Playboy Bunny in 1963. However, according to Betty Friedan, also founder of National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, real second wave feminism purportedly died after the women finally won the 'vote' (Thornham 30-31), as observed from second wave feminists' ability to be "simultaneously united by their investment in a general concept of justice and fractured by the multiple goals and personal practices that delineate the particular conception of justice to which they aspire" (Genz and Brabon 4). It is now claimed that the modern feminist movement serves a special agenda for a select interest group of women who dictate what women "should want" (Genz and Brabon 2009; Lukas 2006). Disunity was manifested within the ranks of second wave feminists, including black women and lesbians, who were "sceptical" over a movement that did not feel inclusive despite the claims of 'sisterhood' "in which they had to struggle for visibility" (Thornham 32).

During the thirty-year period since the beginnings of the 'second wave', feminism has acquired an academic voice both within and beyond Women's Studies, but as a political identity it has fractured along lines of multiple differences between women, and both young women and high-profile media women seem to believe that 'second wave feminism' has dissolved into 'post-feminism'. (42)

In the 1980s, the term 'feminism' itself began to lose its "significance," as noted by bell hooks, who proclaimed that "the 'anything goes' approach to the definition of the word has rendered it practically meaningless" (qtd. in Gamble). However, as academic currency, feminism continues to serve as criticism that Ruth E. Page (2006) hopes has evolved into what she preferably labels postmodern feminism (as opposed to third-wave or post-feminism, which to her, signal a 'demise of feminism') due to the continual political viewing and sensitivity that takes issue with subordination, interrogates gender relations, and takes up political action to change the status quo for women, which is still at the forefront of feminist ideals.

Here, we are not contesting the definitions of feminism in its various forms; however, the ambivalence of the term 'postfeminism' brings forth a shifting negotiation through the act of defining postfeminism to suit the current agendas of certain theoretical schools, most especially second wave feminists. This ambivalence lends itself to multiple definitions of the concept of postfeminism. The prominent ambiguity of the hyphen or absence of the hyphen from the term ('post-feminism' or 'postfeminism'), specifically gives rise to these questions: does the post mean 'after feminism' and therefore an improvement or continuation of the original feminism, or does it mean a new breed of feminism that does not reflect feminist ideals but possibly a reversal of the ideals or a mixture of pre-feminist and feminist ideals? This multiplicity in the perception of what postfeminism is to select groups and certain generations of women depends upon which era during which these women grew up.

Page highlights this "multiplicity and ambivalence" in the attempt of any generalisation with the term 'feminism' such as 'Third wave', 'post feminism' and 'postmodern feminism', which "have all gained currency." She expresses her doubt that 'third wave' is representative of feminist activity from the late 1980s into the 1990s, following after the 'second wave' of the 1960s and 1970s, quoting "[the third wave is] less of a separation from the work immediately preceding it and more of a continuation". However, she does agree that there has been a significant shift that took place between the mid-1980s onwards to the burgeoning twenty-first century (6-7).

According to Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (2009), "[p]ost' can be employed to point to a complete rupture, for, as Amelia Jones declares, 'what is post but the signification of a kind of termination—a temporal designation of whatever it prefaces as ended, done with, obsolete' [8]" (3). Instead, in the true fashion of reflecting the times, they define 'Girl Power' as "a key strand of power feminism that is

aimed at a young generation of women/girls and particularly pervasive in the 1990s media definitions of postfeminism” (76).

Meanwhile, Sarah Gamble (2002) introduces wariness, distrust and scepticism over the neologism ‘Post’ hyphenated to feminism. It is contextually linked to media and popular culture of the early twenty-first century (from the 1990s onwards). In the early days of the word’s usage, Gamble notes how feminist theorists such as Tania Modleski and Imelda Whelehan “barricaded [the term] between inverted commas, thus keeping both author and reader at a properly sceptical distance” (43). Gamble claims that like its “semantic relative, post-modernism,” postfeminism remains definitively undefined, or at least, lacks consensus for any definition. However, Gamble herself starts her essay by framing postfeminism as follows:

In the context of popular culture it’s the Spice Girls, Madonna and the Girlie Show: women dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitudes. (43)

Such bewilderment may be partially attributed to the denotation and connotation of the prefix ‘post’ (denotatively to mean ‘after’, but not rejection). This denotation brings inevitable connotations resulting in uproar, as evidenced by feminists who feel that postfeminism is “a betrayal of a history of feminist struggle, and rejection of all it has gained” (Gamble 44). Modleski dismisses postfeminist texts by basically claiming that these texts are taking women back to a pre-feminist era. However, Gamble points out that this prefix may not necessarily be a ‘relapse’ but a ‘continuation’ of feminism’s aims and ideologies, “albeit on a different level”. She admits that this claim she makes is “rather odd,” as she is aware that postfeminism lacks “an agreed-upon set of ideological assumptions and any prominent figureheads” (45).

Writings of women who have taken part in the backlash of postfeminism, aside from Modleski, include Susan Faludi. Faludi’s claim is that postfeminism is the backlash, women are currently all postfeminists, and no longer care or take feminism seriously (45). However, Gamble’s essay takes an interesting turn when she introduces Modleski and Faludi’s contemporaries who took part in the backlash of second wave feminism with assertions that feminist initiatives are self-defeating, “celebrate vulnerability,” and represent “an extremist cabal that alienates younger generation of women” (46-47). This ‘righteousness’ over what constitutes good or bad feminism by Katie Roiphe in “The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism” (1993) and Rene Denfeld’s “The New Victorians: A Young Woman’s Challenge to the Old Feminist Order” (1995), as Deborah L. Seigel maintains in her essay “Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a “Postfeminist” Moment”, is hostile and serves no other purpose but to “[lock] feminists and postfeminists in dialectical opposition” in the hopes of producing the “‘pure’ or ‘correct’ version of feminism” (47-48). The author of the feminist treatise *The Beauty Myth* (1990), Naomi Wolf, underlines in *Fire with Fire* (1993) “a distinction between feminism as an actual phenomenon and a ‘definition’ of feminism as it exists ‘in the popular imagination’ hence avoiding the argument between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feminism amongst her “postfeminist peers” that includes

Faludi, Roiphe, and Denfeld. Still, unlike Roiphe and Denfeld, who look to past mistakes, Wolf is more concerned with a utopian future of feminism. Gamble concludes that despite the efforts by these writers, postfeminism remains suspended between definitions, and “whether to go forward or back”, it remains a more theoretical than practical ideology. With regards to postfeminism being paralleled to academic concepts of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, Gamble argues that writers like Ann Brooks in *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (1997) will only limit postfeminism or the development of feminism “as an academic discipline [with] limited ... appeal outside the universities” (49-51).

However, Germaine Greer, who wrote *The Female Eunuch*, which became one of the important texts that kickstarted or launched second wave feminism in 1970, published its sequel *The Whole Woman* (1999) that clearly denounces postfeminism, and brings to the forefront ‘third-wave feminism’, instead.

As Greer defines it, postfeminism is little more than a market-led phenomenon, for ‘the most powerful entities on earth are not governments, but the multi-national corporations that see women as their territory’. Its assurance to women that they can ‘have it all’—a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life—actually only restates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods. ... (Gamble concludes from Greer’s stance in her second book that) second wave feminism isn’t dead, and a triumphant postfeminist world is still far from being imaginable let alone a reality. ... The postfeminist phenomenon which was always primarily a media-led movement anyway, has reached an impasse out of which a coherent solution cannot be developed (Gamble 51-52).

In order to adapt to the change of times, the younger generation of feminists (of the 1990s and early twenty-first century) are “increasingly ... distancing themselves from the problematic politics of postfeminism by describing themselves as participating in a ‘third wave’” (52). In America, a few third-wave women’s groups have been founded, which include Rebecca Walker’s “Women’s Action Coalition and Third Wave,” and *Third Wave Agenda* (1997) editors Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake demarcate the difference between third- and second-wave feminism by stating that third-wave feminists are comfortable with “contradiction” and “accept pluralism as a given,” and not to be labelled as postfeminism (52).

We know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something I participate in, and that what oppresses me may be something you participate in. Even as different strands of feminism and activism sometimes directly

contradict each other, they are all part of our third wave lives, our thinking, and our pares: we are products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism, beasts of such a hybrid kind that perhaps we need a different name altogether. (qtd. in Gamble 52)

Heywood and Drake identify the origin of this movement as initiated by third wave feminists representing women of colour and US third world feminists—hence the movement’s “innate acceptance of hybridity” and its association to political activism. In the end, as Gamble puts it “this—or any—attempt to differentiate between third wave feminism and postfeminism may be achieving nothing more than a little juggling with semantics” (54):

It may be ... that third wave feminism is capable, as postfeminism is not, of describing a position from which past feminism can be both celebrated and critiqued, and new strategies evolved. The state of economic, political and technological flux which characterises modernity presents opportunities and dangers for women which the feminists of the first and second wave could not have imagined. But whatever we call it, and whatever form it takes, it is essential that women continue to advance their cause into the next millennium. (Gamble 54)

For the purpose of this study, it is acknowledged that postfeminism has been used in multiple ways. In academia, cultural trends and gender identity are foreground in a discussion of postfeminism, whereas in more popular arenas, it is used to contrast or demean feminism as “detrimental to women and to men” as “feminist goals have been more or less achieved” and therefore should be retired. Instead, this study will use Yvonne Tasker’s (2011) focus on postfeminism, which is “to celebrate female empowerment and strength [specifically] women’s achievements—physical, educational, professional—and ... particular emphasis on individual choice” (68-69):

Contemporary women are imagined by postfeminist discourse to be free to choose; free of both old-fashioned, sexist ideas about women’s limits and feminism’s supposed imposition of an asexual, unfeminine appearance. The extraordinary *lack* of diversity in media images of girls and women belies that emphasis on choice. Moreover, the fact that postfeminist culture’s critique of feminism has so much to do with lifestyle and appearance is telling. While postfeminism insists on female strength and the primacy of the self (for which choice stands as the

marker), that strength can, it seems, only be celebrated when figured in appropriately feminine terms. (69)

Tasker underlines that postfeminist culture sees empowerment in women by aligning “conventional femininities” (such as “passivity, malleability, and a broad willingness to sacrifice self for others”) to the contradictory “postfeminist commitment to an imagery of strong, self-defined, sexually confident” women who are also “resolutely feminine”. This ‘postfeminist woman’ or heroine is most apparent in popular cinemas in “a number of genres,” including romantic comedies:

Traces of feminism as a cultural force are apparent in romantic comedy, frequently expressed as discontent with misogynist masculinities and a narrative instance that men too must change. Contemporary romantic comedy must also acknowledge the (repeated) failure of romantic ideals and marriage as an institution, even while it values intimacy and true connection. (69)

These very tenets co-exist in other forms of popular culture, most especially, its narrative counterpart, the postfeminist fiction, Chick Lit.

