A Transnational Feminist Reading of

Selected Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

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Abstract

This thesis uses a transnational feminist approach to analyse how the selected authors of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit explore religion, ethnicity, female friendships, romantic relationships, consumer culture, and the economically independent woman. The thesis considers how the authors' positions as middle-class, transnational, feminist subjects of the Middle East and South Asia enable them to identify the religious, cultural, and social themes that inform their narratives. I use transnational feminist theory to form the foundation of my reading while integrating the relevant aspects of postfeminist theory as it applies to global chick lit. This approach allows for additional nuance and more intentional engagement with the texts, through which the distinctive elements of the narratives can be recognised. This thesis will consider *Almost Single* (2013) by Advaita Kala, *No Sex in the City* (2012) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) by Rajaa Alsanea, and *Ayesha at Last* (2018) by Uzma Jalaluddin as representations of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. In my analysis of these novels, I compare and contrast the texts to identify the differences and similarities between transnational and domestic authors and Middle Eastern and South Asian authors and their narratives. In so doing, I explore the form of the novels as they mirror and modify conventions in white Western chick lit. Similarly, I consider the novels' handling of themes and tropes evident in (most) chick lit and their application in the unique social, economic, and political circumstances of their setting. Middle Eastern and South Asian iterations of chick lit, while similar in formula and conventions, illustrate how authors can utilise the genre to further discourse about feminine subjectivities in their respective locales.

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Chapter One: An Introduction to Chick Lit in the West and the East

1.1 The Origins of Chick Lit

Chick lit has emerged amid the complicated history of genre fiction. As a genre primarily written by women and for women[1], it harkens back to some of the most influential female writers like Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen. While it could be argued that these literary classics form the basis of chick lit, Juliette Wells observes that chick lit does not necessarily possess the gravitas and depth of its predecessors. Chick lit shifts from the 'seriousness' associated with women's literature and embodies the light-hearted nature of young womanhood. Although it has the capacity to tackle serious themes, as will be discussed in depth in this thesis, there is a distinct perception of chick lit as superficial in nature. Chick lit routinely borrows from its literary predecessors and reworks the recognisable plot and character archetypes into a modern retelling. Stephanie Harzewski describes chick lit as calling "attention to the tensions between high and popular culture" (Harzewski, "New Novel of Manners" 33), which is clear given its reverence for the history of women's writing and romance writing while incorporating current and fashionable elements that are instantly recognisable to the modern female reader.

In this introductory chapter, I begin by outlining the origins of the chick lit genre, chronicling its journey from its conception in genre fiction and looking to its predecessors in the canon of women's literature. I will then consider the popularity of the genre by looking to the academics and writers that have cemented this genre's influence with primarily female audiences. Following this, I will outline the rationale of the study, detailing why I have chosen this topic of study and the texts that will be examined throughout the following chapters. Next, I will present the theoretical framework of this thesis, as well as the literature review. Finally, I conclude this chapter by summarising the focus of each chapter included in this thesis.

In looking at the inception of chick lit, it becomes apparent that Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell are ultimately responsible for the naming of the genre, although that was certainly not their intention. In publishing a collection of postfeminist fiction, they chose to name it *Chick-*

[1] There are some examples of chick lit written by men. This is particularly notable in the examples from India, where a number of male authors have found success. These include Durjoy Datta, Sudeep Nagarkar, Ravinder Singh, and Sumrit Shahi. While these authors write chick lit novels, they fall outside the scope of this project, because my focus is on women's voices and the authentic representations that they offer for their primarily female audience. There is opportunity for new studies focussed on the male writer in this genre, taking on new perspectives and voices.

Lit: Postfeminist Fiction. Mazza acknowledges the potential for controversy, fearing that this title would be "too inflammatory" (Mazza 19), and may even have discredited their project. The collection, published in 1995, would ultimately lend its name to an emerging genre, one which they did not feel aligned with their ideas of postfeminist fiction. In many ways, Mazza feels that chick lit as we know it today is the antithesis of the collection, which originally bore the title. She writes that they did not intend to "reduce the contributing authors [in their collection] into shopping-and-dieting airheads" (Mazza 27). In her article, she shows an apparent disdain for how the genre has evolved but does acknowledge that women "write about what's important to *women*" (Mazza 28, emphasis in original).

While the trajectory of chick lit's development ultimately aligns with the romance novel, the two genres are not to be conflated. Whereas the romance novel maintains a "cardinal 'one woman-one man' tenet" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 28), this is not seen in the chick lit genre. Protagonists endure serial dates with both Mr Wrongs and Mr Maybes searching for their 'happily ever after' (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 26) In so doing, it "presents a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring the dissolution of romantic ideals or revealing them to be unmet, sometimes unrealistic expectations" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 17) as is felt by modern, twenty-first-century women, and therefore no longer concentrates on the singular romantic hero of the romance novel. In fact, the novels "virtually [jettison] the figure of the heterosexual hero, with Manolo Blahniks upstaging men" (Harzewski "Postfeminism" 33). Commodity culture and consumption largely supersede the focus on the hunt for the perfect partner, and luxury goods and experiences are considerably more visible in the novels than most male characters. According to Wells, "consumer goods are essential to chick-lit heroines' self-conception and self-presentation" (62). There is immense value in women's writings – whether it be considered high literature or catering to the masses in the form of chick lit. It is a means for women writers to "fully express their own passions and desires in writing" (Moi 260) while also allowing women readers to "find their own passions reflected in books written with women in mind" (Moi 260).

As a genre, chick lit has largely been dismissed, partly due to the themes of love and romance, marking it as "trashy fiction" (Ferriss and Young 1). Ferriss and Young maintain that the genre illuminates "issues of identity, of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image" (Ferriss and Young 2), all crucial points of discussion at this and every moment of the history of womanhood. Stephanie Harzewski argues that chick lit provides "[focus] on society and culture" and can be considered an "accessible portal into contemporary gender politics and questions of cultural values" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 4-5). While

chick lit may not widely be considered 'literature,' it is my belief that there is immense value in considering chick lit as a cultural phenomenon due to its ability to foreground some of the issues facing women in a palatable and well-understood writing style.

Chick lit novels are singular in their ability to allow women's voices to dominate, a trait that is not often seen in other genres. It is easy to dismiss 'women's genres', especially in literary society marked by male presence and patriarchal views. Chick lit has created a space for "heroine-centred narratives" (Ilief-Martinescu 124) in which the protagonist is not forced to choose between "a feminist or feminine path in life" (Ilief-Martinescu 124). Readers' exposure to an ever-widening "range of female characters and experiences" (Spencer 83) that mirrors the valued friendships, career opportunities, and personal triumphs of real women is significant. Chick lit deviates from overly prescriptive notions of what is acceptable in women's writing, and utilises the ordinary and mundane as well as the excitement of life. In its ability to accentuate the reality of women's lives in writing, chick lit gains control over a new readership and realm of popular literature. The individual and collective voices that make up womanhood have gained momentum, which serves to bridge the gap between portraying powerful feminist women and "young women grappling with modern life" (Ferriss and Young 9).

Chick lit has been a veritable "commercial tsunami" (Ferriss and Young 2) in the publishing world since the late 1990s, becoming a significant cultural phenomenon in women's literature. It has seen massive success in the English-speaking West, with many novels being adapted to film in the early to mid-2000s, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *In Her Shoes* (2005), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009). These are novels about glamorous, independent young women who lead lavish lifestyles in big cities while navigating the ups and downs of romance, friendship, and society, and many of these novels have been elevated to the status of iconic in popular culture. Spurred on by the genre's success in the West, the past two decades have seen an ever-increasing production of international iterations of chick lit novels, "buoyed by the demographic that's both their subject and readership" (Donadio). Chick lit authors from Hungary, South Africa, Australia, China, Poland, and Mexico, as well as African American authors from the United States, have taken on and transformed the genre to highlight the shifts in social order taking place around the globe.[2] While the genre initially featured mainly white middle-class protagonists, there is now

[2] Notable international authors include Anita Heiss (Australian Aboriginal chick lit), Kim Wong Keltner, Caroline Hwang, Michelle Yu, Blossom Kan (China), Malín Alegría (Mexico), Erica Kennedy (African

a significantly more diverse representation in chick lit, including novels that focus on Middle Eastern and South Asian women living in their home countries and the West. Novels featuring protagonists from India, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia, among other countries, have emerged, including *Goddess for Hire* (2004) and *Bollywood Confidential* (2005) by Sonia Singh, *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) by Moni Moshin, *Imaginary Men* (2005) by Anjali Banerjee, *Misfit in Love* (2021) by S. K. Ali, *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged* (2015) by Ayisha Malik, and *Desperate in Dubai* (2011) by Ameera A. Hakawati, to name a few.

Women have been enthralled by the relatable, realistic, and sometimes raw characters that the genre presents, begging for more novels that use this "identifiable, friendly voice and approachable comfort level" (Harzewski 38) that chick lit has made its trademark. Heather Cabot defines chick lit as a narrative that "features single women in their twenties and thirties' navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationship" (qtd. in Ferriss and Young 3). The chick lit genre portrays the ideal combination of "female independence and individualism with a confident display of femininity or sexuality" (Singh 867). Sandra Ponzanesi describes the genre as "a form of women's fiction on the basis of the subject matter, character, audience and narrative style" (Ponzanesi 157). It is now instantly recognisable due to the "distinctive titles, heroines, and narrative styles, clearly marked jacket designs (Day-Glo or pastel, with cartoon-style illustrations), and marketing strategies that aimed to attract single, urban-based white women in their 20s and 30s" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 488).

As a genre, chick lit developed from a need and a desire to realistically capture the essence of modern-day young women, including the difficulties they have finding love, pursuing their careers and the joys of their supportive groups of female friends. Chick lit highlights protagonists who, in effect, mirror the reality of the readers' lives; they are compelling young women and speak largely to grappling with identity formation. Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff describe the chick lit protagonist as not just characters, instead becoming "representative[s] of the zeitgeist" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 489). Chick lit protagonists are recognisable and relatable and allow women to see themselves represented in popular literature. The focus on the identity of the characters aligns with Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai's description of chick lit's development as "parallel to, and part of the trajectory of, the female bildungsroman" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 5). Popular examples of chick lit,

American USA), Carmen Rita (Dominican Republic), Angela Makholwa, Cynthia Jele (South Africa), Zsuzsa Rácz (Hungary). This list is not exhaustive by any means.

such as Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary and Sex and the City* by Candace Bushnell, have become cemented in popular culture. Iconic characters like Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw have become emblematic of the new, modern young women, showing the multifaceted nature of womanhood and the experience thereof.

Chick lit first gained prominence in the 1990s, with some of its most famous examples published during this time. It is widely contended that *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) marks the genre's inception and is often quoted as the foundational text of chick lit (Ferriss and Young 4). *Bridget Jones's Diary* chronicles Bridget Jones and her Austen-esque love triangle with eligible bachelors Mark Darcy and Daniel Cleaver and certainly marks the genre's inception in the United Kingdom. *Sex and the City* (1996) follows the luxurious New York lifestyle of friends Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha, while *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000) features the confessional stylings of Becky Bloomwood and her compulsive shopping habit, both novels following closely behind in the United States. However, critics Sandra Folie and Sandra Ponzanesi suggest that Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) actually birthed the chick lit genre, challenging the widely accepted notion that *Bridget Jones's Diary* was the origin of chick lit. *Waiting to Exhale*, written by an African American author and featuring black characters, was undoubtedly disadvantaged against the white, blonde characters in Fielding and Bushnell's work and thus failed to garner the same international success. Ultimately, *Bridget Jones's Diary* has had the most cultural impact in the English-speaking West, becoming a vital genre identifier for both chick lit and chick flick[3]. These glamorous, independent young women, leading lavish lifestyles in big cities while navigating the ups and downs of romance, friendship and society, have become significant in women's literature and markers of a new wave.