1.2.4 Chick Lit as Postfeminist Fiction

Chick Lit has become the latest trend of postfeminism as it has become a reflection of women’s sociological makeup. Postfeminism, termed as such to co-exist with postmodernism, emphasises the parallels of Chick Lit to third wave feminism—a phenomenon that is depicted to exist as a response to second wave feminism (Margaret Quamme qtd. in Ferriss & Young 19) led by Doris Lessing and Beryl Bainbridge. The following is a table that Margaret Quamme charted to accompany her book review of Cris Mazza and Jeffery DeShell’s anthology *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995) in *The Columbus Dispatch* in which she asserts that “postfeminism answers that large portions of life [that] can’t be dealt with so rationally” as a contrast to feminism:

Table 1.1: Prefeminism, Feminism, and Postfeminism

Prefeminism	Feminism	Postfeminism
kitchen shirtwaists white rice Donna Reed Rhett Butler romantic	protest march power suits brown rice Gloria Steinem Alan Alda Heroic	psychiatrist’s office lots of leather sushi Madonna Anonymous sweaty cowboys ironic

(qtd. in Ferriss and Young 19)

As Tasker points out, in contemporary romantic comedies, its narrative counterpart, Chick Lit, portrays the postfeminist culture of women who manifest both feminist and feminine ideals (as depicted in Quamme's table, above), through demonstrations of the "primacy of the self" yet are self-sacrificial, driven by freedom of choice in lifestyles and careers, yet "resolutely feminine" in their need for "intimacy and true connection" (69).

Acting as the novel's backdrop, postfeminism, as an era, automatically provides the cultural and sociological background of characters and the setting in Chick Lit novels. In an era during which 'spinsters' is a bygone era and marriage is seen as an option rather than an obligation, Chick Lit writers have cleverly tapped into an area that speaks honestly to readers who view the marriage market in the same way. In fact, divorce rates in America alone were rated the highest by the time 'feminism' started peaking in the 1960s following the women's movement and financial independence, this divorce increase, in turn, significantly affected the generational population born between the mid-1960s and 1980, otherwise known as Generation X, who are recognised largely as the by-product of single parent households and second marriage households ("Generational"). Hence, by the 1990s (the period that young Generation X-ers reach adulthood), the transition into postfeminism seemingly reflects young women's own scepticism, caution, or even anxiety when viewing romance and marriage.

However, utilising the term 'postfeminist fiction' as synonymous to 'Chick Lit' is viewed not without a little wryness by Mazza and DeShell, who first coined the latter to originally reflect the ambiguous, ironic nature of their compilation entitled *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (FC2 1995). But once the term is mistakenly used to controversially represent the commercially popular women's fiction we know today, in publishing their next anthology *Chick-Lit 2* (1996), Mazza and DeShell attempted to use the controversy in the hopes that Chick Lit would finally be known to mean "transgressive, visionary, or even smart" but not censored (Mazza, "Who's Laughing Now?" 22). Mazza reflects on the review of their publication by Quamme:

In fictions that 'break the boundaries of politeness,' Quamme concluded, 'if feminism proposes to improve life by making social and political changes, postfeminism answers that large portions of life can't be dealt with so rationally'. (Ferriss and Young 19)

Throughout her essay, Mazza decries the usage of the term as we know it, as the intention was to label the group of writing that "women writers," as opposed to others who remain termed as "writers," produced for at least twenty-five years before *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1996) was published:

So our title of Chick-Lit was meant to point out this delusion, this second-class differentiation; not pretend it isn't there. Our titling gesture was similar to comedian Dick Gregory's title from his autobiography, *Nigger*. Here's who we are, plus what you (still) think of us thrown back in your face.

But how is anyone to make a distinction? The chicks in commercial chick lit, along with Hooters restaurants and celebrity boxing, have stripped themselves of irony. (Ferriss and Young 28)

In quick succession, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) championed the label 'Chick Lit' with Anna Weinberg crediting the novel as "the eve of the genre" in *Book Magazine* (summer 2003), but never going as far as crediting the anthology by Mazza and DeShell for the title (24). Since that fateful twist of labels, Chick Lit "emerged as a subset of commercial print entertainments" with newspaper columnists and journalists as its pioneer writers, such as Candace Bushnell (*Sex and the City*), Helen Fielding (*Bridget Jones's Diary*), Jennifer Weiner (*In Her Shoes*), and Sophie Kinsella (*Confessions of a Shopaholic*), and media professionals like Marianne Mancusi (*A Connecticut Fashionista in King Arthur's Court*), Caren Lissner (*Carrie Pilby*) and Karyn Bosnak (*What's Your Number*)—all of whom have written plots "closely connected to the world of popular culture." Their works are claimed to be novels, yet Chick Lit continues to draw plots from inspirations like reality TV, popularised since the late 1990s, and other forms of current popular entertainment.

With postfeminism as a current theoretical concept, university professors are designing literature courses "that feature popular chick lit" and since the start of this century, many doctoral students began their dissertations on this area (25). Existing studies and dissertations on the subject of the emergence of this new genre in the past decade have covered themes that, on average, range from the issue of consumerism to the inevitable feminist reading. Study on comparative literature between Jane Austen's novels or novel in the manner of Chick Lit novels has also been done to pinpoint the lineage of this brand of postfeminist writing. Most notably, Stephanie Harzewski, author of *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011), was a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, whose dissertation and research on Chick Lit has been credited for defending and utilising this new genre in alignment with the study of literature, categorising it as "new novels of manners" since the works of Jane Austen. Harzewski claims that Chick Lit only began to attract real academic scrutiny in 2004. In her own study, she discovered that Chick Lit displaced not only the popular romance (i.e. Harlequin and the Mills and Boon series), for example, but also the traditional prose romance and the novel of manners (31), thus giving new meaning to the definition of postfeminism.

Her essay entitled "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners" in Ferriss and Young's anthology (2006) details the origins and growth of the genre from the history of 'the novel' itself (which arose from the eighteenth century). She specifies the anxieties of prominent male novelists such as Alexander Pope, William Dean Howells, and Nathaniel Hawthorne that manifested in their "frequent attacks on

romantic fiction, and in later decades, popular romance” as “a new class of women writers ... achieved popular recognition [in expanding readership] and sizeable capital” (30). Harzewski claims that “the last two decades [of the twentieth century]” of second wave feminists have shown “more nuanced consideration of so-called silly lady novelists [in countering George Eliot’s essay]” but demonstrate resentment towards Chick Lit novels, which implies the demarcation between ‘romance novels’, per se, and Chick Lit as formulaic popular fiction. Harzewski has also enlisted Dame Beryl Bainbridge, Doris Lessing, and several women journalists who share Eliot’s fear that “frothiness [becomes] the only suitable literary expression” when it concerns women’s writing (30). She pinpoints how the titles and paperback covers fuel “the derisory classification of chick lit as ‘snack-food literature’” (qtd. in Harzewski 30), and how the challenge now is determining “what recent fiction by women featuring a female protagonist or a cast of women characters is not chick lit” (31).

Instead of the usual comparison to Chick Lit’s predecessor, the 1980s Harlequin (and Mills and Boon’s) romance novels, Harzewski’s essay compares Chick Lit with the original prose romance, initiated by the French ‘romance’ or “chivalric romances” of “high adventure, thwarted love, mysterious circumstances, arduous quests, and improbably triumphs” popularised in the eighteenth century. The similarities she draws from Chick Lit and these prose romances have mostly to do with the accusations they both receive on their literary merit and their cultural affiliations with the times. The English novel rose from the romance not unlike the very popular Mrs Radcliffe’s *Mystery of the Udolpho*, but only for the genre to experience literary judgement in mid-century by those who determined what kinds of novels were good or bad to read. The works of early successful English male novelists like Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding are deemed appropriately factual as opposed to the “inappropriately factual” fiction of the prose romance novels, usually associated with ‘feminine’ (due to linkage to the French origins, as the English is coded to be ‘masculine’) and written by female writers (Harzewski 32).

However, there is much debate concerning Chick Lit’s connection and allegiance to its alleged ‘big sister’—the romance novel. How similar are the two genres? Ann Snitow gives a comprehensive analysis of the tenets of the romance fiction, specifically the Harlequin and Mills and Boon varieties in “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”.

The heroine is alone ... the Harlequin formula glorifies the distance between the sexes. Distance becomes titillating. ... Once the heroine knows the hero loves her, the story is over. Nothing interesting remains. (310-311)

The couple is alone. There is no society, no context, only surroundings." (312)

Instantly, we can offset this description with the one we know about Chick Lit: the Chick Lit heroine is almost always surrounded by other minor characters that may consist of colleagues, the best friend, family members, and acquaintances she meets along the way. In fact, it is Chick Lit's "most significant deviation from the Harlequin" that the men in Chick Lit are recanted as "a shadow presence or background figure" (Harzewski 33). This thesis will demonstrate how the protagonist depends upon her interaction with others within close proximity to get through a plot scene. There are instances within selected Chick Lit novels that play upon the distance between the male interest and the protagonist, but the accessibility of certain technologies draw them closer together, with no regard for physical or geographical space between them. This usually churns more conflict and more interest than anything else from a 'will they-won't they' scenario to 'how would they really'.

Snitow underscores the easily identifiable "characters in an upper-class, polite environment familiar not in experience but in the ladies' magazines and on television" (312). In Chick Lit, the majority of characters are not upper-class because, to match Chick Lit readers' experience, Chick Lit needs to match the middle-income socio-economic experience found in the text to the real experiences of the majority of Chick Lit's readership. Media-based materials like magazines and television programmes are utilised in Chick Lit to paint the same verisimilitude of readers referring to these forms of media as part of their 'dailiness'. Indeed, in romance fiction, the couple is the ultimate goal and the heroine has to earn the coupledness effortlessly since her "most remarkable virtue" is her "blandness," "calm façade," and being "ordinary" (312). On the other hand, the Chick Lit protagonist's 'most remarkable virtue' is her willingness to laugh at herself despite all her foibles and imperfections because these are the very qualities that are especially valued in a Chick Lit heroine, and even regarded extraordinary by other characters. Snitow also highlights that romance fiction is a "balancing act" of "romantic tension, domestic security, and sexual excitement" (319), of which the second is not shared with Chick Lit. The "romanticised sex" evident in romance fiction is usually graphic, which is yet another quality Chick Lit does not share (320). In Chapter Four, more elaboration is provided on this particular issue. Harzewski articulates the major difference between the Harlequin romance and Chick Lit is "[i]n [Chick Lit's] attempts at synthesis of work and love" by integrating "the professional sphere into the romance plot": "chick lit offers less romance than its predecessor but greater realism" (31-32).

Overall, Snitow's essay parallels this thesis with regards to taking readership seriously and her need to counter the criticism of fine "women novelists" towards mass-marketed paperbacks of a specific genre of popular fiction:

The ubiquity of the books indicates a central truth: romance is a primary category of the female imagination. The women's movement has left this fact of female consciousness largely untouched. While most serious women novelists treat romance with irony and cynicism, most women do not. ... In spite of all the audience manipulations inherent in the

Harlequin formula, the connection between writer and reader is tonally seamless. (Snitow 321)

The ubiquity of Chick Lit novels points towards a common thematic underpinning shared between the genre and its predecessor: love. Here, the line is indistinguishable between romance novelists and Chick Lit novelists whose treatment of love is matched by the expectations of their readers. When looking back on Quamme's table and Tasker's definition of the postfeminist heroine, we can see irony as a prominent treatment in postfeminism: the contradiction between both feminist and feminine ideals of being empowered and independent from men yet desiring love and connection with men point to moments of acute uncertainty and difficulty with those who find Chick Lit more of one than the other. Yet, Chick Lit heroines encompass both—negotiating between two ends, unwilling to give up one for the other, and reflecting readers' need for both worlds to find a way to co-exist. The fact that such a compromise becomes a lucrative formula that makes most Chick Lit fiction derivative does not help the genre, but like most anything, whether literature or popular fiction, there are good ones and bad ones, and Chick Lit is no different.

1.2.4.1 Subsets of Chick Lit

Subgenres have emerged in the market to adapt to a variety of racial, cultural and even religious needs, such as Black Chick Lit, Christian Chick Lit, Latina Chick Lit and the Asian counterparts, such as the Indonesian Sastra Wangi and Indian Chick Lit³. When *Bridget Jones's Diary* reaped bigger profits in box offices with Universal Studios' film adaptation of the same title, almost a decade and a half after its production, Chick Lit was escalated to what is now considered a standard formula for romantic comedies. Following in Fielding's footsteps, other Chick Lit novelists with bestselling novels have also been picked up by major studios as latest installations of romantic comedy pieces that incidentally also transformed into box-office hits on both big and small screens: for example, Melissa Senate's *See Jane Date* (2003) became a successful TV movie in the same year; Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), which finalised a successful run of six years as a top award-winning television series and was succeeded by two motion pictures; Laura Zigman's *Animal Husbandry* (1998), which later had a film adaptation entitled *Someone Like You* (2001); Cecilia Ahern's *P.S. I Love You* (2007) and *Where Rainbows End* (2004), the film version of which is retitled *Love, Rosie* (2014); Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009); and Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), which eventually earned an Oscar Nomination at the 79th Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actress and Best Costume Design. Each novel that these films originated from is set up on the same premise that basically establishes the working definition of Chick Lit: written in the first person; contains some elements of romance; and depicts young, single, white, metropolitan, career-driven heterosexual women in their late twenties and early thirties who depend on close friendships to get them through the day.

³ Rachel Donadio's essay "The Chick Lit Pandemic" in the Book Review section of *The New York Times* (March 19, 2006) sums up the global landscape of latest "trailblazers" of Chick Lit writing from India, Russia, Poland, and Hungary.

At the time this thesis was first conceptualised, the latest Chick Lit success was a romantic comedy film released in cinemas in September 2011 entitled *What's Your Number?* starring comedienne Anna Faris and Chris Evans. The film was adapted from Karyn Bosnak's bestselling Chick Lit novel entitled *20 Times a Lady* (2006). The popularity of Chick Lit not only reaches the masses outside the circle of readers via movie adaptations, but those who are not aware can be introduced to the literary genre via television adaptations. In recent times, it has become common to see Chick Lit for teenagers such as Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* series, which achieved the most popular television series status (2007-2012), and Chick Lit's Asian counterparts, such as Sastra Wangi in Indonesia, which released top blockbuster hits like *Eiffel, I'm in Love* (2003), a teen film adaptation of a Chick Lit novel of the same title. Chick Lit novelists are also readily accessible to their readers on the Internet via personal blogs and websites, which further enhances Chick Lit's reigning global popularity.

Chick Lit has a defining quality that Kathryn Robinson points out: "Anyone familiar with Jane Austen's oeuvre will immediately recognise in chick lit a kindred wit, the same obsession with choosing a mate, and a shared attention to the dailiness of women's lives". The following is a list of sub-genres or directions that Chick Lit has flown into over more than a decade since 'Bridget Jones', which crosses "divides of generations, ethnicity, nationality, and even gender" (Ferriss and Young 5-7):

- Hen lit / Matron lit / Lady lit (focuses on women over forty)
- Chick Lit Jr (adolescent Chick Lit)
- Mommy lit
- Ethnick lit, which includes Sistah lit (Black Chick Lit), Chica lit, and works that focus on second-generation Chinese American and Indian American heroines
- Sastra Wangi or 'fragrant literature' (Indonesian variant)
- Hungarian Chick Lit
- Church lit
- Lad lit / 'Dick lit' (written by male authors (e.g. Nick Hornby))
- Bride lit / 'Wedding fic' / 'Bridezilla' novels
- Novels that focus on the work world

However, Ferriss and Young admit that the "overwhelming majority of chick lit continues to focus on specific age, race, and class: young, white, and middle" as much as the "demand for and popularity of fiction on protagonists beyond those categories is growing exponentially" (8). They admit that "ambiguity lies at the genre's core" following the ironic term 'chick lit' to originally refer to postfeminist attitudes and stereotypes found in the popular genre of women's fiction. They highlight that these pulling forces between ideals for women and the featured protagonists "to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity," showcasing "empowered, professional women" versus displaying "the same patriarchal narrative of romance ... that feminists once rejected" (9).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young presented the bane of Chick Lit's existence in the introduction of *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2006): "Highbrow critics, perhaps inevitably, have dismissed chick lit as trashy fiction. In Britain, venerated novelists such as Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing have weighed in against the 'chickerati'" (1). What follows shows a critical standpoint of how Chick Lit is generally viewed:

In addition to Lessing and Bainbridge, those influenced by second-wave feminism, emphasising contemporary women's fight for equality and access to precessions, have disparaged chick lit as "unserious" and antifeminist. (Ferriss and Young 9)

The words "trashy," "unserious," and "antifeminist" are clearly used by like-minded "[h]ighbrow critics" to describe Chick Lit. The disdain comes from more than just a simple "generational divide" that Ferriss and Young address in a later review ("A Generational Divide") between the opposite reactions of "feminists from the 1960s and 70s who now are university faculty members" and today's young women concerning the label 'chick', which is used to carry such stigma but no longer holds the same derisive meaning in a post-feminist era. Further investigations prove that the negative criticism lies deeper than just a title, and even much deeper than the whole packaging. Anna Weinberg, for instance, states, "[i]nside their dust jackets covered with shopping bags, martini glasses, shoes or purses, many of these titles really are trash" and she further elaborates "trash that imitates other, better books that could have ushered in a new wave of smart, postfeminist writing" (Skurnick, "Chick Lit 101"). When Sittenfeld publicly states her 'reluctance' to call Melissa Bank's recent novel *The Wonder Spot* Chick Lit (and proceeds to do just that anyway) because it "feels catty, not unlike calling another woman a slut" ("The Wonder Spot"), Jennifer Coburn, journalist and a bestselling Chick Lit novelist, retaliates with an aptly titled "fuming" response, to the Editor where she directly reprimands Sittenfeld for "intellectual snobbery" ("Defense of Chick Lit").

To borrow Coburn's words, "intellectual snobbery" is not uncalled for when we have a group of "highbrow" literary writers and critics casting the first stone on a genre they call "trashy," "unserious," and "antifeminist," and by the time they throw "slut" in the mix, it becomes too easy to choose sides and champion those that are forced to wear the unprivileged term 'lowbrow'—the binary opposite of 'highbrow'. As mentioned before, defenders of Chick Lit came in strides—the frontrunners include those like Coburn, Chick Lit novelists or "chickerati" (Bainbridge), who have justifiable personal investment in doing so, and those from both sides of the stratum of the controversy—Chick Lit readers and non-Chick Lit readers who admit that the lighter qualities of Chick Lit overshadow the "froth" Bainbridge mentions. Dissertations and book publications from dissertations and journal articles optimise the tension between the two sides, as demonstrated in Ferriss and Young's anthology. The collection of essays in their postfeminist 'textbook' becomes a part of "the body of work amassed over the

past decade alone [that will continue to raise] issues and questions about subjectivity, sexuality, race, and class in women's texts for another generation of women to ponder" (12).