In critiques of the genre, chick lit is often referred to as fiction, as opposed to literature. Juliette Wells describes chick lit as "certainly one of the next generations of women's writing but, despite its capacity to invoke the questions that long swirled around women's literary writing, it is not the next generation of women's literature" (Wells 49). By definition, this seeks to exclude chick lit and other romance genres from the standard for literature and does not allow them to take their legitimate standing in literary critique and scholarship. However, chick

[3] Here I use the slang term 'chick flick', which loosely refers to films that are aimed towards women. The terms 'chick lit' and 'chick flick' are both imbued with negative connotations. They speak to the derision that is often projected onto women's work. However, I think that using these terms and attempting to counteract the negativity that is associated with women's media, is an act that attempts to balance this negativity with scholarly pursuit and great import. I speak at length to the value of women's literature, and hope that this will become abundantly clear through the course of this thesis.

lit can be seen to stem from the bildungsroman, similarly capturing the growth and development of its female characters. Chick lit furthermore relies on a significant history of women's writing, as outlined in this chapter, and is worthy of the attention, both commercial and otherwise that it has garnered. Toril Moi quotes Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in suggesting that the derision of chick lit "shows that in a sexist society, man is the universal and woman is the particular; he is the One and she is the Other" (Moi 264). The dismissal of chick lit simply because it is popular fails to consider that it allows women "to understand that their individual experiences are understood and appreciated by other women" (Gerhard qtd. in Spencer 161). Chick lit captures the zeitgeist unlike any other genre (Davis-Kahl 19) and has shifted over the last quarter of a century to reflect but also critique the changing ideals of society. The genre has responded to feminism, postfeminism and the socio-cultural conditions of the countries to which it has spread. There is no doubt that literary critics and academics overlook chick lit as an instrument both for capturing some of the essence of women's experiences, as well as dismantling the narrow perceptions of womanhood.

Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff have formulated a list of five prerequisites that must be met if a novel is to be considered chick lit. These five characteristics primarily serve to distinguish the chick-lit novel from the romance genre. These criteria are as follows: her sexuality, her independence, her identity as a working woman, her participation in consumerism and consumption to adhere to beauty standards, and her female friends. While the romance protagonist typically adheres to the tenet of one love or one romantic pursuit, the chick lit protagonist embraces her sexuality and pursues and allows herself to be pursued by multiple men. Akin to other popular media, the chick lit protagonist is emblematic of a sexually liberated generation of women (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 493). She takes on the power granted to her in this embrace of sexuality and initiates sex on her own terms. However, Gill and Herdieckerhoff go on to qualify that the sexually liberated chick lit protagonist is still rendered naïve and timid when encountering her "hero" (494). They see this naivety as achieved by restoring the protagonist's innocence so that their encounter is not devoid of "specialness" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 494). Their statement implies, in my view, that there is an immorality to the sexually liberate actions of the protagonist, which needs to be rectified in order to find happiness with 'the one'. There, however, is a sense of a return to the traditional romance novel through the sexual encounter with 'the one', as this frees her from singlehood and the serial dating in which she has engaged. Gill and Herdieckerhoff indicate that the chick lit novel allows women to still engage with the desire for "transcendent love and sexual satisfaction" (494). What is evident in these novels is that sex is not taboo, and it is also a popular topic of

conversation amongst female friends in the novels. There is an allowance for the women of the novels to engage in whatever they desire, but also a suggestion that their deepest desires are not in line with the "feminist goals in relation to sexuality" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 494).

The protagonist of a chick lit novel is invariably a working woman, but according to Gill and Herdieckerhoff, two distinct types of working women are present. The first work in an unsatisfactory job for too little money, leaving her discontent with her career and trajectory. The introduction of a romantic partner allows them to pursue neglected or forgotten dreams after marriage. The second type of chick lit protagonist is a working woman who is successful, driven, and motivated. She occupies the opposite end of the spectrum, often characterised as "cold, manipulative, and immoral" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 495). This woman is demonised for her interest in her work and drive, especially for her choice to focus on her career instead of a potential romance and relationship. The successful woman in chick lit is often vilified, seemingly without cause, by the men featured in the texts.

Fundamental to the chick lit narrative is the unhappy singledom of the protagonist. Groups of female friends are often all single, and this is a topic of many conversations between them. There are constant reminders of their single status as friends get married and have children. The chick lit protagonist is most often nearing thirty years of age and is cognisant of her biological clock. However, Gill and Herdieckerhoff note the importance of the female friends here, as this allows women to have fulfilling relationships outside of romance, emphasising the sisterhood and support that the protagonists rely on. Finally, beauty standards are a familiar theme in the chick lit genre, and beauty is a primary concern for many protagonists. The protagonists often exhibit a "preoccupation with the shape, size, and look of the body that borders on the obsessional" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 497) in the genre. Potential romance relies on beauty and the conspicuous consumption that facilitates meeting beauty standards. It is through these conventions that chick lit is ultimately recognisable, and thus forms the basis for this study. Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit have taken these conventions and transformed them to align with the social, political, and cultural specificities that are evident in these two regions.

1.2 Rationale of Study

Chick lit has become a well-established genre due to its commercial success, and as a result, it has garnered considerable academic study[4]. In this thesis, I will shift the focus to Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, to consider how examples from these regions fit into, and break out of the genre, especially given their rise in popularity in recent years. While there is some scholarship that covers these two regions, there is little comparison of the domestic and transnational, as well as no comparison between the regions despite proximity and some shared characteristics such as religion. For this thesis, I will use the term 'domestic' to refer to texts written about characters living in their homeland or country of origin. In contrast, I will use "transnational" to describe those novels that follow Middle Eastern and South Asian characters living outside their homeland. "Domestic", for my purposes, is defined as "of, relating to, or originating within a country and especially one's own country" (Merriam-Webster 2011) and can be used interchangeably with 'homeland' or 'indigenous' within the context of this thesis. I chose to make use of this word, in part because of one of its many other meanings: "of or relating to the household or the family" (Merriam-Webster 2011), as there is a distinct focus on the family structure, culture, and tradition in global chick lit that is not evident in Western versions of the texts. Using "transnational" to describe texts set outside the protagonists' homeland is self-explanatory but will be further expanded upon in the literature review. The primary objective of this thesis is to compare the four chosen novels through close reading and analysis, intending to identify and explore the tropes and conventions typical of the chick lit genre. While Anglo-American iterations of chick lit nearly omit any deliberation of the social, political, and religious conditions in which the protagonists live, Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit tend to apply more focus on these areas. I would like to argue that global chick lit takes a transformational approach to the patterns of chick lit while remaining a recognisable part of the genre. In addition to the transnational feminist approach, Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit produces its own themes and tropes unique to the regions' novels.

While there is increasing scholarship on chick lit from these regions, no research considers a transnational feminist reading of Middle Eastern chick lit alongside South Asian chick lit. My research will use transnational feminism to examine how selected Middle Eastern and South Asian versions of chick lit novels grapple with their particular socio-cultural nuances

[4] For example, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* by Stephanie Harzewski, works and articles by Rosalind Gill, Elena Herdieckerhoff, Heike Mißler, Amy Burge, and Sandra Folie to name a few.

in an increasingly Westernised and globalised society. As is seen in the existing research on global chick lit, there is a consideration of the nuances of feminism and postfeminism but a failure to consider the intersectionality of race, economy, and migration in the globalised modern society. For this reason, reading the chosen primary texts through a transnational feminist lens is significant.

I will closely read *Almost Single* (2013) by Advaita Kala, *No Sex in the City* (2012) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) by Rajaa Alsanea, and *Ayesha at Last* (2018) by Uzma Jalaluddin. *Girls of Riyadh* and *Almost Single* are the domestic novels that will be considered in this thesis, while *No Sex in the City* and *Ayesha at Last* are examples of transnational novels. Much like the novels they have written, Rajaa Alsanea and Advaita Kala are domestic authors who reside in the country about which they have written their novels. Uzma Jalaluddin and Randa Abdel-Fattah live in Canada and Australia, respectively, like their protagonists, making them both transnational authors. South Asian authors wrote *Almost Single* and *Ayesha at Last*, while Middle Eastern authors wrote *No Sex in the City and Girls of Riyadh*.

For a relatively fair and equal comparison of the texts, it was necessary to choose two novels from each region, two from the Middle East and two from South Asia. In addition, one novel from each region is domestic, and one is transnational. Making this choice will facilitate more critical analysis, enabling a comparison between domestic and transnational texts on factors such as linguistic nuances, stereotypes, and how they are situated in the broader national context.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

For most of its academic study, chick lit has been understood in relation to postfeminism. I have chosen to first outline the tenets of postfeminism, as it has been significant to the study of chick lit. Angela McRobbie describes postfeminism as the "elements of contemporary popular culture [that] are perniciously effective in regard to [the] undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to 'feminism'" (McRobbie 27). There is a common perception of postfeminism as inextricably linked to 'choice', making the type of feminism that characterised the 1970s and 1980s irrelevant. McRobbie describes a "double entanglement" (McRobbie 28) evident in postfeminism in which neoconservative views of gender, sexuality and family become entwined with the increasingly liberal stances on choice, as evident in chick lit. Germaine Greer contends that "postfeminism is little more than a market-led phenomenon" (Gamble 51) which positions women as consumers first and foremost. Corporations rely almost

exclusively on women, who make up a considerable proportion of their income, by driving the marketing of "pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods" (Gamble 51) directly towards women. There is an acute focus on the individual, the refeminisation of women, and moving away from the political aspect of the movement. Greer also calls postfeminism a "luxury" (Gamble 51), which is only afforded to the Western world if they can ignore "the possibility that the exercising of one person's freedom may be directly linked to another's oppression" (Gamble 51). As a postfeminist genre, "chick lit actively produces discourses of feminization" (Harzewski "Postfeminism" 50), and as a result, is burdened by the negativity that is associated with women's consumerism and mass culture.

Postfeminism is a frequently contested theory. It is sometimes understood as "anti-feminist" or the end of the need for a feminist movement, especially in the 1980s, where it was used to refer to liberation from a "hopelessly outdated feminist movement" (Gamble 44). Ann Brooks defines postfeminism as the desire of feminist thought to include intersectional issues under the consideration of feminism (Brooks 1). Anna Yeatman argues that postfeminism represents the 'coming of age' of feminism, as it acknowledges and embraces "pluralism and difference" while also "reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements" (qtd. in Brooks 1). For these critics, 'post' is not the end of the movement, but rather implies "a process of ongoing transformation and change" (Brooks 1). It is however, deeply rooted in the English-speaking West, and does not take on much influence from outside this realm. Postfeminism theory is at times presented as almost utopian in nature, having moved past the political nature of the feminist movements and into a society in which a woman has the power to make her own choices in life. However, this is largely only true for white, educated, upper-middle-class women living in the West, and so postfeminism's 'universal' appeal falters. Greer sees postfeminism as intrinsically linked to consumer choices, identifying a Western capitalist society that sees women as consumers first and foremost. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra take this cynical approach from Greer, and rationalise it as part of postfeminism's very definition. They state that postfeminism works to "incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism" into society, but it also fundamentally "works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer" (Tasker and Negra 2). According to Tasker and Negra, postfeminism emphasises choice in the following areas: work, domesticity, parenting, and physical and sexual empowerment (Tasker and Negra 2). While these areas are choices, they do reiterate the significance of consumption but allow women more agency – they see consumption as a means for women to produce selfhood in modern

society. This does, however, lend itself to white, Western populations and ignores intersections that may impede such choices.

While this thesis will problematise postfeminism, it is not an accurate or sufficient theoretical base through which to read the chosen novels. Transnational feminism is able to adeptly fill the short fallings of postfeminism by bringing together all aspects of womanhood and the female experience that other theories have failed to consider. The world is increasingly globalised, which results in new identities which need new theories in order to create understanding. The transnational identity is increasingly common and publicised, and is therefore in need of representation. Each transnational text is singular, unprecedented and unique in its understanding of both past and present contexts that inform it. Given that no two experiences are the same, it is necessary to bring forward a theoretical underpinning like transnational feminism, which is better able to mediate and understand the singularity of the experiences and representations in the texts. As a theoretical framework, postfeminism is unable to attend "to multiple forms of social difference simultaneously" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 5), which transnational feminism can do, given that it foregrounds intersectional issues and views the female characters of chick lit not simply as one dimensional, but rather as an amalgamation of various facets. Postfeminism is similarly unable to give adequate attention to the unique position of women in the global south as they deal with postcolonial societies, changing economic circumstances, and increasingly globalised, cosmopolitan cities. Postfeminism can be described as hegemonic and is ultimately isolated. As such, postfeminism is not a suitable theoretical basis for analysing global chick lit. In this thesis, theories of transnational feminism will be critical to my analysis and understanding of the texts and provide a more nuanced foundation than simply postfeminism from which to work. Feminist studies often rely on a unified view of womanhood that is most often white, middle-class, and enfranchised. To combat this limited viewpoint, Butler and Desai have instead chosen to highlight the various facets of life that impact the global chick lit protagonist. The global chick lit protagonist is multifaceted, contradictory, and sometimes at odds with herself, her origins, and her identity. Alongside the familiar stories of a woman's individual empowerment often seen in chick lit, global chick lit navigates this same journey while asking questions about race, nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class, which is uncommon in white, Western chick lit.