However, Lessing and Bainbridge's words, sting as they may, do not come from blatant insensitivity or unfounded sentiment. There are women writers like themselves who still remember early feminism taking root, and experienced first-hand the peaking of feminism and all the struggles that women had to go through to level the playing field with their male counterparts so they could finally be taken seriously as equals. In their lifetime, it would have pleased them to no end to have seen women's writing other than their own to continue the legacy of their foremothers. It evidently irked Lessing and Bainbridge that towards the twilight of their days, Chick Lit is defining the prominence of contemporary women's fiction, overshadowing more (deemed) worthy literary counterparts, and more deserving women writers in this century. They were asked a question about Chick Lit's dominance, and they spared no ire and, in a sense, sincerity in their reaction. To them, Chick Lit is the non-literary worm that infests the apple that is good women's writing. Highbrow writers are, after all, literary fiction writers comprising poets, dramatists, short story writers and novelists who value fiction as art that "appeal[s] to higher aims" and which therefore places any genre lacking similar quality in literariness ("poetic language"; see 1.3.1 for full definition) on the other end of the spectrum of "frivolity and idleness" (Richter 373). In this case, popular genres such as Chick Lit represent lowbrow fiction that aspires to lesser than "higher aims" of literature, which may explain why "for all the popular attention it has drawn, [Chick Lit] has received little serious or intelligent discussion" (Ferriss and Young 2). This popularity is a "cultural phenomenon" as evidenced by fans "who claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women" and it is within the parameters of Ferriss and Young's publication (i.e. *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*) that they attempt to give this dismissed genre "a serious consideration" as they explore "issues of identity, of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self image" ranging from "its place in literary history to its engagement with contemporary culture" (2-3).

The most current serious publication of Chick Lit since Ferriss and Young's foundational text is Rocio Montoro's *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (2013) and Stephanie Harzewski's *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011). Montoro states in her book that "the non-linguistic camp" uses literary criticism deeply embedded in the socio-political and cultural input of Chick Lit. In contrast, she, delves into stylistics and new the terms of Chick Lit 'Cappuccino Fiction' as a quirky homage to the "froth" that Lessing and Bainbridge append to the genre, inversely hoping to achieve a positive spin. Harzewski, on the other hand, defends the literary value of Chick Lit in her text as she re-frames postfeminist fiction as "the new novel of manners," reminiscent of the original novel of manners of women novelists from the Victorian era.

However, I find that Chick Lit's lack of literariness has more to do with the zeitgeist. When Bainbridge and Lessing, among others, point to 'froth' as Chick Lit's content, I argue that it is more likely that this very froth shapes this brand of popular fiction, and that perhaps, instead of narrowing the study of Chick Lit down to a matter of stylistics or re-framing it altogether to defend what literariness it possesses, we must step back

and view Chick Lit in a more holistic fashion. Reflection upon the criticism of those who follow Lessing and Bainbridge's lead—who feel Chick Lit is not a representation of what literature should be—makes me ponder how something that depicts real and familiar parts of the actual world, whether in time or place, does not translate as real writing itself.

Chick Lit provides an excellent avenue or stage for the discussion of the zeitgeist. This is the same zeitgeist that has been credited with respect to Chick Lit's popularity but never explicitly defined. I argue that if Helen Fielding had not come up with the supposedly first Chick Lit novel, someone else would have. In fact, other contemporaneous contemporary fiction writers who recognise new impulses and ideas for writing largely for women about women within the backdrop of new technological advances in the burgeoning century undoubtedly existed, which will be further detailed in Chapter Four. This is simply the by-product of the zeitgeist of the period that demarcates Chick Lit from the time of women's popular fiction (romance novels of the 1980s) that precedes it. Suddenly, heroines of women's popular fiction are looking beyond romance and the quest for Mr Perfect, and readers of Chick Lit expect their heroines to reflect verisimilitude of their own daily skirmishes in an advanced world with emphasis on career and relationships. Candace Bushnell, Marian Keyes, Melissa Senate, and Sophie Kinsella (writing as Madeleine Wickham at the time) would have stepped in and pioneered the genre with their own bestselling novels that reflect these very narratives. The zeitgeist of the time demonstrates that Chick Lit would still have been established as the reigning women's popular fiction of the early twenty-first century. Simply narrowing down the zeitgeist in this manner only entices us to seek out a bigger potentiality of its true role within the make-up of Chick Lit novels. All we need is another method of looking into the content of Chick Lit novels and justify its value in literature in spite of its lack of literariness.

What if there is a way to assess value within a genre that lacks literariness that established literary theories alone cannot accomplish to our satisfaction? What if Bainbridge and Lessing, second wave feminists, and other literary critics who have judged Chick Lit themselves lack the appropriate critical tool to criticise Chick Lit, and that all along, they are limited to critical techniques that are not suited to extracting real value from Chick Lit? I argue that Chick Lit has its own 'language' laden in plots and characters that can only be interpreted by using a new way of seeing Chick Lit. It is the intent of this thesis to propose a conceptual framework that introduces a non-literary theory, specifically a social network theory, to adequately and thoroughly evaluate Chick Lit on its own terms, utilising its own 'frothy' properties. There is no known study done on conducting interdisciplinary research utilising both literary and social network theories to examine the structure of Chick Lit novels, let alone an in-depth study of the zeitgeist embodying this genre.

I feel that there is a need to discover what the zeitgeist is in connection to Chick Lit and, in turn, learn how it permeates this particular type of fiction, making Chick Lit a distinguishable brand of narrative form. I believe that the study of the genre through the usage of a new methodological tool can provide an insight to more dimensions of the popular fiction's plot constructions that separate the genre from other literary genres. Chick Lit is rich with new interpretations of the ideology of women to date and one of

the most transparent ways to study that is looking into the representations of women as depicted, and for the purpose of this thesis, documented within Chick Lit novels, specifically that of the female protagonists or ‘heroines’ of these novels and their character development.

There is a challenge in taking up research on a genre whose literariness is still debated due to significant points of prejudice, notably its standing as popular fiction (i.e. formula fiction and ‘frothiness’), and its nature as romantic fiction (i.e. it is clearly just meant for women). My interest lies in a main thread that evokes an in-depth investigation into the form of this particular genre of ‘popfiction’, and uncovers a set of ideologies that may shed light on the current sociological makeup of women, as well as harnessing a deeper appreciation for the plot construction of the postfeminist text. This thread is the ‘reality’ that seems to be embedded in the telling of each Chick Lit storyline.

The initial idea stemmed from reading the claim made by Ferriss and Young in their introductory chapter—a claim which I now align to my thesis: Chick Lit uses and shows real life.

Supporters [of Chick Lit] claim that, unlike traditional, convention-bound romance, chick lit jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals.

Both fans and authors of chick lit contend the difference lies in the genre’s realism. (3)

They account for the realism with “readers’ compassion and identification” with the typical Chick Lit protagonist, who is “flawed” and “fallible”—like the readers themselves. They further prove this assertion of realism by mentioning Chick Lit writers that differentiate Chick Lit from romance novels. Jennifer Weiner, for example, states that Chick Lit has “an authenticity frequently missing from women’s fiction of the past” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 4). Plum Sykes, Lauren Weisberger, and the authors of *The Nanny Diaries* have used their own personal experiences in writing up their “novels’ plots.” The accepted idea that Chick Lit is regarded so realistically resulted in Helen Fielding having to ward off the readers’ comparison of herself to her fictional character ‘Bridget Jones’ (Ferriss and Young 4).

The fact that Chick Lit protagonists are almost never alone points to relationship ties and connections that go beyond the Harlequin-type ‘couple’. Chick Lit protagonists expand their focus and interactions in a wider social network of female friends and family that goes beyond the ‘heterosexual hero’—a point that is not missed by other researchers:

“To [Rochelle] Mabry, the women of Candace Bushnell’s ‘Sex and the City’, with their frank discussions of sex, represent ‘the desires and attempts of many real-life contemporary women to investigate the mysteries of modern sexual relationships and gender roles on their own terms.’ She, along with Harzewski and others, argues that contemporary literature and films deemphasise a central romance and highlight the female protagonist’s nonromantic relationship with her close community of mostly female friends, thus suggesting that contemporary women can express their desires outside the frame of patriarchally defined heterosexual monogamy.” (10)

It is my aim to fully flesh out Chick Lit’s constructions—plot, setting, and characters—through a closer investigation of these social networks that are instrumental in the life and events of the Chick Lit protagonist, and after detailing the structural integrity that determines Chick Lit’s true value, which is in reflecting and utilising zeitgeist, we would see that both form and content are one and the same with Chick Lit novels. To analyse and critically evaluate Chick Lit with the appropriate tool is to know how Chick Lit, froth and all, can still be explicated and shed light on an identical theme that literature—high and low—expounds: the human connection.

1.3.1 Definition of Literariness

The definition of literariness is as follows:

literariness, the sum of special linguistic and formal properties that distinguish literary texts from non-literary texts, according to the theories of *RUSSIAN FORMALISM. The leading Formalist Roman Jakobson declared in 1919 that ‘the object of literary science is not literature but literariness, that is, what makes a given work a literary work’. Rather than seek abstract qualities like *IMAGINATION as the basis of literariness, the Formalists set out to define the observable ‘devices’ by which literary texts—especially poems *FOREGROUND their own language, in *METRE, rhyme, and other patterns of sound and repetition. Literariness was understood in terms of *DEFAMILIARIZATION, as a series of deviations from ‘ordinary’ language. It thus appears as a relation between different uses of language, in which the contrasted uses are liable to shift according to changed contexts. (Baldick 141)

Demotic and sometimes colloquial language commonplace in informal and formal speech devoid of aesthetic qualities for the purpose of entertainment or pleasure is seen as 'lacking' literariness. This is seen in Chick Lit, and most popular forms of fiction. The distinction between literary prose and poetry and that of popular fiction that lacks literariness gives rise to debates on what is truly considered literature or canonical. Literary prose and poetry function to give deeper layers of meaning to an expression. Metaphor, simile, and other literary elements that are inclusive in figurative language allow for a certain level of literariness that gives way to aesthetic descriptions meant for, as Juliette Wells puts it, an "openness to interpretation" (66). Chick Lit's attempts at figurative language are superficial at best, as it is more interested in highlighting comedic writing that is better expressed using simple clichés or commonplace analogies.

In other words, simply the employment of literary elements that lead to the "openness to interpretation" of a literary piece differentiates 'Literature' to that of the 'Lit' in Chick Lit, or other popular fiction. Wells demarcates the distinction between literary novels and Chick Lit by highlighting the superficial treatment of figurative language and theme within Chick Lit novels:

"Both descriptive language and metaphor contribute crucially to the layers of meaning that make literature worth discussing, examining, and rereading. ... Although [the elements found in Austen's novels such as "love stories, high comedy, irony, and social criticism are] certainly present in some (if not all) chick lit, no chick lit novel is multilayered enough to allow its readers to come to truly divergent conclusions about its nature. *The Devil Wears Prada*, for example, is full of criticism of its heroine's working conditions, yet—aside from very brief mentions of roommates who toil as investment bankers—it makes no broader claims about the gruelling nature of apprenticeships in different fields, as would be characteristic of a more literary treatment of this theme." (66)

Wells' descriptions of Chick Lit's lack of literariness is further elaborated in 2.2.1.

1.3.2 Defence of Chick Lit

The debate between good or bad literature has always existed since the conception of literary theory. George Orwell, whose best writing was his political and critical writing, wrote the following concerning the judgement of good or bad literature:

[A]s soon as you start talking about 'good' and 'bad' writers you are tacitly appealing to literary tradition and then dragging in a totally different set of values. For what is a 'good' writer? Was Shakespeare 'good'? Most people would agree that he was. Yet Shakespeare is, and perhaps was even by the standards of his own time, a reactionary in tendency; and he is also a difficult writer, only doubtfully accessible to the common man. (qtd. in Thornley and Roberts 157)

According to Steven Lynn (2004), "Shakespeare's plays were once dismissed by the literary establishment as mere popular entertainments" (30). Today, Shakespeare is, as the saying goes, as good as it gets. Lynn defines literariness as a quality that is the "product of a reader's attention" and "Literature" occurs "whenever a reader looks at a work as if it is Literature ... that is, with a certain kind of attentiveness" (30-31).

[...] any work, theoretically, could be studied as if it were literature. If other readers were to accept that designation, then the work arguably would be literature (at least for those readers who take it to be). In theory, then, one might justify studying anything in a "literature" class ... Different critical approaches are, in fact, more likely to encourage the study of one work over another. (31)

Based on Lynn's argument, I take on postfeminist fiction for a study of literature using a critical approach designed to specifically explicate Chick Lit in a way no other critical approach has been able to do. More significantly, this critical approach, a conceptual framework of both Social Focus Theory and narratology, is constructed around the tenets of close reading of a genre that easily offers rich layered, structural properties and that reveals social and narrative nuances of the twenty-first century. It may sound like common sense, but it needs to be stated that to study Chick Lit using a social network theory, we have to paradoxically become a close reader. The emphasis of 'reader' as a core element is a logical one considering the power readers have over the fate of literature. For example, "educated readers" are mainly responsible for what is considered 'canonical', thus building a wall between what is deemed good or bad literature:

The category "literature" is constructed by a certain kind of behaviour, but there is also an element of consensus involved: other readers, it would seem, will have to share the assumption that a work is literature, in order for it to be literature (for other readers). Those works that are generally perceived to be literature, that educated readers generally agree they ought to be familiar with, form what is called "the

canon.” “The canon” is an ongoing discussion or even argument about what we ought to read. In the past few decades, literary works by women and minorities have increasingly received scholarly attention, and have increasingly been read by all sorts of readers, and have increasingly been included in literature anthologies ... (Lynn 35)

Whether Chick Lit will enjoy the same literary attention as the “literary works of women and minorities” of the “past few decades” the way Chick Lit has received scholarly attention this past decade is questionable, where ‘the canon’ is concerned (Lynn 35). John Barrigan (2008) reports that the canon of English literature is “constantly unstable and hotly contested in every period” but no canon has been established since 1939. He cites Philip Gaskell’s *Landmarks of English Literature* (1998) to have ended the list of “what to read to acquaint oneself with the history and development of literature” with “Conrad, Eliot and Joyce in the modernist period”. Barrigan claims that it has not been easy to get literary experts after 1939 “to agree on such a shortlist of what to read” (“The Twentieth Century, 1939-2004” in *English Literature in Context*, Paul Poplawski [General Editor], 2008: 643). There is still the worldwide accepted canon to contend with, if any. Then again, based on the mass-marketing of Chick Lit by the publishers, Chick Lit writers’ defiance of highbrow criticism, and non-Chick Lit readers’ lacklustre reception to Chick Lit, the elitist claim to canonical status may not be as alluring as hitting the current bestseller’s list.

Alan Jacobs (2011) presents a spirited case for feeling the same about the elitism of a canonical status. He criticises Harold Bloom’s practice of recommending reading lists according to his elitist canon and telling the reader “What to Think about It,” and for having “little patience” for readers who read “non-masterpieces” that include J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, about which Bloom publicly comments: “I know of no larger indictment of the world’s descent into the subliterary” (qtd. in Jacobs 20). Bloom has also called Rowling’s readers “nonreaders.” Jacobs clearly finds little patience for those, like Bloom, who dictate what they deem are superior books to read and those who claim that readers who fall short in their reading list should feel “a sense of shame,” as demonstrated by Eric Williamson, a professor who demeaned his student for proclaiming Stephen King a superior author to Donald Bayrthelme or William Vollman (20). Jacobs finds that those who do read from a prescribed list are in danger of being self-congratulatory or fear-driven, neither of which “has anything to do with genuine reading” (21). Jacobs shares Lewis’s celebration of reading unsophisticated books, and mentions G. K. Chesterton and his “defense of ‘the penny dreadfuls’ so popular in the late Victorian world,” about which Chesterton stated, “there is no class of vulgar publications about which there is, to my mind, more utterly ridiculous exaggeration and misconception than the current boys’ literature of the lowest stratum” (22). Chesterton is perfectly happy to acknowledge that these books are not in the commendatory sense “literature” because “the simple need for some kind of ideal world in which fictitious persons play an unhampered part is infinitely deeper and older than the rules of good art, and much more important” (22-23). Happy days when highbrow writers embrace lowbrow reading!

Unfortunately, the ‘intellectual snobbery’ of those who read good or bad literature is equivalent to the mockery of literary readers over popular fiction readers. Chick Lit readers confess to the same experience of disdain received from non-Chick Lit readers to the point that Chick Lit readers believe the act of reading popular fiction is equivalent to a lesser reading standard. Open any online book forum that headlines Chick Lit and the term ‘guilty pleasure’ usually takes precedence among romance and Chick Lit readers. However, Jacobs claims “[i]t’s not what readers are escaping from but what they are escaping into that counts most. Most of us do not find fictional worlds appealing because we find our own lives despicable” (130-131). There is nothing wrong with the Chick Lit reader, or any reader of any fiction—be it literary or pulp fiction. No one reads Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) and is described by others as an advocate of privileged children stuck in a bubble of make-believe and bad deductions about life. No one reads Lessing’s last novel and is criticised, along with Lessing, for being a historical revisionist, or at worst, delusional. At least, not to this researcher’s knowledge. It is also not the point. If we must evaluate critically, we must do so with the methodology best suited for it.

Some books demand a different perception and approach to reading. Not all novels are structured like the classics or as what Jacobs calls “Great Books.” He recommends that we should balance our reading of Great Books since “it would be too much” as “[g]reat books are great in part because of what they ask of their readers: they are not readily encountered, easily assessed” (Jacobs 23). Literary texts demand complete attention and, therefore, as poet W. H. Auden once pointed out, “masterpieces” should be reserved for a special occasion, not for daily wear (Jacobs 23). Therefore, in the same spirit, Chick Lit novels are structured accordingly, in part because they are not demanding of their readers—they are essentially built to “be readily encountered” and “easily assessed” so they can be enjoyed by Chick Lit readers on any day. A book that does not demand much of our concentration or time is truly reflective and conducive in these times of speed and mobility. In Chapter Four, I demonstrate how the zeitgeist inclines Chick Lit readers toward reading Chick Lit novels at Whim (Jacobs’s capitalisation)—because they want to, because it is pleasurable, and also because it is fast. The methodology I propose will string out how the zeitgeist is embodied in Chick Lit to allow such reading to happen.

We must concede that sometimes ‘judging’ good from bad literature is usually done by those who are not as informed as they should be about what either literature has to offer. Sometimes, there are situations when judging is done from misconceptions, when we know something should be carefully considered and justification found before we declare it completely useless. It is like an argument for movie-viewing preference, and someone comments that a particular film is nonsensical and unworthy of our time because it is filmed by a director who is renowned for his explosions, or casting caricatures that are no longer amusing, and therefore, the plot is pointless—yet the critic has never even seen the movie. This thesis seeks a justification reaped from an informed viewing that validates the judgment. True, Chick Lit is not considered ‘canonical’ (though there are good Chick Lit novels that may be held as such in the unknown future of changing trends and aesthetic values), but perhaps, like a movie written off based on one thing or another, there are still interesting qualities to appreciate. All forms of art—be they novels or movies—lend so much subjectivity that there is always a little something for everyone. Not all readers read Chick Lit, but all

Chick Lit readers read Chick Lit for that ‘little something’ that speaks to them. This thesis is written with Chick Lit readers in mind.

Still, the thesis does not set out to solely defend Chick Lit as much as it sets to introduce a new way of explicating Chick Lit. Besides, there is as much defence for it as there are those who decry it—dissertations and publications have been written all around the world on the merits of Chick Lit. There are websites and blogs online dedicated to Chick Lit. At the same time, there are newspaper and magazine editorials that question, label, and prophesise its demise. Yet, through it all, there is something in the formula of Chick Lit novels that cannot be ignored. Interest lies in the hidden value that is overlooked through all these criticisms and defences. I wish to bridge the gap between the extremes and justify the act of reading Chick Lit for the first, and usually sole reason books are written: simply to be read. For the purpose of this thesis, I read it at whim. As a student, I read it for information. It is definitely easier when we read without expectations or judgement. It becomes a little more difficult when we have an agenda, but then, with Chick Lit, I find it still digestible, comprehensible, and ever-so-familiar. The framework of the study that is set up is not to suggest the way to read it but as an explanation of how it is being read. It is reader-response on the most basic level, but utilises an unorthodox structure and method in order to evaluate and appreciate what Chick Lit has to offer. Like every plot, in the end, we need to unravel and problematize the genre enough to yield a justification for the investigation of Chick Lit in this fashion.