As a result, transnational feminism is undoubtedly the most significant theory with which to read global chick lit. Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai define transnational feminist critique as one that foregrounds issues of race, migration, and political economy, while also interrogating globalism, empire, and the nation-state as it is seen in the novel (Butler and Desai

5). As is evident from this definition, it is a transnational approach to the popular genre that takes into consideration "the nation-state, globalism, capitalism, race, and ethnicity" (Butler and Desai 4) in addition to the 'standard' issues of gender and sexuality that are central concerns in feminist theories. As Butler and Desai describe the necessity for transnational feminist readings come from a need to shift the discourse away from the dominant chick lit criticisms, which was marred by the "apolitical nature" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 4) of white, Western chick lit, as well as the focus on the individual and her choices in these novels.

Transnational feminism recognises the innate connection between context, surroundings and the self, moving away from the neoliberal feminist concern with the individual. Thus, transnational feminism shifts towards more intentional engagement with "identities, subjectivities, structure, and power" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 8), looking for spaces in which to resist the focus on the individual and "challenge the production of neoliberal feminine subjectivities" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 9). In addition, transnational feminism is particularly significant in that it does not limit itself to the axis of race, sex, and class, but rather endeavours to take on all issues that are evident in the subjectivity of the chick lit protagonist. This is echoed by Butler and Desai, who speak to the significance of transnational feminism in understanding how "popular culture operates in relation to broader political and economic contexts" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 6). By viewing chick lit through this lens, we are able to see it not as a derivative of white, Western chick lit, but as an example of the ways in which popular literature helps produce new subjectivities, regardless of location.

This thesis also draws on Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's text, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices.* It is through this text that Grewal and Kaplan argue for the all-encompassing consideration of global economic structures, politics, social conventions, and feminism, as these elements do not act in isolation. They consider the nuances of feminism outside of the West, as well as the ways through which religion, tradition, and ethnicity interact with feminist thought and practices in 'modern' society. Grewal and Kaplan describe feminist movements that do not consider transnational nuances as "prone to reproducing the universalising gestures of dominant Western cultures" (Grewal and Kaplan 17). Given the Western nature of postfeminism and the focus on individual freedoms and choices, it fails to respond to the needs of societies outside of the West that have not necessarily had organised feminist movements. It can be said that postfeminism dismissed diversity and any distinction between women's experiences in favour of a "universalized Western model of women's liberation" (Grewal and Kaplan 17). This failure to consider the intersectional nature of women's experiences, like class, race, ethnicity, region, or location,

has led to a single-minded and narrow postfeminist theory that does not lend itself to the study of women's literature outside of the white, English-speaking West. It fails to consider oppositions or conflicts with the hegemonic narrative created by postfeminist theory, resulting in the intricacies of global narratives being largely ignored in scholarly critique from this perspective.

Grewal and Kaplan have criticised those who "leave the category of 'race' unexamined, unhistoricized, and essentialised" (Grewal and Kaplan 6). Postfeminism, as discussed, is part of the dominant discourse concerning white, English-speaking Western chick lit, so it is significant to read chick lit through a lens that opposes "the hegemony of Western imperial culture" (Grewal and Kaplan 7). Similarly, Grewal and Kaplan state that feminist theories need to acknowledge "transnational cultural flows" (Grewal and Kaplan 17), or they risk misunderstanding the diverse lives that women lead in various locations. In highlighting these 'cultural flows', the movement of ideas, people, and cultures is acknowledged, which is especially notable in a globalising and increasingly heterogeneous society. Transnational feminism transforms global feminism to ensure that it is multifaceted and all-encompassing, able to "compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression" (Grewal and Kaplan 17), as one might consider postfeminism. The transnational feminist subject mediates the "local, nation, and global through the nexus of political economy, sexual agency, consumer culture and translation mobility" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 8). As can be seen here, there is an appreciation for specific circumstances in which the subject resides, and transnational feminism aims to understand the chick lit protagonist, not just read her through one singular lens. Transnational feminism opposes hegemonic, Western ideas of feminism, which remain singular and unchangingly white despite the multicultural nature of the West. Kaplan further states that allowing for "historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations" and the creation of "alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances" (Kaplan 139) is vital in a feminist context. This acceptance of diverse identities allows for the deconstruction of dominant views, as is the intention of transnational feminism.

1.4 Literature Review

While chick lit began as an Anglo-American phenomenon, it migrated and gained popularity in various parts of the world – especially those influenced by Western values and Anglo-American neoliberalism (Chen 214). The genre has flourished in China, Hungary and South Africa. In China, novels like Weihui Zhou's *Shanghai Baby* (1999) and the "Pink-

collared Beauty" novels reflect both the spread of the chick lit genre and the everchanging society in which they are published, especially as China began to embrace a market economy and global commodity capitalism (Chen 215). Chen states that with the rise of Western commodities and ideals in developing and ex-communist countries, the notions of "universalized choice and freedom" (Chen 214) are increasingly popular for young, educated, and ambitious women living in cosmopolitan areas. The chick lit genre in China maintains its core brand of conspicuous consumption, femininity, and choice, but is only allowed to do so because of the altered socioeconomic situation that has arisen. It might be assumed that the chick lit produced in China is, therefore, more aligned with Western values than with the nation from which it emanates, which is largely incorrect. Despite the influence of capitalism and commodity culture on chick lit, both the protagonists themselves and the genre as a whole, there are apparent differences from the Western iterations of the novel. There is a consideration of the local and traditional gender roles at play as protagonists are seen to be eschewing these outdated ideals and opting for the more progressive Western standards (Chen 217). The woman is considered a sexual individual, previously erased in Chinese women's literature (Chen 217). The shift in political ideals from communist to increasingly capitalistic sees women morph from "traditional, submissive" to "financially successful and sexually confident, "me-first" Chinese women" (Chen 217), and this is especially true of the chick lit protagonist. Despite this sexual confidence, sexual experiences are not vividly recounted in the novels, speaking to a more conservative audience and population. White, Western chick lit infrequently considers the socio-political nuances of the society in which it is set, while global chick lit, and in this case, Chinese chick lit, considers and respects the restraints of the traditions of the locale. Taboos remain taboo to some extent, but the chick lit protagonist is "candid" (Chen 221) about her experiences and gives legitimacy to a nation of women who may otherwise not be heard. As Chen rightly affirms, "global chick lit contains a distinct transnational setting and an added dimension of race (and also class) that better reveals the many exclusions and hierarchal differences" (Chen 223) that are otherwise unseen in chick lit of the West. Western chick lit can gloss over issues of social inequality in ways that are simply not true for global chick lit. However, chick lit's Western commodities and values often overshadow the global issues, and international iterations of chick lit sideline issues specific to their nation. Instead, they portray the small faction of women who can ignore the unequal circumstances of the broader population in favour of enjoying privileged access (Chen 223). Chick lit in China has great potential as a genre, but seems to primarily concentrate on consumerist freedoms and individual agency (Chen 223).

Far closer to its origins, chick lit has profoundly influenced Hungary's literary market. The "Bridget Jones effect" or "Bridget Jones phenomenon" (Séllei 173) brought about cultural and ideological shifts and "unprecedented discourse" (Séllei 173). Nora Séllei describes it as a social phenomenon that has contributed to the makings of a new multinational cultural creation, not simply a subgenre of chick lit. Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* was hugely successful, primarily with young, educated women, and inspired the creation of Hungary's version. Séllei states that this was not a mere copy but rather a "different cultural [product]" (174). The post-communist social reality of Hungary presents to the reader a fundamentally different circumstance for chick lit. Unlike the at-times one-dimensional characters seen in white, Western chick lit, the protagonist of *Stop Mammatheresa!* is deeply complex, has a well-rounded identity, and immerses herself in the contemporary social issues surrounding her (Séllei 175). Zsuzsa Rácz's novel, *Stop Mammatheresa!* (2002) is the most famed of these novels, transforming the chick lit genre for the Hungarian population's needs. This and other novels like it make up the 'szingliregény' genre or the 'singleton' novel. The "lifestyle – and very existence – of the single woman" (Séllei 177) as a concept did not exist in communist era Hungarian novels, and singleton novels therefore allow a "literary space" for characters who did not previously "have a life story worth writing and telling" (Séllei 179). In Hungarian, chick lit and its adaptation, the singleton novel, coincided with immense economic, political, and cultural shifts that resulted from the transition into a post-communist era.

As a genre, South African chick lit has opened up a new space for the "New South African Woman" (Spencer 79), as the texts reflect on women's experiences in post-apartheid South Africa. Lynda Gichanda Spencer highlights the adherence to the conventions of chick lit, as well as the shift to include realism about middle-class women in South Africa, noting, in particular, the "local content" (Spencer 82) that the novels are imbued with. Spencer discusses the ways in which women in South Africa have taken advantage of "feminist politics" (Spencer 82) in order to gain new wealth and opportunities, but notes the pervasive patriarchal structures that complicate the lives of the New South African Woman. South Africa has various publishers that are singularly committed to publishing books by women, for women, thereby allowing women's voices to become heard in the country. As with other iterations of the genre, South African chick lit focuses on "feminine rituals such as shopping" (Spencer 86), rites that have become synonymous with the genre. Her argument highlights a nuanced and critical analysis of the middle-class woman in post-apartheid South Africa and questions the empowerment derived from representations such as those in the chick lit genre.

Similarly, Pamila Gupta and Ronit Frenkel note the ability of chick lit in Africa to offer insight into the genre, due to the continent's relation to "multiple diaspora relocations" (Gupta and Frenkel 123). It is their assertion that African texts can play a foundational role in considering postfeminism through a transnational lens, as well as changing the assumptions of texts produced in the Global South. African chick lit does not only "speak back to Western chick-lit" (Gupta and Frenkel 123) but can also be seen as a medium through which to "re-centre and revive the debate" (Gupta and Frenkel 123) around African women's writing and the productions of the Global South. They see chick lit as working in conjunction with Afropolitanism, considering the history of the African continent and the nuances of the present-day lived experience, as is depicted in fiction. Gupta and Frenkel highlight the necessity of looking at the "specific dilemmas of race, sex and social class" (Gupta and Frenkel 126) that affect African women in their particular African settings. Their argument calls for an intersectional approach to this "dynamic" (Gupta and Frenkel 123) genre as it develops and provides various new viewpoints in scholarship.

Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit has been the subject of some critical work. This rise in research has seen scholars like Banu Gökariksel, Elle McLarney, Zuha Moideen, and Charmaine Carvalho write about consumer culture for Middle Eastern and South Asian women and the notion of "Islamic capitalism" (Gökariksel and McLarney 1) and discuss its simultaneously empowering and oppressive nature. Lucinda Newns and Muhammad Abdullah speak to the rewriting of homogeneous viewpoints of Muslim women and their experiences. Abdullah explicitly seeks to challenge the marginalising Western perceptions of marriage in Islamic cultures using a postfeminist perspective. Sugandha S. Singh and Abha Shukla Kaushik consider the empowering nature of chick lit and its representation of women taking ownership over previously stigmatised facets of their lives, particularly their sex lives. Sonia Vashishta Oberoi writes on the intersections of tradition and modernity for the urban Indian woman.

Amy Burge and Sandra Folie fully consider the nuances of writing and reading romance fiction in the Middle East, speaking specifically to *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea and *Desperate in Dubai* by Ameera Al Hakawati[5]. They write that the Middle East has drawn on Anglophone literary cultures, particularly chick lit, in order to produce an illuminating genre that brings new insight into the women of the Middle East. They highlight these texts as

[5] This text would have been an excellent choice for study in this thesis, but overlapped with *Girls of Riyadh* as a domestic, Middle Eastern text. It was also incredibly difficult to find, and at the time was only available in the United States and United Arab Emirates. It was untenable to purchase and ship the novel to South Africa, and the electronic version was similarly too great an expense.

"hybrids" (Burge and Folie 324), rather than imitations of previous iterations of chick lit. In taking on the conventions and elements of chick lit, Middle Eastern chick lit is able to present "a taste of a culture" (Burge and Folie 324) for readers outside the Middle East. Burge and Folie also note the relationship between Middle Eastern chick lit and other fiction being produced in the region. They chronicle the various references that *Girls of Riyadh,* in particular, makes to other Arab authors, which shows intertextuality, although chick lit authors are writing in a different format. In so doing, they bring attention to the nuances of chick lit outside the West and the complicated influences that come together in the genre. In their discussion of the two novels, they pay particular attention to the confessional nature of the texts, which creates "intimacy between narrator and reader that is a key element of the genre" (Burge and Folie 327). As the genre is primarily written in the first person, there is what Burge and Folie describe as a "quality of eyewitness accounting" (Burge and Folie 328). This, too, serves to bring the readers and characters closer in proximity and blurs any distinction between them. Finally, in their analysis of the two novels, they highlight the "socio-critical attitude" (Burge and Folie 329) that is displayed in the digital spaces occupied by the narrators. The anonymity of these spaces allows the narrators and, by extension, the authors, to grapple with issues faced in the lives of real Middle Eastern women without the characters taking what might be deemed controversial stances.

Nicklas Hållén and Delphine Munos also discuss the trajectory and positioning of chick lit, specifically in the global south. They position "aspiration and upward social mobility" (Hållén and Munos 177) as being at the centre of the chick lit genre. Their article speaks to India and sub-Saharan Africa, where chick lit novels produced in these regions challenge the notion of chick lit as "white-normative" (Hållén and Munos 166). They note the prevalence of the English language as a language of aspiration in the texts, particularly in Indian and Nigerian chick lit. Hållén and Munos state that language is of significance to Nigerian Anglophone chick lit, as it is through this medium that authors "[balance] faithfulness to the genre on the one hand and need to reshape it on the other" through "creative use of non-local dialects and idioms" (Hållén and Munos 168). In India, they state that English "stands at the heart of many social changes" (Hållén and Munos 168) and again affirms its role as a language of aspiration. Drawing on Myambo's theories discussed later in this thesis, they see cultural flows as being integral to the movement and development of chick lit from North America and Europe into the rest of the world, paying particular attention to the global south.

1.5 Introducing the Authors and their Novels

As previously mentioned, the four novels chosen for this thesis are *Almost Single* (2013) by Advaita Kala, *No Sex in the City* (2012) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) by Rajaa Alsanea, and *Ayesha at Last* (2018) by Uzma Jalaluddin. The chosen texts consist of two novels from each region, one of which is an example of domestic chick lit and the other transnational chick lit. *Girls of Riyadh* is an example of domestic Middle Eastern chick lit. It tells the story of four women living in Saudi Arabia from 2004 to 2005. Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees are upper-class, socially mobile young women navigating love and societal expectations while grappling with their positions as religious women in a religious society. The novel is written in the form of an email newsletter written by an unnamed woman called "Memoirs Disclosed" (Alsanea, i), who knows the four protagonists. Through this series of anonymous emails, the stories and lives of the four women are explored, and their religious and cultural values are intrinsic to the plot. *Girls of Riyadh* was originally published in Arabic. The novel's author, Rajaa Alsanea, is a Saudi Arabian, and she was once an assistant professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Publishing *Girls of Riyadh* subjected her to considerable backlash, including from the Saudi government. She is quoted as stating that she received over 1000 emails shortly after publication, a number of which were death threats. A legal suit was brought against her and the government, calling for the revocation of permission to publish the novel, but this was ultimately rejected. Despite the popularity and impact of *Girls of Riyadh*, she has not published any further novels and works as a dentist. She received the Dublin Literary Award and was ranked on a list of the forty strongest and most influential Arabs by *Arabian Business*. Alsanea writes in her author's note that she did not anticipate publishing in any other language, as she did not "think the Western world would actually be interested" (Alsanea vii). Its intended audience was, therefore, Arabic speaking, allowing her to include language that reflects the "Arabic of the modern world" (Alsanea vii). This study has used a translation by Alsanea in collaboration with Marilyn Booth, in which explanations for the Western reader have been included, and certain elements omitted as they would not "make sense to the non-Arab reader" (Alsanea vii).

No Sex in the City follows the story of Esma, a Turkish second-generation migrant living in Australia during the 2010s. Esma is seeking a husband who is on "the same religious level" (Abdel-Fattah 12). While she practises her religion, she does not consider herself observant since she does not observe the five tenets of Islam. The transnational text follows Esma, her relationships with friends Ruby, Lisa, and Nirvana, as well as the complicated dynamics with her parents and sister Senem. The novel documents her dating life while also

presenting the realities of a young woman's career choices, personal principles and causes, and engagement with the increasingly globalised society in which she lives. Author Randa Abdel-Fattah is an award-winning young adult writer, and *No Sex in the City* is her first novel written for adults. Like Esma, she lives in Sydney, Australia, although she is of Palestinian and Egyptian heritage. When she is not writing fiction, she also writes critical work on the situation of women in Saudi Arabia, among other topics relating to Muslim women. Her non-fiction writing has been shortlisted for the 2022 Victorian Premier's Prize for nonfiction, the Stella Prize, and the 2023 Prime Minister's Literary Awards. In writing *No Sex in the City*, she drew on "horror matchmaking stories of family and friends" (Abdel-Fattah 383), including the idea of the 'Rule of Six', which she credits to a friend's father. She insists the novel is not autobiographical, despite the similarities to her own life. Her goal in her work is to highlight what it means to be Muslim in Australia.

Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* follows the dating journey of Aisha, who works in a luxury hotel in New Delhi in the late 2000s. While she is not religious, the cultural and spiritual practices of Hinduism she partakes in are indicative of her cultural and ethnic identity in India. As a young, middle-class woman, Aisha is representative of a growing class of economically independent young women in India and the changing ways in which they interact with culture, both local and global. *Almost Single* is an example of domestic chick lit from India. Aisha spends much of her time with Misha and Anushka, who are both single, although Anushka has recently divorced. The three women dedicate themselves to fun nights out, shopping, and, most importantly, dating. They help one another build online profiles, perform rituals to promote romantic success and consult astrologers to ascertain the likelihood of their perfect husband coming into their lives. Kala began her working career in a hotel, much like Aisha. She lives in New Delhi with her family. On top of her fiction writing, she also contributes to multiple newspaper and magazine columns. She is an award-winning screenplay writer, having worked on films *Anjaana Anjaani* in 2010 and *Kahaani* in 2012. She was awarded a Screen Award for Best Story and a Star Guilds Award for Best Story, among other awards, for her work in film.

Lastly, Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last*, a transnational novel, features Ayesha, a Muslim Indian woman living in Canada. Ayesha is devoted to her practice of Islam and observes prayers and other rituals. Ayesha was born in India, but she moved to Canada with her mother, grandparents and brother after the death of her father, aided financially by her Uncle. Ayesha wears a hijab and does not drink alcohol or date. She is an active member of her mosque and spends her free time with her best friend, Clara, or writing poetry. Uzma Jalaluddin, like Ayesha, is a high school teacher living in Toronto, Canada. She describes

herself as a voracious reader. She attends her local mosque and mirrors Ayesha's desire to be an active member of her faith community. Since publishing *Ayesha at Last*, her first novel, she has gone on to publish two more novels, *Hanna Khan Carries On* (2021) and *Much Ado About Nada* (2023). Her subjects are drawn from a desire to write novels about women who look like herself and create the representation that she battled to find in her own reading choices. She also writes a culture column for the *Toronto Star*, her local newspaper. *Ayesha at Last* was listed for the Toronto Book Awards, shortlisted for the 2019 Kobo Emerging Writer Prize, and longlisted for the Stephen Leacock Humour Award. Her published works have been optioned for film and television adaptations.

I will conclude this chapter by outlining the content and focus of the chapters that will follow in this thesis. In this chapter, I have outlined the general focus of this thesis and defined all terms and theories that will be utilised during the course of this study. I have examined postfeminism as a theoretical lens and explained why transnational feminist theory is better suited to the content of this study, given its appreciation of the various social, political, and economic factors that impress upon feminism. It is clear that transnational feminism's ability to consider the intersections and nuances of female subjectivity lends itself to the reading and analysis of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, which will be further examined in later chapters.

In Chapter Two, I will consider the form of the chick lit novel. I will examine the transformation that has taken place in the four chosen texts by analysing and discussing the author's use of conventional chick lit forms. Furthermore, I will consider how the form of each novel is impacted by the social, economic, political, and cultural context in which it was written and how such differences influence the popular genre.

Chapter Three will examine the non-romantic relationships of the protagonists in the four chosen texts. In this chapter, I will consider familial relationships, as well as friendships, particularly female friendships. It is here that I will look at how the chick lit protagonist is able to grapple with her identity while balancing the family ties that are deeply significant to her sense of self and consider the significance of female friendships and the chosen family.

In Chapter Four, I analyse the constant appearance of consumerism and consumption in the novels and how it is intrinsically linked to romance and romantic relationships. I will consider the ways in which the domestic texts use consumption as markers of progress and Westernisation for the protagonist while also creating beauty and materialism standards within their society. I will then discuss the use of consumer goods and consumption as a marker of belonging and a method of 'fitting it' to transnational homes.

Chapter Five will discuss religion and culture as it relates to identity formation. I will compare and contrast the ways in which religion and ethnicity are utilised in domestic texts as opposed to transnational texts, as well as how characters navigate the religious and cultural identities in a globalised society. Furthermore, I discuss the use of cultural and traditional practices in transnational texts. Chapter Six consists of a summary of the main discussions and content of this thesis and provides my final thoughts on this reading.

Chapter Two: Considering Form: A Discussion of Chick Lit Conventions in Middle Eastern and South Asian Texts

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the focus of this thesis and defined all terms and theories that will be utilised during the course of this study. I discussed why I have chosen transnational feminist theory to form the basis of this thesis, and the chosen novels for this thesis. In this chapter, I will explore the use of form in chick lit by the chosen Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novels through two key points. Firstly, I will examine how selected authors have appropriated Jane Austen's novels as a basis for the chick lit novel. Secondly, I will discuss the use of the first-person confessional style in these novels and how this contributes to the familiarity and relatability of the protagonists. Through the use of conventions of form of chick lit, it becomes clear that acceptance of diverse identities allows for the deconstruction of dominant views, as is the intention of transnational feminism. This chapter recognises the innate connection between context, surroundings and the self, moving away from the neoliberal feminist concern with the individual, and how chick lit navigates this through form. Regardless of its country of origin or any other variable, the chick lit genre draws on certain elements of form to remain identifiable. In this chapter, I will highlight these two elements to analyse how Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit effectively utilises key elements of the genre to position it as multifaceted while maintaining its recognisable quality.

As stated in Chapter One, this thesis will closely read four novels from the Middle East and South Asia. The chosen texts consist of two novels from each region, one of which is an example of domestic chick lit and the other transnational chick lit. *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea is an example of domestic Middle Eastern chick lit. It tells the story of four women living in Saudi Arabia, an Islamic country governed by laws derived from the Quran. Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees are upper-class, socially mobile young women navigating love and societal expectations while grappling with their positions as religious women in a religious society. It is written in the form of a mass email chain, sent out by an anonymous woman who is a friend of the four protagonists called "Memoirs Disclosed" (Alsanea, i).

No Sex in the City by Randa Abdel-Fattah follows the story of Esma, a Turkish second-generation migrant living in Australia. Esma lives with her parents, and works in Human Resources, and volunteers with refugees in her spare time. She spends much of her time with her three best friends, Lisa, Ruby, and Nirvana. Together, they form the 'No Sex in the City

Club', as they are all single at the start of the novel. The novel documents Esma's dating life while also presenting the realities of a young woman's career choices, personal principles and causes, and engagement with the increasingly globalised society in which she lives. She is often set up on dates in her family home, organised through familial connections and her parents' friends. The novel features an obvious reference to Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* franchise but also frequently makes use of allusions to *Pride and Prejudice*.

Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* follows the dating journey of Aisha, who works in a luxury hotel in New Delhi, India. While she is not religious, the cultural and spiritual practices she partakes in are indicative of her cultural and ethnic identity in India. Instead of religion, Aisha finds solace in her astrologer and his predictions for her life. As she is still single, her mother finds hope in her religious views and in prayer for her daughter to find a suitable match. Aisha spends much of her time with Misha and Anushka, who are both single, although Anushka has recently divorced. The three women dedicate themselves to fun nights out, shopping, and, most importantly, dating. They help one another build online profiles, perform rituals to promote romantic success and consult astrologers to ascertain the likelihood of their perfect husband coming into their lives. As a young, middle-class woman, Aisha is representative of a growing class of economically independent young women in India and the changing ways in which they interact with culture, both local and global.

Ayesha at Last is a transnational novel featuring Ayesha, a Muslim Indian woman living in Canada. The novel is a contemporary retelling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and borrows from character archetypes and elements of the plot. Ayesha is modelled on Elizabeth Bennet to a certain extent, while Khalid mirrors Mr Darcy. Ayesha's cousin Hafsa and her short-lived relationship with Tariq makes use of Lydia and Mr Wykeham's narrative.