The genre steadfastly offers material that walls off those who choose to oppose it or think less kindly of it. There is in question the sum total of much misreading of a genre that gets quickly written off by serious literary critics based on some agreed-upon literary prejudice. The structure gets lumped in with the rest of what makes Chick Lit unfathomable for a serious read. Critics who take up the mantle to investigate further usually celebrate what is deemed not so froth-like in nature—the question of gender studies, what the genre sheds in light of the state of consumerism, the female discourse—issues that allow for serious discussion to take place that grants immunity from froth and lack of taste. A study of the structure of Chick Lit gives way to the immediate foregone conclusion that it is formulaic and, therefore, a ‘you read one, you’ve read them all’ attitude. I argue that we have to experience the froth and embrace it for what it can teach us. Like networks, we can look from a distance and judge away, but we must also take that extra step and zoom in to locate the source, the node or nodes, that makes connection perceivable so as to make an informed judgment. We must be readers of Chick Lit to truly make claims about Chick Lit. The claim I have come to make is how the zeitgeist is embodied in the genre.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This thesis investigates the narrative features of selected Chick Lit novels and aims to inform about Chick Lit as representative of the twenty-first century zeitgeist, and conduct interdisciplinary research relying on Narratology and Social Network Theory, specifically Scott Feld’s Social Focus Theory.

There is too much of the zeitgeist, or the spirit of our times, tapped, utilised, and adopted into the structure of the Chick Lit novel to be ignored. Ultimately, based on the depiction of changing times and the utilisation of certain real spaces (whether geographical or domain-based) that exist in Chick Lit novels, the question of what the zeitgeist truly is becomes important to answer to better define Chick Lit's value as fiction that documents the complexities of the times, specifically the early twenty-first century. The study can perhaps lend more sociological import to postfeminist fiction, and relate the significance of Chick Lit's narrative form and its potential.

For all these reasons, I aim to analyse selected Chick Lit novels as a narrative form that serves as a social commentary of the times. My inquiry will include an examination on the plot constructions that allow for the development of Chick Lit protagonists' character traits to take place. According to Scott McCracken, the study of popular fiction can still show us how "written popular narratives ... tell us much about who we are and about the society in which we live" (*Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, 1). As McCracken points out, the study of popular fiction needs to be done in a more holistic fashion instead of in isolation where it can "only be easily dismissed" (5). My hope is to apply a new conceptual framework, which consists of the combination of a social network theory (Social Focus Theory) and a literary theory (Narratology) in order to determine the character development of the protagonist that is dependent upon the movement of the plot structure that uses the zeitgeist as a plot device. With an analysis of this nature, I hope that in my attempt to inform about the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century through the study of the postfeminist heroine, the Chick Lit protagonist, I will be able to validate Chick Lit novels as popular fiction that can sow serious literary discussion in spite of its 'froth-like' nature.

My core argument is that Chick Lit is a product of our times. People write fast and write to reflect the fast-paced world, leaving insufficient time for literariness, which in turn, affects the way we read. Chick Lit gets consumed speedily, and the genre allows readers to read fast because the lack of literariness does not inhibit them. It may very well be that Chick Lit depends upon its lack of literariness for continual consumption.

The premise of a social network theory as a tool to unearth such information and provide solutions from and for Chick Lit analysis is the assumption that no woman is an island. With all that has been written about Chick Lit, from journal articles, essays, blogs, internet websites, and dissertations, there is still an area yet to be addressed that seems to formulate a defining point of what a Chick Lit template entails: the social aspect of the world of the Chick Lit heroine. The heroine is always embedded in a circle of friends and family. There is always a social focus that permeates the setting of a typical Chick Lit plot. What defines the heroine more often than not is depicted from her interactions with other characters—some stereotypical, archetypal, and even downright ludicrous caricatures of unique personalities—that pepper and colour the metropolitan existence of her surroundings. These social interactions, when studied as visualised information, become a treasure trove of discoveries of what it means to be female, a woman, a sister, a daughter, a lover, a subordinate, or a leader amongst characters that are portrayed as life-like and having realistic conversations against a backdrop of real-life locales.

Most importantly, my investigation will demonstrate that women write the way they do in Chick Lit because they rely on their readers to fill in the blanks, and Chick Lit readers do. Chick Lit readers fill in the gaps in the story (syuzhet) using their knowledge of the world—the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century.

1.4.1 Research Objectives

This study attempts to:

1. establish that the zeitgeist emerges from trends extracted from the times and imprinted onto Chick Lit through authorship, readership, and the text;
2. detect the urbanised space within the text that the character inhabits which allows for unique social interaction;
3. uncover how times have changed to the extent that Chick Lit novels take advantage of technologically induced abruptness, allowing for reinforced dramatisation; and
4. justify that the zeitgeist exists as an underlying plot device for character (protagonist) development.

My work analyses and surveys early twenty-first century fiction from an early twenty-first century perspective. It is intentionally theoretical, but like a popular non-fictional text points out, “[theories are] obvious ... in hindsight [but] startlingly new in their time, and despite their simplicity, they may make us re-examine things that we take for granted” (*The Philosophy Book* 16).

First, I wish to establish that the zeitgeist truly emerges from trends extracted from the times and imprinted onto Chick Lit through authorship, readership, and the text. I aim to discover where networks take place within the selected text within the network diagramming that I will elaborate in detail in 1.7. Second, I will detect the urbanised space within the text that the character inhabits which frames unique social interactions that take place. The third research objective looks into technology in any conceivable form that takes shape within the text, such as mobile phones, television, computers, and emails that trigger communication and interaction between characters and form networks. This technological evidence triggers specific Chick Lit plots and imitates real life scenarios, as well as the dominant trends of the times. Throughout the findings and analysis of data, close reading will determine the extent readers relate to the protagonist within each critical plot scene, which may provide a better view of character development and justify that the mode (such as technology) that represents the zeitgeist is used to develop the character.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study is restricted to three novels, each of which features first-person point-of-view of single (not married) metropolitan female protagonists between their mid-20s and early 30s. The novels are selected based on popularity as all three have been ranked as bestsellers of the genre and can justifiably represent popular contemporary women's fiction. The first two novels were turned into successful film adaptations, and still have selling power to date, as evident from current Amazon and Kinokuniya online bookstore websites. The last novel is to see how far Chick Lit has come along as it is the most recent Chick Lit novel marketed during the writing of the thesis that focuses on technology as a literary device. As Chick Lit novels, these three texts consist of formulaic romantic storylines, superficial themes of love and relationships, and prominent emphasis on fashion and cultural trends as literary devices, which are deemed controversial and unserious for contemporary women's fiction writers who prefer to focus on more in-depth layered themes, intricate plots, and serious characterisations of women for discussions that can stand the test of time. I plan to break the analyses into major narrative features in fulfilment of the research objectives as displayed in 1.4.1. Since time and space are deep-rooted aspects of my study, the narrative features include plot, setting, and character development. The following are the synopses of the three selected texts as they give an overall view of the storylines that act as core outlines for the study.

1.5.1 *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2000) by Sophie Kinsella

Initially entitled *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, and set mostly in London, the novel unfolds the comical adventures and mishaps of Becky Bloomwood, who harbours a secret dream of making huge amounts of money to pay off her exorbitant credit card debts accrued from her even larger love for buying anything that catches her fancy. In reality, she is a financial journalist who (ironically) advises others on how to manage their money. Along the way, she goes head to head with Luke Brandon, the "head honcho of Brandon Communications" (Kinsella 17), when she volunteers to help out her neighbours, who have been scammed by the financial institution Luke's company represents. Through sheer will and journalistic prowess she never thought she possessed, she wins their fight, triumphs over Luke, and even lands a higher-paying job that she hopes will help her pay off her overdue bills in due time. In a gesture of reconciliation, Becky agrees to see Luke for dinner, which ends with both of them no longer denying their secret attraction for one another and finally consummating their relationship that she initiates.

1.5.2 *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) by Lauren Weisberger

Andy Sachs, a fresh university graduate in journalism, lands a position as one of two personal assistants to the editor in chief of Runway magazine, a leading fashion magazine in New York City. The novel documents her entire journey of metamorphosis and abuse while she ingratiate herself with the most hated person she has the misfortune to work for: the boss from hell—Miranda Priestly. The only reason she

stays on in “a job a million girls would die for” (19) that she does not care for or aspire to is due to the unofficial guarantee that if she stays on for a whole year, Miranda has the power to guarantee her a writing position with any magazine of Andy’s choice. Unfortunately, her journey and ambition affect her personal relationships, most especially her boyfriend, Alex, and best friend, Lily, and before the year is up, she falls out with Alex and almost loses Lily to a car accident. When she still chooses staying on the job to serve Miranda despite the news of Lily’s state, she becomes aware of what she has turned into (i.e. a younger Miranda), and in quick succession, drops Miranda, her job, and career opportunities to fly back, but not before giving Miranda a much-deserved public showdown. A couple of months later, she manages to regain all that she lost (i.e. self-respect, family and best friend), with the exception of Alex, and lands a writing job for another fashion magazine.