2.2 The Easternisation of Austen: Analysing Intertextuality in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *No Sex in the City* and Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last*

This chapter draws on Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff's conventions of chick lit, which were outlined in full in the previous chapter. To summarise, in order to be recognisable as chick lit, a novel must utilise certain requisites. These are as follows: the protagonist's sexuality, her independence, her identity as a working woman, her participation in consumerism and consumption to adhere to beauty standards, and her female friends. While these are all significant elements of the text, there is another convention that is true for most chick lit texts: the form of the novel. Critics such as Stephanie Harzewski and Juliette Wells have referred to

Jane Austen's writings as the models on which many chick lit novels are based. For example, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is frequently dubbed "the mother of all modern romances" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 80). Contemporary writers[6] often use these works to align themselves with the literary canon and invite readers to "view their works as descendants of women's literary classics" (Wells 48). In so doing, some chick lit authors attempt to associate with a longstanding and well-studied literary tradition given considerable recognition in women's literature. This alignment and appropriation can be seen as an attempt to overcome the often negative perceptions of the genre that were touched on in the previous chapter and "anchor the chick lit genre in respectable origins" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 60). In addition, the nature of *Pride and Prejudice*'s fame deflects quite convincingly from aspects of a chick lit novel that may be considered 'lacking', 'frothy', or 'insubstantial'. Alignment with a famous literary work and drawing on its plot, character archetypes, and even familiar phrases, allows for the chick lit adaptations to enjoy some of the enduring prominence seen by Austen's works. However, critics do not always see these allusions as positive. Harzewski describes the protagonist Bridget Jones as an "almost grotesque deflation not only of Elizabeth Bennet but of the liberal feminist tenets of autonomy and choice" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 61). This analysis of *Bridget Jones's Diary* seems to be an unnecessarily harsh criticism of a character in a novel that does not claim to be feminist (and instead spurns the notion of feminism all together). Aside from the literary merit potentially gained in making these references, mirroring Austen's texts also increases the genre's popularity with mass readership. The late 1990s and early 2000s, the beginnings of the chick lit genre, were also marked by a phenomenon that Deborah Kaplan terms the "Austen boon" and "Austenmania" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 78). This boom in popularity meant that Austen's texts were widely adapted and are recognisable even to those with little to no literary knowledge.[7] The novel now belongs in the realm of pop culture and general knowledge, not just academic and literary criticism. I assume that many readers will recognise the characteristics of chick lit novels that find their origin in Austen's work, and these similarities are as discernible in Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novels. Harzewski states that the chick lit novels as a consumer and media form "reify

[6] Examples include *Pride, Prejudice, and Other Flavors* by Sonali Dev, *Ayesha at Last* and *Much Ado about Nada* by Uzma Jalaluddin, *Death Comes to Pemberley* by P. D. James, *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld, *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet* by Bernie Su, *The Other Bennet Sister* by Janice Hadlow, and of course, *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding.

[7] *Sense and Sensibility* was adapted for television in 1971, 1981, and 2008, and for film in 1995, while *Pride and Prejudice* was adapted for television in 1967, 1980, and 1995 and for film in 1940 and 2005. Austen's other works have been similarly adapted at multiple points in time.

Austen but also lend an optic into the playfulness of postfeminism and its joining of romance with self-help, commodity fetishism with nostalgia for courtship and civility" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 61). It is important to note here that Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit are informed by the ideas of courtship in Austen's novels and return to dating protocols that would not be far-fetched in a Regency novel – the so-called "nostalgia for courtship and civility" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 61). In *No Sex in the City*, *Ayesha at Last*, and *Girls of Riyadh*, the religious and traditional values of the protagonists and their respective families mean that their conditions for dating differ from the white, Western chick lit protagonist – and this is often by choice.

While it has been appropriated by white, Western chick lit, Austen's 'Novel of Manners' is more adeptly transformed for the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit market. The "Novel of Manners" is described as "a realistic novel [that] focuses on the customs, conversation, and ways of thinking and valuing of a particular social class" (Abrams 254). Harzewski states that "Austen continues to be co-opted as a proponent, if not authority, on decorum" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 85), and it can be seen that the novel of manners is considerably more linked to the chosen examples of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. Their Western counterparts, despite having innate similarities in terms of race and economy, move away from the demure and asexual nature of the novel of manners, choosing instead to highlight freedom and power in female sexuality. The "decorum" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 85) that Austen encapsulates in her texts is modelled in *Ayesha at Last*, *No Sex in the City*, and *Girls of Riyadh*. All three texts feature Muslim protagonists and characters for whom religion and tradition are pivotal when approaching dating and the prospect of marriage.

In *No Sex in the City*, Esma has rules for her dating life, primarily defined by her faith. While she identifies as Muslim and "values religion", she is "relaxed in practising it" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 89). It is, however, still the ideology that guides her life – and one of her first requirements for a husband is that he be similarly religious to her. Esma's parents help her to find potential partners from their circle who may be "possibly suitable matches" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 78), but notably, they do not attempt to force any match, despite her age and their desire for her to marry. The decision is ultimately hers, and this support system, alongside her faith, are vital factors. Firstly, she will not be intimate before marriage and, in fact, will not engage in any physical contact before marriage, including hugs and hand-holding. In addition to her own rules, her father implements, for a time, the "Rule of Six" (Abdel-Fattah 68), meaning that there should be a minimum of six people at any meeting Esma has with a man to avoid it looking like a date, which would be "no good for

[her] reputation" (Abdel Fattah 68). However, this rule slowly subsides and allows Esma to date 'normally', by her definition. I would argue that Esma's dating life, one of intention and defined by religious values, is the intersection of modernity and tradition in her life. Her dating life is remarkably similar to that of Jane Austen's heroines, who also subscribed to specific rules and practices in courtship to maintain their dignity and reputation. Much like the female characters in Austen's work, Esma believes that the "only permissible way to physically actualise romantic love is to confine it to a married relationship" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 85), and this belief allows her to set boundaries for herself and her potential romantic partners. In so doing, she can also gauge the morals and values of the potential partner and whether they align with her own.

While Harzewski states that chick lit has developed past the courtship novel due to "upheavals in marriage and education demography as well as the accompanying growth of a singles culture" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 72), this is only true for white, Western chick lit, in which second-wave feminism and postfeminism have had a more significant influence. The single women of the Western chick lit novels are delaying marriage by choice in order to advance their careers and see themselves as liberated "from compulsory marriage" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 73). Furthermore, Harzewski states that the "quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social interaction is given equal or more attention than relationship conflict" (Harzewski, "New Novel of Manners" 37). This statement does align to some extent with the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novels examined here, and this will be discussed in chapter three. However, Esma does not see marriage as compulsory but desirable, mainly due to the family and traditions in which she is immersed. Esma may live in a Western society, but the notion that those ideals should apply to everyone is limiting and hegemonic and allows for no individual thought or practice. As seen in *No Sex in the City*, even the white characters like Ruby and Lisa do not subscribe to the values that they are 'expected' to, choosing instead to align with their faith systems despite the supposedly secular society in which they live. By considering the character's faith, culture, and ethnicity, we see an adaptation of the 'novel of manners' that is more true than white, Western chick lit, which tend to prioritise the sexual aspects of romantic relationships. In writing about the multifaceted nature of womanhood, subjectivity, and transnational identity, Abdel-Fattah has produced a novel that aligns with the 'mothers' of chick lit to an even greater extent than white, Western chick lit has been able to achieve and makes use of the form of the genre in every sense.

On a more foundational level, chick lit often 'borrows' liberally from Austen's work, whether through narratives and plots or simply allusions to recognisable passages. This is most

certainly true of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, and Randa Abdel-Fattah and Uzma Jalaluddin make use of this practice in their respective novels. In Abdel-Fattah's *No Sex in the City*, the novel opens with an explicit allusion to *Pride and Prejudice* and reads as follows: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a student visa must be in want of an Australian wife" (Abdel-Fattah 7). This play on the opening lines of the classic novel serves to ground the novel with its predecessors and contextualise the story for the readers. It can be said that many chick lit readers would instantly recognise the reference being made here, as Austen's work has permeated popular culture and become ingrained in the psyche of many, regardless of literary ability, as I previously discussed. As this is the first line, the reader is immediately immersed in the protagonist's world and invited into the specific worldview of Esma. In the following lines, Esma is immediately situated as the child of immigrants, single, and dating men who are often immigrants seeking permanent residency through marriage to her. The original statement in *Pride and Prejudice* has been modified to fit the context of the migrant or transnational story while remaining wholly identifiable as an allusion to the classic text. Furthermore, *No Sex in the City* mirrors Austen's work, with a difference, by listing the attributes of the protagonist, Esma, who states:

> I've had enough. I'm twenty-eight. I'm attractive (according to my friends and family who never, *ever* lie about these things). I've got a master's in human resource management, I volunteer every month at the Sydney Refugee Centre, I'm well travelled, I have excellent taste in music, I watch the ABC news, I have the *Guardian* saved as an application on my iPhone, I'm very good at getting maximum points out of my two-letter words in Scrabble, I never jump queues, I pay my bills on time, I never order 'just a salad', I'm great with kids, I don't freak out at the sight of a spider, I turn off the tap when I'm brushing my teeth – Goddammit! I DESERVE TO BE SWEPT OFF MY FEET! (Abdel-Fattah 11, emphasis in original)

Readers[8] of *Pride and Prejudice* will notice similarities to Charlotte's speech to Elizabeth, with noted differences – Charlotte sees her age as a burden and an impendence to marriage. In contrast, Esma sees her age and various accomplishments, big and small, as attributes that should make her more appealing to a potential match. Esma also has a job and economic independence that would be unimaginable to a Regency-era woman. Charlotte's preoccupation

[8] And those who have viewed any of the many film and television adaptions.

with marriage and her age is marked by the need to marry in order to secure her future, and provide stability. Esma does not need a husband to provide this for her, as she is well educated and has a stable job. The women want to be married for vastly different reasons, and one could argue that Charlotte is in a desperate position when compared to Esma, who simply wishes for a romance and marriage for the sake of love. While they are distinct, Abdel-Fattah draws on this passage from Austen to mirror the two characters, both seeking love and relationship, albeit for different reasons.

While *No Sex in the City* alludes to *Pride and Prejudice*, it also draws on Candace Bushnell's *Sex in the City*. Although Esma and her friends have 'no sex', in stark contrast to Bushnell's characters, the influence of the column, book, and television series in the lives of young, particularly millennial women like the characters, is clear. But, it is *Ayesha at Last* by Uzma Jalaluddin that can truly be considered a retelling of Austen's work. Like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Ayesha at Last* follows some of the plot points of *Pride and Prejudice* to a certain extent and makes use of the character archetypes from the classic in the construction of the novel. Ayesha is modelled on Elizabeth Bennet to a certain extent and can be said to embody similar character traits – she is bold, self-assured, intelligent, and independent. At twenty-seven years old, she sees future romance as unlikely, and has yet to hold hands with a man (Jalaluddin 8). However, on this front, she is battling the expectations of family and prying neighbours, whom she dubs the "Aunty Brigade" (Jalaluddin 24). Much like the character of Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, many of these women's sole goal is to see the young people in their lives make suitable marriages, and as such, they come to "represent [the] beliefs" (Oberoi 129) of the homeland.

Ayesha embodies the character of Elizabeth Bennet primarily in her treatment of the potential for romance. While the "anxieties of staying a spinster and fear of facing an uncertain future" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 80) are a principal concern of many women her age, and indeed, of Ayesha, she is attempting to live an independent life. When she meets Khalid, she is agitated by him, especially his pious religious manner. He is arrogant, introverted, and steadfast in his convictions, like Mr Darcy. Both characters are intensely stubborn and unwilling to admit their mutual attraction and admiration for one another. This narrative is similar to that of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, who follow an equally wayward path to marriage. Ayesha's trepidation towards love is primarily fuelled by her mother's love for her father, who passed away when she was young. She saw the condition of her mother at his death and decided that she "wanted no part" (Jalaluddin 329) in a love that "steals your very self" (Jalaluddin 329). Her hesitancy towards the notion of love is similarly felt by Khalid, who feels

that he is not at a point in his life to open his heart. This was due to the tense relationship with his mother, who "taught [him] there was only one way to be a good Muslim, that any other way was misguided" (Jalaluddin 330). After much strife between Ayesha and Khalid, they are able to come together – especially given that Khalid had called off his engagement to Ayesha's cousin Hafsa. The novel, much like *Pride and Prejudice*, follows two profoundly stubborn characters who are unable to come to an agreement over their clearly mutual love for one another. Jalaluddin writes their eventual proclamation of love in such a style that one could easily imagine the scene as a modernised version of Austen's protagonist and love interest doing the same:

> "When my father died, my mother fell apart," Ayesha said. "She cried for weeks, and when we moved to Canada, she didn't get out of bed for a long time. If that was love, I wanted no part. Love takes your heart and leaves you with nothing. It makes you forget your children, your family. It steals your very self. So I closed off my heart, telling myself I was better without it. Nothing could be worth such pain. That's why I fought so hard when I realized I was falling for you." Ayesha looked up, and they stared at each other. (Jalaluddin 329)

Khalid replies with an equally revealing and intimate disclosure of his feelings for Ayesha, which draws on both his reservations about love and deference to his religion. He states that:

> "You showed me that faith was a wide road. I was harsh; you taught me compassion. I was judgemental; you taught me to be brave and open. Please, tell me we still have a chance. I need you in my life, Ayesha. My heart is yours to take." He closed his eyes, and prayed. (Jalaluddin 330)

Outside of the main romantic plot following Ayesha and Khalid's relationship, we continue to see Austen's plot points in use by Jalaluddin. Lydia and Wickham's elopement is mirrored by Ayesha's cousin Hafsa and Tariq, the man with whom she runs away. The circumstances of this match are deemed unacceptable, and Hafsa's family disapproves of the circumstances. They also fear for her reputation and endeavour to keep the details of Hafsa's experience a secret. Up until this point, Tariq had established himself as a helpful and respectable member of their wider religious community. He was assisting the Imam of their

Mosque with the funding and planning of a youth event, which did a great deal to elevate his role in their community. This is comparable to Wickham, who was liked and respected in his regiment in the army. Both men are attractive and charming, to their detriment. Obviously, the original elopement plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is not entirely copied, as Hafsa's experience is both traumatic and embarrassing. Tariq uploaded nude photographs of her to a website entitled "Unveiled Hotties" and was aiming to take advantage of her for the sole purpose of enacting revenge on Khalid's mother, Farzana. Both Hafsa and Lydia are returned to their families, and suitable marriages are expedited. Hafsa does not fear the loss of her reputation to the same extent as Lydia, in part due to the modern setting of the narrative, as well as due to her age and naiveté. Like Lydia, she is young and headstrong and has hopes for her life outside of the traditional marriage structure. Her prospects for marriage were never slim, and she is still able to choose her husband after the events with Tariq, which would not have been realistic in a more traditional family. The transnational nature of this text is evident here, as the societal restrictions are reduced in favour of the consolidation of the customs of the homeland and the practices of the diasporic home. It is compelling to note here that Hafsa's interactions with Tariq and the shameful situation he put her in are the most explicit references to sex or sexuality for women in the text. Hafsa's youth and sense of self, like Lydia's, cause her to be bolder and able to reclaim her sexuality as "joyful, unapologetic femininity" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 80).