1.5.3 *I’ve Got Your Number* (2012) by Sophie Kinsella

The novel opens in medias res with physiotherapist Poppy Wyatt, scrambling around on all fours in a near empty hotel ballroom searching frantically for her lost engagement ring, a family heirloom recently given to her by her fiancé Magnus, in the aftermath of a luncheon event that Poppy and her friends, colleagues, and wedding planner attended in celebration of her engagement. In her panic, her mobile phone gets swiped outside the hotel, but she recuperates when she chances upon an abandoned phone in the hotel lobby’s trash bin. In a series of comedic events that ensues, Poppy discovers that the phone is a company phone formerly belonging to a personal assistant for business executive Sam. When he angrily demands to have the phone returned, however, Poppy refuses. As the hotel is given the mobile number of her ‘new’ phone in the off-chance that her engagement ring is found, Poppy strikes an agreement with Sam by forwarding all company emails that go through the phone to him so she can continue to keep the phone until the hotel contacts her about her ring. From this point onwards, the phone becomes instrumental in bringing Poppy and Sam closer together, recovering her lost engagement ring, as well as uncovering two separate scandals—a personal scandal that involves Magnus, who is allegedly having an affair, and a work scandal that involves Sam and the fate of his mentor’s standing in the company. Poppy aids Sam with solving his workplace scandal and in the process, they discover their attraction for each other. When she finally uncovers Magnus’s personal scandal, Poppy finds herself breaking off her engagement but quickly succumbs to Magnus’s plea for forgiveness and accepting his second proposal of marriage. However, during an untimely epiphany, Poppy jilts Magnus at the altar and runs out to find that Sam, who has been incessantly bombarding wedding guests with SMS messages to help him stop Poppy’s wedding, is waiting outside for her.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

Chick Lit novels are the objects of my study, and the issue of realism, or verisimilitude, in their storylines holds the core focus of my analysis. My study is aligned to Scott McCracken’s methodology in *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* as I intend to study the narrative form of the text closely but without disregarding the world and the reader. In other words, my main argument is to point out how the character development of the

protagonist in Chick Lit novels is dependent upon existing social networks which predetermine the structural integrity of the story's plot construction. I aim to show how the real world prefigures in the plot construction of Chick Lit novels.

The conceptual framework takes advantage of social network theory that offers the ability to utilise language in an objective manner (its physical existence appearing in the novels) and avoid the chaos of language by centring the bare skeleton of connections acquired from interaction or communication existing between characters within the text. As Richter claims, “[a] key question for the future of theory is whether the key topics of textuality, language, and discursive practice will remain at the center of critical study, or whether some new revolution may not lurk over the horizon” (8).

Since current literary theories on their own do not sufficiently address the value of Chick Lit, I plan to construct a new methodology based on a conceptual framework that involves a crossing of disciplines between literary theory and social network theory—and when once combined I hope will garner more hermeneutic possibilities. Richter recommends the same avenue with the reasoning that “[o]nce we outgrow the maps we are given, we learn to do without them—or do as our three mapmakers [Abrams, Crane/Friedman, and McKeon] did: make our own.” However, due to the closeness of social network theory, which is essentially a study of forms, to that of formalism and structuralism (atomistic versus organic/whole), and narratology (Tomashevsky's *fabula* and *syuzhet* and Genette's spatial-temporal concept) with reader-response theory (close reading and gap-filling), I aim to ensure my core analysis is based on what the potential reader, like myself, would make of the text. This ultimately aligns my analysis to the practice of “many formalist critics [who] have relied heavily ... on what an “ideal” or “potential” reader would make of the text” (Richter 8). Throughout my analysis, I bear in mind Georg Lukacs's (1956) words concerning the significance of the ‘worldview’ to that of form and content.

It is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung* [world picture] underlying a writer's work, that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes his “intention” and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content. (“Ideology of Modernism” qtd. in Richter 1220)

It is my hope that the combined theories in the conceptual framework of my design, which I term ‘chronophotography’ (visual representation), will reveal or expose the specific content of how the *zeitgeist* is encapsulated by Chick Lit.

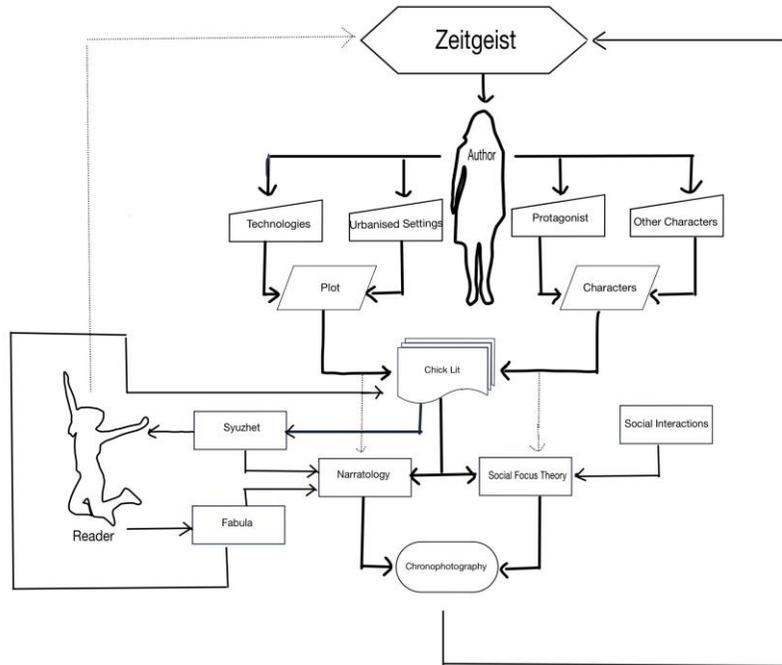


Diagram 1.1: Conceptual Design

1.7 Methodology of the Study

In preparation for applying the methodology, three texts (as provided in 1.5) will be summarised to present the general outline of each selected Chick Lit novel after reading at Whim (further elaboration in 4.6.1)—reading for pleasure, and not for information—to gauge a general storyline of the texts, as most readers would upon their first reading. In preparation of the next step, the length of each reading will be acknowledged to be varied, and therefore, the outcome of the findings will reflect the differences accordingly.

In the first step of the methodology, as a close reader, I detail each plot event in its chronological order (as narrated from beginning to end) from chapter to chapter and point out flashbacks wherever the time sequences break in the narration of the first-person perspective (protagonist), not dissimilar from stream-of-consciousness that both Kinsella and Weisberger employ for the purpose of giving their stories a realistic feeling and plying empathy for their heroine from the reader. According to the general tenets of narratology, both fabula (story) and syuzhet (plot) are separate narrative structural sequences of any given story. Many narratologists over the years have come up with their own terminology of the same thing (the formalists Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Tomashevsky use ‘fabula’ and ‘syuzhet’), but I shall briefly use Robert Dale Parker’s (2011) reader-friendly description of narratology, which he defines as “a structuralist study of narrative,” to differentiate between the two. For Parker, in each

narration there is the tale and the telling. The ‘tale’ is the fabula, which is “the sequence of events in the order they take place,” whereas the ‘telling’ is the syuzhet, which is “the sequence of events in the order they are told” in the story (66). The reason we have fabula and syuzhet in a narrative is because “storytellers do not always begin at the beginning or end at the end,” but “instead, a telling flashes back and flashes forward,” which is typical of syuzhet. This explains why the tale (fabula) has all the events, but a telling (syuzhet) leaves some events out, thus producing gaps/ellipses/lacunae (67). My interest with this theory is that the tale always tells the story straight, but the telling describes plot with all its gaps for readers to fill on their own. I argue that Chick Lit readers give substance to an already gap-filled narration found in a Chick Lit novel by drawing out their knowledge and worldview of their current environment—their exposure to the spirit of the times.

With this in mind, my data is presented using a product of the times, which is a visual representation of both fabula and syuzhet detected from the text. Visual representation of literary pieces are already at the forefront of the educational arena, whether it be on a single page displaying the Character Map in Cliffs Notes series of classical literature, or a teacher drawing out the Freytag Triangle while describing the plot of a novel. Most apparent is the trend for sharing Infographics with the general public, especially over the Internet, in reflection of the times, to save time by displaying bite-sized pieces of information for instant consumption of ideas. In several representations of ‘literature in a nutshell’, these ‘shortcuts’ seem to give students, scholars, as well as literary and non-literary audience a quick bird’s-eye view of canonical literary pieces. These visual diagrams/charts/infographics are not unlike the printed laminated cards by BarCharts. Inc, or your basic poster advertisements that relay statistics in chart form to accommodate the general public’s skimming and scanning skill set for information when chanced upon. Joanna Eliot (2014) justifies the use of infographics for the purpose of teaching literature in all its varied aspects, stating that “when created [the infographic] can throw light onto often unforeseen quirks of data”; a discovery made while creating her book is “the beauty of the infographic is that it can suggest new meaning on texts that may not be so obvious in the original, written form” (9).

This visual representation I dub ‘chronophotography’ is constructed in a linear fashion for chapter break displays and plot points, such as exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution (Freytag’s triangle); however, upon the premise that ‘no woman is an island’ in a Chick Lit novel, I proceed to detect the social interactions between every character extracted from the text as proof of a Chick Lit novel’s staple ingredient: the protagonist exists in a social circle of friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, and even the random stranger or two. To determine the validity of social circles and connections between the protagonist and other characters in the text, I use a more objective method of extraction by applying Scott Feld’s ‘Social Focus Theory’, whereby he supplements his study of social groupings with a set of proponents as adherents to the theory of his making (refer to Chapter Three for a detailed list). The use of a social network theory is deliberate throughout the methodology because social network analysis is absolutely a product of the times. Networks today are formed from connections made easier and faster with technology. James Gleick, author of *Faster*, a book that documents the speeding of time as it barrels into the twenty-first century, mentions “connectivity” specifying the importance of the existence of computers and the Web as “a universal publishing medium” and a communicating medium whereby

everyone can finally get to know (and know of) everyone (69). In between the plot points and the social networks detected (represented as connections of nodes for individual characters), I display the space (place) and time (timeline) that are always presented in every text in order to demonstrate plot movement—temporally and geographically. With technology in mind, I insert timestamps or landmarks that I use to translate the existence of every technological device, gadgetry, media, popular trends (e.g. fashion or celebrity icon) and provide evidence of contemporaneous plot devices used by the protagonist and any character within her proximity.