2.3 The Confessional Nature of Chick Lit

Chick lit as a genre is inextricably linked to and defined by the confessional mode, characterised by the intimate topics of discussion, emotional quality, personal viewpoints, and anecdotal nature of these novels. By this definition, most chick lit novels employ first-person narration due to its capacity to relay the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist to the reader without barriers. Through the confessional mode, the reader can form an approximation of a relationship with the protagonist due to this unfiltered insight into their thoughts and nature. Heather Cabot states that chick lit authors "strive to imbue their books with a tone that's similar to their chats among girlfriends" (Mazza 26). Much like the female friendships in the novel function as a support group for the protagonist(s), the reader is allowed to immerse themselves in the novel's world and is potentially similarly comforted by the character. While this perspective results in the most truthful representation of the character's inner thoughts, it does mean that virtually every other perspective is sidelined in the novels. Harzewski writes that

male figures in the genre come to be seen as a "shadow presence or background figure, and a gay male best friend instead functions prominently as the protagonist's confidante" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 34). She is correct in asserting that male characters are not inherently valued and are instead displaced by friends, family, workplace ambitions and commodities. On the one hand, the women-centric voices in the texts lead male voices to be virtually non-existent and nearly always reported via the protagonist and therefore imbued with her thoughts, tone, and interpretation before it reaches the reader. It might be said that this results in "lend[ing] one-dimensionality to male characters" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 34). On the other hand, the primary audience of the chick lit novel is women, who find camaraderie in the written lives of the female protagonists and perhaps do not miss the additional input from male characters. It is my view that chick lit's primary concern is womanhood and women's experiences, and therefore does not necessarily need male input in the narrative. By framing interactions with men through stories and second-hand reported speech, the novels mirror real life, the conversations that women have when they are only in the company of other women. The confessional mode relies on honesty and relatable, intimate views into the mind of the protagonist. Ensuring the female characters are well-rounded should be the primary concern, and I therefore do not see issue with Harzewski's notion that male characters are one-dimensional – it only serves to reaffirm the focus of the novels.

Abdel-Fattah uses first-person narration from the perspective of Esma in *No Sex in the City*. While she interacts with her friends, family, and potential suitors, the reader is only exposed to the innermost thoughts of Esma, who guides the reader in great detail through the happenings of her life. She could not be described as shy and holds nothing back when in conversation with the reader. The intimacy of sharing her inner thoughts with the reader shows no signs of being guarded and offers insight into Esma's confidence in her faith and ability to find a match that will meet all her expectations. The finer details of her friends and family's lives are also available to the reader due to the nature of the text. Esma's narration of the novel reads as conversational, and it is easy for the reader to imagine themselves as simply another friend joining in with conversations at the 'No Sex in the City Club' as they meet for drinks and catch up on a Friday night. This first-hand experience is recognisable in the genre and speaks to the tendency to "opt for transparency and humor over nuance and irony", as stated by Harzewski (qtd. in Mazza 26). While this statement is meant as a critique of the genre and its seeming inability to consider social issues and concerns in the West, Esma and her friends speak to the social and political issues facing women, women of colour, and migrants in Australia. There is a notable concern with the situation of refugees and migrants in the country,

and the group of women first became friends after meeting at a protest during their time at university (Abdel-Fattah 14). The narrative outside of the main romantic plot does not hesitate to engage with world issues, amplifying the ability of transnational chick lit to illustrate changes and plights affecting women on a global scale.

Similarly, in *Almost Single*, Kala relays its narrative entirely through the eyes of Aisha. Not only does it conform to the confessional style synonymous with chick lit, but Kala also uses colloquialisms and slang throughout the novel. When interacting with friends, she takes on the role of an always casual, personable social butterfly, which is distinctly recognisable through her style of speech. Aisha speaks informally to her reader, with specific vital thoughts italicised for emphasis. This emphasis serves to make these thoughts act as an aside to the reader directly, as Aisha is not only narrating but adding insight and input in real-time in addition to the 'facts' of the events as she sees them. In addition to this casual style of speech, Kala makes use of Hindi, although it is mostly "words [Aisha] wouldn't use in polite company" (Kala 9). Despite the primary language of the text being English, this addition of Hindi slang and terminology serves to remind the reader of the geographical context of the novel. Aisha occupies the cosmopolitan space of New Delhi, and the hotel she works in serves many foreign clients, so she mainly communicates in English as a result. However, when referring to cultural practices, such as naming conventions for women or talking to her astrologer, she switches to Hindi, cementing these practices within their cultural context. Notably, these words are not translated and are clearly intended for an audience within India or with a knowledge of the language. Ulka Anjaria discusses the use of a mixed Hindi-English vocabulary as a means of "making visible the richness and nuance of Indian English itself as a variably accented language" (Anjaria 53), which further reiterates the intended audience of these novels. This language choice in combination with Aisha's informal and intimate speech depicts a character that appears to be speaking directly to the reader, who in turn becomes part of the female friendship group that has come to define the genre.

Jalaluddin's novel is the sole example in this study that does not employ the first-person confessional mode. Much like its inspiration, *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel is written in the third person. In stark contrast to the other three novels of this study, *Ayesha at Last* allows for multiple perspectives to be heard by the reader – even that of the love interest, Khalid. This is virtually unseen in the realm of chick lit, which almost entirely excludes the male voice in favour of the singular or polyphonic female voices. This immediately renders this text distinct and almost unknowable in the domain of the chick lit genre. Given that the genre's primary occupation is to write novels that feature female narratives for the pleasure and affirmation of

the female reader, the inclusion of the male perspective brings discomfort and simultaneous newness to the text. Khalid's perspective takes the reader into the mind of a deeply religious man – one who lives with his mother despite their strained relationship. We see first-hand the progress that he is able to make in terms of his personal development, his journey in faith, and his love for Ayesha. Typically, the chick lit protagonist and reader are both unaware of the feelings of the love interest, and are unsure if they will reciprocate the feelings of the protagonist. Here, the reader is invited in by Khalid and is given an otherwise unseen perspective. The omniscience of the reader does not remove the satisfaction of the romantic climax of the text but rather intensifies it, as they are able to finally see the two characters profess their love to one another, having known their thoughts for much of the novel. Including the male perspective is a unique take on the chick lit novel, given its predisposition to favour the female narrative to the point of exclusion of the male voice. However, in the particular instance of *Ayesha at Last,* Khalid's perspective bolsters the narrative given to the reader by Ayesha, and he features as robustly as any other character in the text. Many other examples of chick lit refer to male characters only when talking about dates, going on dates or after the solidification of the relationship between the romantic partners. Jalaluddin has reworked the form of the chick lit novel to include, to a greater extent, the male voice, which adds complexity to the text and, in this case, value and satisfaction for the reader.

2.4 Conclusion

In considering Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit and their usage of the conventional form that is recognisable as chick lit, it becomes clear that the novels from the regions have been able to transform the genre. As they refer to Austen, commonly seen as the mother of contemporary romance genres, including chick lit, the Middle Eastern and South Asian examples follow the historical trajectory of chick lit. By viewing chick lit through this lens, we can see it not as a derivative of white, Western chick lit but as an example of the ways in which popular literature helps produce new subjectivities because of their location while maintaining iconic elements of the genre. Through what I have described as an 'Easternisation' of Austen and her novel of manners, I contend that the novels chosen for this study effectively utilise the chick lit form and history to produce novels that align profoundly with Austen's work. While white, Western examples of chick lit have more apparent similarities to Austen's works in that they concern women of similar racial and societal backgrounds, the protagonists featured in Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit are more easily comparable to those in the novel of manners due to their values and religious convictions.

Furthermore, Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit is seen to make use of the confessional mode, another key element of the chick lit genre. In utilising the confessional mode, the novels create intimacy between the narrator and the reader. There is a distinct emotional quality as a result, which further bolsters the casual but revelatory nature of the texts. The confessional mode creates a relationship between the reader and the character. The reader feels connected to, and empathetic towards, the protagonists, having gained valuable insight into their experiences and thoughts. The novels tend towards mirroring the real-life conversations of the reader with their friends so that they may feel as though they are part of the groups of female friends that are integral to the texts. In so doing, the novels allow women to see themselves, their friends, and their communities in the texts. Chick lit is deeply honest, and it is my view that this honesty, achieved through the confessional mode, is the primary reason that the genre is popular. This is further reinforced by the first-person narratives. In the chosen texts, a narrator may speak directly to the reader in an aside, communicating their inner thoughts and feelings. Through both these elements, Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit takes on the conventions of form that are significant in the chick lit genre and adapts them to create relevant and insightful novels featuring well-rounded female characters that exemplify the genre.

Chapter Three: Familial Bonds and Sisterhood: Navigating Non-Romantic Ties in Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I considered the various ways in which the form of the chick lit novel is conformed to, and appropriated or modified in selected Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novels. It is clear that there are certain conventions of form which the novels utilise, particularly the intertextual references to Jane Austen's works and the novel's use of the first-person confessional style. This serves as a medium to communicate the familiarity and relatability of the protagonists regardless of the origin of the novel. As a continuation of the discussion on the characteristics of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, this chapter will explore non-romantic relationships. It is my assertion that the familial and friend relationships between characters form a most significant aspect of the novels, one which highlights the social and cultural nuances of the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit genres. Through this lens, it is possible to see the influences of family in the examples from these locations, a conversation that is often excluded from the study of white, Western chick lit. The familial relationship is given significant attention in the chosen texts, allowing for both representation and analysis of the relationship between protagonists and their mothers, mothers-in-law, fathers, and Aunties.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will consider and discuss two types of relationships: familial and friendship. This chapter is divided into two sections, the first concerned with family, and the second with female friendships. In the first section, which deals with the familial relationships, I have divided the chapter into three subsections that each deal with the protagonists' relationships with their mothers, then fathers, and finally, the Aunty. In terms of familial relationships, I will first highlight the relationship between mother and daughter, paying particular attention to characters from *No Sex in the City* by Abdel-Fattah, *Almost Single* by Kala, and Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. The nature of the mother-daughter relationship can be separated into two groups – the interfering mother and the supportive mother. I will consider two kinds of fathers, the distant father and the involved father. Finally, I will discuss the role of Aunties, who play a unique role in the protagonists' lives. Following the discussion of familial relationships, I turn to the female friendships that are a hallmark of the genre. Friendships are the cornerstone of social life, which presents an opportunity for the analysis of female friendships, as a means through which the authors decentralise the romantic relationship, instead highlighting the ability of the chick lit protagonist to find joy and

authenticity outside of romantic or sexual relationships. It is also a space where ethnic, cultural, and religious lines become blurred, as their friendships supersede any perceived difference between the women.

In *No Sex in the City* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, Esma lives at home with her parents who are Turkish Muslim migrants. She is dedicated to her family and their rules and Islamic beliefs play a large role in her life. Her mother, while being a stay-at-home mother herself, ensures that her daughters, Esma and Senem, pursue university degrees and fulfilling jobs before committing to marriage. Their mother-daughter relationship is supportive, although Esma's mother tends to interfere with her life, especially concerning her romantic choices. When she is not working, or spending time with her family, she is with her groups of female friends. The four women, Esma, Lisa, Ruby, and Nirvana, all practise different faiths and come from different cultural backgrounds, met at university due to their shared interests in world politics. They have affectionately dubbed their group 'The No Sex in the City club', as all four are religious, and dating with the intention of marriage. Their friendship is a constant in their lives, while they date and move through this chapter of their lives.

Advaita Kala's novel *Almost Single* follows protagonist Aisha as she navigates her mother's expectations, her career, friendships, and actively searches for a husband. She and her mother tend to differ on opinions regardless of the topic – her choices, her friends, her potential partners. These are all contentious topics between the two women, and as a result, Aisha turns to the support of her two best friends, Misha and Anushka, with whom she can commiserate. Her friends function as a chosen family, and the three women are seldom apart, spending nights out and shopping trips with one another, or simply evenings at one of their homes.

Ayesha at Last by Uzma Jalaluddin sees protagonist Ayesha engage in somewhat complicated family politics. She lives with her mother, grandparents, and brother, having emigrated from India as a child. Their family is supported by her uncle, Sulaiman Mamu, after her father died, and it is her uncle's wealth and good fortune that allowed them to immigrate to Canada and begin a new life. She feels a debt is owed and a responsibility to her family, as she is the eldest child in the family. Her grandparents are incredibly close figures in her life, as they took on parental roles during this time. She also serves as a role model and older sister figure to her cousin Hafsa, who is a young and wild contrast to Ayesha's serious and considerate self. Outside of her family, she spends free time with her friend Clara, with whom she is very close. The women met as children, as they started at school on the same day and

found comfort in not being the only 'new' girl. Ayesha and Clara support one another and push each other to pursue career dreams and relationships.

Finally, *Girls of Riyadh* chronicles the lives of a group of young women living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. While they embark on romantic relationships, it is seen that Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle, and Lamees find solace in one another. Their families play a large role in their lives, particularly their mothers. Gamrah navigates her relationship with her mother after her divorce from Rashid, as this changes their relationship dynamic immensely. The friendship between the four women ultimately drives the plot, as it is in these friendships that the women find those who are most capable of understanding them. Their relationships, even as they marry, go to different universities, and move overseas, still possess a depth and quality that is unseen in the other relationships in their lives.

3.2 Theory and Literature Review

One of the most important aspects of chick lit is the representation of non-romantic relationships. A. Rochelle Mabry states that global chick lit offers "important new visions of women's voices, communities, and experiences as sexual beings" (Mabry 205). In stark opposition to Western chick lit, where the family plays only a small role in the protagonist's life and "offers little emotional support" (Mabry 202), the sense of community is pivotal in global chick lit. The family structure becomes almost more important than the romance at the centre of the narrative. It is through the non-romantic relationships that one is able to see how "women-of-colour and diasporic feminist chick lit [travel] and [constitute] social spaces" (Butler and Desai, "Second Read" 33). Increased value can be gained from these transnational texts due to the nuance they display – not only do they represent the realistic relationships of the protagonist, but in doing so, they consider "questions of race, nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class" (Wills 73).

The role of relationships in the chick lit novel is discussed by various critics, who explore this with varying levels of engagement with issues outside the romance. Linda Chávez Doyle speaks to the role of 'Chica Lit', which centres on the narratives of Hispanic and Latin American women. Chávez Doyle outlines the significance of female friendships in this specific brand of chick lit. Her article highlights the ability of the characters to emulate or mirror the real life of the author and readers, most especially concerning the authentic relationships between characters. That is to say, the representation of female friendships and female-centred community aligns with the author's own experiences, highlighting a reality that is not often portrayed in other genres from the region.

In her article concerning the female friendships in Latina chick lit and 'women's' genres, Felicia Salinas-Moniz explores female friendships and familial relationships in novels written by Latina authors. Her main argument revolves around the realism of non-romantic relationships as they are presented in Latina iterations of the genre. She highlights the protagonists' relationships with their families, as this differs vastly from the family dynamics considered in academia concerning white, Western chick lit.

In her chapter ""Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves": Chick Lit in Black and White", Lisa A. Guerrero focuses on the importance of community in African American chick lit by considering the nuances of the family dynamic, which constitutes an everyday concern for the protagonist rather than merely an annoyance or infrequent demand for the protagonist's attention. She asserts that family occupies a much larger role in the narrative of the African American chick lit protagonist. These protagonists function not only as daughter, but as part of the emotional and economic stability of their extended families. Lauren O'Mahony's work on Anita Heiss's Aboriginal Chick lit looks at the cultural and social-political form that is significant in the romantic and broader genre. Her article does not limit its exploration merely to the romantic form but rather to the community that is at play and the wider social, economic, and political issues that are discussed within the texts. In addition, she highlights the potential for cultural change through the publication of culturally specific chick lit novels. O'Mahony's analysis of Heiss's work is considerably more aligned with Desai and Butler's notions of transnational feminist critique and the broader imperatives that must be considered when looking at chick lit outside the white, Western realm. She focuses not only on the romantic narrative, but also on the careers of the protagonists and how these interplay with the socio-political narrative within the text.

Ferriss and Young's influential text on the study of chick lit, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction,* also speaks to the value of the chick lit genre as being "modern" and functioning outside of the patriarchy and traditional monogamist relationships. They further stated that chick lit decentralises romance and instead chooses to emphasise female friendship, a statement widely discussed in the aforementioned critical texts.

As this thesis focuses on Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, it is significant to consider critical work that has been done in a similar area. Jenny Heijun Wills writes on transnational East Asian chick lit and considers the nuances for women of colour living in America, particularly East Asian migrants. It is her opinion that the 'modern' or first/second generation migrant women living in America would distance themselves from "antiquated dating customs" (Wills 72) instead choosing to date and engage in romance in a manner that

aligns with their diasporic home, that is, in a Western manner. She goes on to say that there is very little nationalism seen in these texts from the protagonists, who again wish to move away from the thoughts of their parents and grandparents and instead choose to move towards the globalised, liberal values, emulating the white, Western chick lit protagonist in the canon of chick lit.

While much has been written on relationships as seen in white, Western chick lit, and some variations of chick lit outside of this realm, there is a relatively small body of scholarship that focuses on the non-romantic relationships of Middle Eastern and South Asian protagonists. Sonia Vashishta Oberoi speaks to Indian chick lit, which she states is a valuable source of literature that embodies the experiences of the modern Indian young woman. She notes that Indian women are perceived as incomplete if they are single. Oberoi also highlights the significance of the 'typical Indian mother' and the specific relationship between mother and daughter as being guiding but stern – the daughter is always answerable to her mother.

Muhammad Abdullah has written an extensive body of work on Muslim and Middle Eastern chick lit. His paper "*No Sex in the City* and Postfeminist Discursivity from Arab Diaspora" discusses the various forms of relationship that are evident in chick lit novels and how they function specifically in Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel *No Sex in the City*. He focuses on female relationships, such as the relationship between mother and daughter, and the female friendships that function as a support system for the protagonist. The theoretical background of this chapter draws on Abdullah, as his contentions about the Middle Eastern chick lit are invaluable in the understanding of these iterations of the genre.

3.3 Rooted in Family: A Look at the Familial Dynamics of Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

In this section, I would like to turn my attention to the ways in which the chosen texts depict the familial relationships of the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit protagonists. Family is a complicated issue for the chick lit protagonist. As I have previously stated, it is clear from the body of scholarship that the family does not play a significant role in the adult lives and development of the protagonist in white, Western chick lit. Lisa A. Guerrero states that in white, Western chick lit, a family is generally a "nuclear family that represents a certain measure of stability, even if it's a stability in formality only, provided by the unquestioned normative nature of its makeup" (Guerrero 96). While the family is a part of the story, it features primarily in the background of the immediate life of the protagonist. They are

fundamentally separate from the protagonist, "people who don't need to be provided for" (Guerrero 96). Guerrero goes on to speak to the roles and dynamics seen in African American chick lit. However, I believe that the sentiments of her paper can be applied to Middle Eastern and South Asian iterations of the genre. The Middle Eastern and South Asian examples, as well as other global varieties of chick lit, show that the family is "part of everyday concerns" (Guerrero 96), as it is the protagonist who is still responsible for much of the running of the household. Any dysfunction in the family becomes the protagonist's responsibility, as they are fundamentally responsible for "their parents' well-being" (Guerrero 96). Guerrero notes the prevalence of traditional experiences and the role of the extended family found within specific communities, which results in an inherent sense of responsibility for the family. In the discussion that follows, I will show how the Middle Eastern and South Asian family structures are specific, with a unique set of nuances and practices that distinguish them as singular, and are deeply significant to the protagonist.

In *No Sex in the City* and *Ayesha at Last*, the readers see the manner in which the family is involved in the life of the protagonist. The lives of both the *No Sex in the City* and *Ayesha at Last*'s protagonists are innately intertwined with the family and the dynamics of the extended family members. In *No Sex in the City*, Esma and her group of female friends are all in similar situations where their parents' hopes and beliefs are deeply consequential. Ruby believes that there is only one option for a relationship: a partner who is "Greek, educated, successful and moves in the same social class as [her family] do." (Abdel-Fattah 157). Her parents' social and cultural standing is significant to the type of relationship they hope for their daughter to enter into, as their status within their diasporic community relies on specified standards being maintained by all members of the family. Esma lives at home with her parents and capitulates to many of their rules and stipulations for her life – she states that she is "old enough to own her own property and conceive a baby but […] still has to argue with her parents about late nights out" (Abdel-Fattah 41). As seen in Guerrero's assessment of families in African American chick lit, for women of colour, the family is an integral part of a successful relationship – not only do the female friends bond over the similarities between their families and their upbringings, but the family of a potential partner is a considered hurdle when entering a relationship. Esma's relationship with Aydin is hindered to some extent by his reluctance to share details about his family, particularly his brother, which leads Esma to feel that he is withholding and potentially not the correct chosen partner for her. She was raised with the notion that you "marry a family, not a person" (Abdel-Fattah 287) – a sentiment that she shares with Aydin due to their similar upbringings and cultural values. Both characters were raised in

a certain way, to "[embrace] traditions because [they] believe in them" (Abdel-Fattah 249). Aydin's reluctance to share details about his brother comes from a place of shame and fear that Esma may not accept the disgrace that he has brought to Aydin's family – their relationship, and the continuation thereof, is reliant on Aydin trusting that Esma will not "judge [his] family poorly" because otherwise "there's no point in continuing to get to know each other" (Abdel-Fattah 254). The couple, however, are able to bond over their shared experiences of responsibility and loyalty to their families, regardless of the circumstances. While the pair adhere to some traditional and cultural values passed down from their parents' generation, they note that "things have changed. People our age tolerate and accept a lot more." (Abdel-Fattah 355).

As in *No Sex in the City*, *Ayesha at Last* similarly clearly illustrates the importance of the family unit to the women in the texts. Despite the qualms with her mother, Zareena is able to build her own family unit and states that she would "do anything for [her] family" (Jalaluddin 275). The protagonist, Ayesha, has a profoundly complicated relationship with her family and jokes about "divorcing [her] family" (Jalaluddin 74); it is fundamentally one of love and loyalty. Her immediate family were "saved" (Jalaluddin 221) by her uncle, Sulaiman Mamu after her father died, and it is her uncle's wealth that allowed them to immigrate to Canada. As a result of this, she feels indebted to her uncle and her grandparents, who cared for her and helped raise her and her brother while their mother was grieving the loss of her husband and their father. Her grandparents were her surrogate parents, while her mother was understandably consumed by her grief.

Moreover, Ayesha is the eldest child of her generation and, as such, feels compelled to "set the bar high for everyone else" (Jalaluddin 9). She feels that she cannot let the older generation of her family down, "not after everything they've done for her" (Jalaluddin 9), nor can she fail the other young adults and children who may see her as an example of what it means to be a good member of the family. For example, she wishes to be a writer and poet but instead chooses to turn to teaching, where she can be sure to have a stable income in order to pay debts and add value financially to her family. She takes Hafsa under her wing and, in so doing, is forced to contend with comments about her few marriage proposals and older age, while Hafsa receives multiple proposals and is younger and, thus, apparently more beautiful. In both novels, there is an indisputable adherence to traditional family values, some of which revolve around patriarchal views and others around a profound devotion to the family unit. In both examples, the reader is exposed to the internal workings of the protagonists' lives in a way that is unseen in white, Western chick lit. While mothers and other family members are at times

present, they do not form the influential base for the protagonist that is present in these examples of diasporic Middle Eastern chick lit. This distinction between white women and women of colour, I believe, speaks to the differing cultural specificities at play. The family is a significant part of the transnational subject's life, as they share a unique bond, in part due to their shared experiences, as well as the separation from extended family and homeland. It is apparent that the family rely on one another more than white, Western protagonists, and these intimate relationships are presented to a greater extent in the texts. It is my view that the extended view into the family dynamics allows for a deeper view of and more information about the protagonist. The family presents itself as being an intrinsic part of the daily life of the protagonists, reaffirming the role that community plays and the value thereof, especially for the transnational chick lit protagonist, but also for those living in their homelands. Family and community come to underpin the genre in the Middle East and South Asia, and show how the genre has shifted with its migration into new spaces.