Finally, I fill the syuzhet of my reading and extraction of data into the gaps of the text with fillers of my knowledge of the times from my own experience of the real world, hence the annotative quality of my data extraction (refer to Appendices). After data extraction, I ‘zoom’ out for a “bird’s eye” view of the results, loosely using a concept first introduced by Franco Moretti (2005) known as distant reading. Moretti uses this method as opposed to close reading for analysis of a literature piece due to his interest in using a computational tool to conduct analysis of a corpus of literature pieces with the aim of charting literary history. He claims charting literary history accordingly could result in viewing literature in a new light: “[t]his is what ‘comparative literature’ could be, if it took itself seriously as ‘world literature’, on the one hand, and as ‘comparative morphology’, on the other” (90). I still value textual analysis using my own interpretive abilities guided by a set framework of literary theories in the manner of any literary scholar. Therefore, I must highlight that the scientific social network theory is regarded as a tool in my methodology, but all explication is left to the informed reader. The methodological tool I have constructed enables extraction of data to occur in an objective manner, so upon analysis, as per size of data, it relies upon me to ‘zoom out’, so to speak, and conduct my own interpretation of distant reading, which is reading data across several texts. From this point onwards, I am better able to derive assumptions and conclusions from the patterns shown visually that provide evidence of the utilisation of zeitgeist as plot device in the selected texts.

1.8 Significance of the Study

I see a clear niche for a study on Chick Lit’s structure and how that is representative of a sliver of time in the history I currently inhabit, which for me is curiously more interesting than any other space and time, solely because of the tautological reason that it is a period of time I garnered the most experience. At length, this study seeks to uncover the character development of the protagonist, and how its dependency on existing social networks predetermines the structural integrity of the Chick Lit novel. The core argument of my study is to highlight the distinctive nuances that can be lifted from interactions between characters and the heroine within a specific place and a specific time in the novel and everything else in between that reflects the zeitgeist of the early twenty-first century.

The phenomenon that is Chick Lit is not accidental in its marked exposures to scenes of the singleton’s lifestyle that involves dating, co-habiting, entertaining, working, and shopping. More often than not, the ‘dailiness’ (or daily activities) depicted in these scenes is familiar and commonplace for readers who recognise the activities of social

networking embedded in these familiar scenes with the usage of technological devices that allow for immediate interaction to take place wherever its location and whenever the time. Such instances are significant and, rather than showing that the novels seem formulaic, may bring to light why this particular brand of women's fiction breeds protagonists whose social interactions with other characters become instrumental in the way their characters develop, inadvertently shaping the novels.

How the novel is shaped may separate it from other literary genres. The Chick Lit novel is already distinctive, with the core premise of the storylines involving many interactions in myriad forms to take place. Every novel shares the characteristic of the development of the protagonist. Her character development is much dependent on her immediate social network such as colleagues, girlfriends, and ultimately, Mr Right.

The exciting thing about any research on popular romantic literature is how narratives address the question of the 'happily ever after', an important plot element. A contemporary fairy tale is like any other fairy tale that ends with 'happily ever after', and not initiated by it. It is more poignant in Chick Lit novels because it brings attention to a postmodern heroine's significant moments placed strategically at times and spaces that reflect what is allowed or logical to happen in this era. For Chick Lit novels, its sole success lies with a heroine who is flawed, has a flawed life, and finally, through endurance and often times encouragement from other characters and especially herself, pulls through a flawed situation to become ultimately happy and content, but not reaching perfection—only acceptance of an imperfect self. Looking through a pair of zeitgeist goggles, the study takes us to another plane of query—how women see themselves or how they would like to see themselves in the real world.

The genre can provide insight to new dimensions of the narrative, specifically how the character (protagonist) and plot development in Chick Lit novels uniquely reflect significant patterns that could lead to new interpretations of the ideology of women to date. Essentially, this study is an attempt at serious discourse to highlight that there is value to be found in the frothiness of Chick Lit novels.

To quote McCracken (1998):

Contemporary popular fiction is the product of a huge entertainment industry. Written fiction is only a part of that industry, which markets and sells popular narratives for film, radio, television and periodicals as well as in book form. To study popular fiction, then, is to study only a small part of popular culture. Nonetheless, written popular narratives can tell us much about who we are and about the society in which we live. (1)

I wish to make clear the question I am working on is one that should interest any serious reader of representative post-feminist fiction. The methodology offers a hermeneutic exercise that requires discipline and equal parts objectivity and subjectivity. It still adheres to the critical tradition of asking questions about art since

Plato—specifically, what are the genre’s “properties, uses, powers and value?” (Richter 1-2).

It is fitting and fortunate that Chick Lit has all these flaws and criticisms against it because it is these very flaws and criticisms that highlight the advantages of Chick Lit—it only needs the appropriate tool to showcase these advantages that elevate Chick Lit to a very fitting object of literary study. To quote David Richter, “But as we grope for the over-all intention, however crudely, we remove ambiguities, which in turn allows us to refine our sense of the whole, which eliminates more ambiguities, and so on” (22). When synthesising, we go through analysis, which gives us a better sense of the synthesis. The whole is made of parts that make up a whole. This is the foundation of hermeneutics, or the act of interpretation. Also, what makes literature ‘literature’ is our ability to continuously find new ways to look at the work and extract new meaning—something more, and hopefully, even profound, to add to our appreciation of the fictional piece we are analysing. Most prominently, in the investigation of the selected Chick Lit novels using the current specially-designed methodology, characters from afar seem a certain way. Patterns emerge whereby some units are identical and most show a social order. Patterns are the norm in life. There are different ways of looking at things, but the structure remains ahistorical. There is just as much interest in looking at patterns as looking closely at individual units. In narratology, there was much investigation done on the study of themes and motifs as there still is for social network studies with regards to analysing the whole of the network and individual, indivisible units.

Attempts at identifying core structural elements that make up a Chick Lit novel have been replicated into How-to-write-a-chick-lit-novel manuals such as texts by Yardley and Mlynowski, and publishing mock How-to pamphlets as illustrated by Anna Weinberg in “Make Your Own Chick-Lit Novel!” (albeit satirical) (*Book Magazine*). But could these simply be the result of overgeneralisation? How can one critique Chick Lit when we do not investigate the parts of the true skeletal formula (syuzhet vs fabula) of Chick Lit text and its readers’ worldview? In truth, we do not study a fact without looking at the underlying “abstract substrata,” so Propp emphasises:

These substrata lie at the basis of a great many phenomena of life, and it is precisely to this that science turns its attention. Not a single concrete fact can be explained without these abstract bases. (15)

Otherwise, how can one compare between Chick Lit novels, and their subsets, and the variations that are published from around the world? There may be differences that we may be in danger of overgeneralising or assuming as identical. When a pattern emerges from the diagrams and they seem the same, we would be able to point out exact similarities and bring our attention to parts that are ‘not’ identical. We can properly appoint similarities within Chick Lit where they truly exist and conclude accordingly. At the present time, we need an exact description of the Chick Lit novel. We cannot ignore the reader and her worldview with connection to the text.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

I do not claim that my findings are universal in fiction (but some are very general), nor that they are an exhaustive description of Chick Lit novels, nor that they are directly applicable to other traditions of romance and popular fiction story lines.

Chick Lit may continue to experience difficulties in defining itself as 'literature'. The research is limited to three Chick Lit novels; therefore, the scope is limited to only three novels originating from the UK and the USA, two of which were written by the same author. As a researcher, my background is still bound by Malaysian culture and society, and there is bound to be a cultural or sociological gap. Even though the research has some grounds and likeness to narratology, a branch of structuralism, especially with regards to profiling characters and plot structures accordingly, the chosen methodology will not delve into investigation that involves semiotics or applied linguistics. This study is interested in form, as evident in the usage of formalist theory and structuralism (narratology). But social networking analysis is key in the method that will be used to derive new meaning and interpretation from the selected texts.

1.10 Organisation of the Thesis

In Chapter One, I provide the initial background of Chick Lit and the critical problem of its literariness as observed by literary critics and writers. Here, I propose a new means of interpreting Chick Lit to be judged for the value it brings in informing the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century and outline the research objectives that will guide the conceptual framework designed especially for the explication of Chick Lit novels, of which I have selected three of the most popular texts for investigation.

In Chapter Two, a brief overview of social network theories and social networks analysis in literature are included, as well as certain features of narratology that are relevant in the construction of the method used to explicate selected texts. A section about the realities of the single woman is inserted to lend sociological import to the landscape of the zeitgeist.

Chapter Three will solely focus on the methodological components comprised of Scott Feld's 'Social Focus Theory', the mapping of time and space for unique social interaction to take place extracted from the selected texts, and the detection of technology as a device for triggering plot movement.

Chapter Four will demonstrate how closely certain narrative features of Chick Lit reflect 'real life' and predominantly the role of Chick Lit as text, Chick Lit writers, and most especially, Chick Lit readers play in contextualising the zeitgeist. This is followed by a section on developing a conceptual framework based on this zeitgeist to reflect the disruptions and interruptions detected throughout the reading of Chick Lit. Based on the data extracted from the application of methodology of the selected texts, this

chapter will then demonstrate observations made from setting, plot movement, and character development that are drawn out from critical plot scenes of the diagrams or chronophotography (attached as Appendices 7, 8 and 9). Reader-response fills in the gaps of the experience of Chick Lit and is optimally reflected in the fabula and syuzhet extracted from the close reading of the texts. In other words, the zeitgeist becomes a literary device and syuzhet filler for the three texts.

Chapter Five will hold concluding thoughts, advancements, and limitations of the new methodology used to describe the structure of Chick Lit novels, and recommendations for further study in the areas of social network theory as a tool for explication of other popular genres.

1.11 Conclusion

What is brought to question is the value of Chick Lit. We celebrate all varieties. Just because we cannot read a genre the same way we read another does not make one genre inferior or superior to the other. It only underscores the fact that they are all different. This difference allows for the opportunity to attack the reading material from a different angle, which begs us to take on a more open perspective. The art of interpretation is not limited to class, gender, or cultural intelligence. Furthermore, a civilisation is rich for its courage to attempt the novel, even at risk of doubt and speculation. Like the intrepid explorer, we can only forge ahead and hope the journey, if not the destination, opens new paths in the same spirit of open-minded investigation and great adventure. Chick Lit is another variety that despite all odds, is still here and still poses as much a threat as it is a comfort from two opposing ends of the literary spectrum.

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