3.3.1 'Typical' Mothers: A Discussion of the Interfering and Supportive Mothers of Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

The mother-daughter relationship is seen to be one that is ultimately complicated in Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. Mothers in the chosen texts can be characterised in two ways. First, as the interfering mother, which is embodied by Aisha's mother in *Almost Single*. Gamrah's mother in *Girls of Riyadh* is similarly interfering, particularly after Gamrah's divorce. These mothers are noticeably involved in their daughters' lives, and this involvement is marked by disapproval and criticism. The two mothers feature in examples of domestic chick lit, and illustrate the traditional values that characterise these novels. However, in *Ayesha at Last,* a transnational text, Khalid's mother, Farzana, is perhaps the most severe and controlling of the interfering mothers. For the purposes of this thesis, I have only briefly noted the relationships between mothers and sons, as female relationships are of more import in the genre. In contrast, Esma's mother in *No Sex in the City* is framed here as the supportive mother with a far more positive outlook on her daughter's life and choices in the transnational text.

In reference to *Almost Single,* Sonia Vashishta Oberoi writes that there are some aspects of society and culture that are particular to Indian chick lit, noting the relationship between mother and daughter in particular. She notes Aisha's mother's repetition of the same question every day "So, have you met anyone interesting?" (Kala 11). This sums up the notion of the "typical" (Oberoi 130) mother concerning their daughters. Oberoi states that Indian or South

Asian chick lit is able to explore the mother-daughter relationship. It is generally accurate that daughters are "considered closer to their mothers in India" (Oberoi 130); the true extent of the relationship is highlighted in this particular text. Aisha's mother, Mama Bhatia, is aware of all aspects of her life, although she disapproves of Aisha's behaviour. Mama Bhatia blames any ill fortune on the fact that Aisha "live[s] in the big, bad city on [her] own, and did not get married when [she] was supposed to" (Kala 98). Her despair at Aisha's lousy karma (Kala 12) speaks to Oberoi's view that daughters are always "answerable to their mothers for whatever they do in their lives and the same way they know that their mothers are always available to guide and help them" (Oberoi 130). Aisha's mother defends all her actions and sometimes harsh words by reminding Aisha that she "only asks because she cares about you" (Kala 12). Aisha's mother dreams of her daughter's engagement – which would be a sign of the success of both women. An engagement would be a success for Aisha because she 'finally' found a husband, and for her mother because she can finally tell her friends about her daughter's engagement in the same way they have been able to. Her mother's disappointment at the fact that "everyone is … " (Kala 193) engaged, except for Aisha, from their circle, is not lost on Aisha. Her mother also deems it acceptable to dabble in her search for a husband. Aisha is potentially too old for an arranged marriage, in which many men would want a wife who is not nearing thirty years old. As a result, her mother makes an online dating profile for Aisha, in which she is brutally honest about her daughter. She describes her as "large framed" (Kala 234), drawing specific attention to her perceived flaws instead of elevating her daughter. Mama Bhatia reminds her that there are "a lot of challenges" (Kala 234) when trying to find a match as a woman of "a certain age, especially for a girl living alone" (Kala 234). Thus, her brutal honesty is necessary to ensure that any potential partners are well informed, in her opinion. Ultimately, she does not see the potential harm she is causing to her daughter here. While it is evident that her mother loves her very much, she does not possess the ability to be kind about her. She cannot bring herself to be complimentary, or even neutral about her daughter, even to find a suitable husband. This interference creates tension between mother and daughter, as Aisha feels differently about social and cultural traditions that may govern her mother's life and those of the older generations. Aisha is an independent woman whose life is in a modernising, Westernising, 'big city', and she resents the way her mother sees "being independent and socially active as a handicap" (Kala 234) in her search for a partner. As can be seen here, the mother-daughter relationship is one of support but also one of accountability. This connection between two generations of women shows the tensions that can be evident, especially as the nature of womanhood for young, urban women in India is shifting. The

protagonists of the genre are seen to be emotionally bonded with their mothers, but this is marked by considerable disagreement, and a toxic co-dependence in the case of Aisha and Mama Bhatia. Aisha's love and respect for her mother results in a hesitancy to be truly honest with her. She is unable to communicate how the online dating profile made her feel and hurt her feelings, as her mother would interpret this as an attack rather than honesty. Traditions and cultural expectations govern the lives of the mothers, and they do not know how to navigate their relationships with their daughters, who do not feel the same.

In Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, we are again exposed to the archetype of the interfering mother. Gamrah has a strained relationship with her mother, whom she perceives as controlling. Gamrah remarks that her mother's approach to parenting changed significantly after her marriage – she spoke freely about sex, or what she calls "the business of men and women" (Alsanea 13). Before her marriage, "her mother hadn't talked about such matters at all" (Alsanea 13), which speaks to the taboo nature of sex in their cultural environment. Despite the closeness of their relationship, Gamrah was not able to ask her mother questions about sex before this point or confide in her. Her marriage changes the dynamic of their relationship, and this allows for increased honesty from Gamrah's mother. She suggests that Gamrah refrain from having sex with Rashid, her new husband, for as long as possible, as "Refusal [is] the secret to activating a man's passion" (Alsanea 12). Gamrah is desperate to please her mother and follow her 'Golden Rules' – her approval fills Gamrah "with confidence and pride" (Alsanea 12), even though her mother's tactics do not work on Rashid.

Alsanea outlines the fluctuations in the relationship between Gamrah and her mother, a reality of any mother-daughter relationship. At the beginning of the novel, when Gamrah lives in the United States with Rashid, she phones her mother for comfort and the familiarity of home. When her relationship with Rashid takes strain, she calms herself by cooking a traditional Saudi dish under the instruction of her mother and "[stays] on the phone the whole time it [takes] to cook, listening to the latest news of her relatives and her neighbours" (Alsanea 60). When Rashid sends her back to Riyadh, her mother keeps her secret for her, even from Gamrah's father, and acts as Gamrah's ultimate protector during this time. Her father takes little interest in the personal lives of his wife and children, and it is up to Gamrah's mother to be the "organizing mastermind, the mover and shaker of the household, and she always would remain so" (Alsanea 106). This speaks to the gendered nature of the household, with mothers being active participants and leaders, while fathers take on official affairs such as marriage proposals – issues that require cooperation with other men. Despite this support from her mother, which continues throughout Gamrah's pregnancy and eventual divorce, Gamrah

resents the overprotective nature of her mother, whom she sees as constantly harassing her, as she forbids her to go out as she used to before her marriage and birth of her child (Alsanea 133). Gamrah's mother shows a powerful sense of concern for her daughter due to her changed position in society. She claims that "all eyes [are] fixed on her, waiting for a single misstep and [are] prepared to spread the most lurid rumours about [Gamrah]" (Alsanea 133). While her mother cares deeply about her, Gamrah sees her mother's behaviour as a hindrance to her life and her attempts to establish a new sense of normality for herself. When her uncle and father arrange a meeting with a much older potential suitor, the reader sees the extent to which her mother attempts to protect Gamrah with her limited power within the home. While she "soothed her daughter with whatever words she could find" (Alsanea 205), when Gamrah expressed her indignation at the potential match, it became clear that her mother could only protect her from certain aspects of life. Fathers and senior male family members ultimately have primary decision-making powers when it comes to the women in their lives. While Gamrah's mother is there for her every day, and most of the family's affairs are up to her, the father can radically change her life without considering the effect on his daughter.

In viewing both the mothers in *Almost Single* and *Girls of Riyadh,* it seems evident that the domestic texts' portrayal of mothers tends towards negative. Both Mama Bhatia and Gamrah's mother are rightfully concerned about the welfare of their daughters. India and Saudi Arabia have strict rules for women, and it therefore follows that both mothers would be overprotective of their daughters and their reputations. I contend that the mother-daughter relationship illustrates the fears of the mother, having herself lived under the same rules, traditions, and laws in the case of Saudi Arabia. There appears to be an acknowledgement of the different lives their daughters wish to live, which manifests in concern on the mothers' part. Gamrah believes she cannot live under the weight of her mother's expectations, but in reality, her mother is trying to protect her from the realities of life in Saudi Arabia, and the potential judgment she will face if she does not marry and adhere to her assumed role in society.

In *No Sex in the City,* Esma battles to cope with causing her mother stress and disappointment but also struggles with the fact that sometimes her mother can be correct when it comes to her life, her relationships, and her mishaps with men. While she is fundamentally a supportive mother, there is an expected amount of tension between the pair, as is to be expected in any mother-daughter relationship. There is an ambivalence in their relationship, which speaks to the often complicated relationship between a mother and a daughter. One would assume that Esma's mother inherited these traits from her own mother, who is undoubtedly a tenacious character despite her age. She is also not averse to meddling in the affairs of her

daughters or granddaughters and singlehandedly positions Esma's sister, Senem, next to a suitable match at a dinner, who later becomes her husband. She reminds Esma that the "only reason she's hanging onto life is because she wants to see [her] married" (Abdel-Fattah 27). Esma's search for "Mr Right" (Abdel-Fattah 28) is, at this point, not just for her own life but also for the joy of her mother and her "grandmother's very life" (Abdel-Fattah 28). Fundamentally, the women of the novel are incredibly close – Esma describes her relationships with her mother and sister as being "in each other's lives down to the last detail" (Abdel-Fattah 173).

For the most part, the domestic mothers align with the notion of the interfering mother, while Esma's mother is framed as both supportive and interfering. Her position as a transnational subject has clearly brought a nuanced approach to her actions when raising her daughters. While she wishes for Esma to marry, she and her husband advised her against marrying while she is studying, and encouraged her to get a postgraduate education. Esma's mother clearly desires choice and freedom for her daughter. That is not to say that she did not have freedom, but perhaps she did have to marry and immigrate in order to have more agency and options, like those now available to her daughters Esma and Senem. The domestic mother is defined by her fears and trepidations over her daughter's life, while the transnational mother sees the opportunity for her daughter to dream and achieve more while still maintaining some of the fear seen in the domestic mother. This contrast speaks to the differences in tradition and norms in the domestic and transnational spaces, but I do not feel it presents the domestic texts as backward but rather realistic. Mothers in the domestic texts appear to be more complicit in the upkeep of patriarchal views, which some might consider backwards or out of alignment with modern feminist values. The mother-daughter relationship becomes the sphere in which the nuances of each region are illustrated, giving a keen insight into the differing norms for women.

While the mother-daughter relationship is exhibited widely in the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit genres, so is the mother-son relationship. A particular kind of mother-son relationship, namely those mothers that suffer from "mummy's boy syndrome" (Abdel-Fattah 127), is extensively shown in the chosen texts. The additional insight into mother and son relationships is also a marked difference between the Western genre and Middle Eastern and South Asian genre. The mother with 'mummy's boy syndrome' operates to different extremes – in *Almost Single*, Aisha is immediately confronted with Karan's mother, whom she dubs Gucci Mamma, due to her extravagant outfits and overdone look. His coffee table is adorned with a "silver-framed photograph of Gucci Mamma [that] occupies pride of place"

(Kala 168) – it is here that Aisha realises that Karan is a Mama's Boy and Gucci Mamma is a potential barrier in their relationship. The mothers of men can potentially be the ones who make or break their son's relationships. The sons show a pervasive reluctance to disobey or challenge their mothers in any way. While the daughters are held accountable by their mothers, the relationship dynamic between mothers and sons is replete with the sense that sons can do no wrong. Mothers allow their sons certain freedoms, and in return, their sons are hesitant to disappoint their mothers.

Khalid's dynamic with his mother, Farzana, or 'Ammi' in *Ayesha at Last,* mirrors that of Anil's and Faisal's to a certain extent, in *No Sex in the City* and *Girls of Riyadh,* respectively. Farzana is a domineering character and matriarch of their family since the passing of Khalid's father. When she decided that Khalid was ready to get married, she began "dropping hints" (Jalaluddin 2). This was not so that he would begin dating and conducting his own search for a potential life partner, but rather so that he would be prepared when she chose his wife. She announces that she has "begun the search for [his] wife" (Jalaluddin 2) and reminds him that despite the fact that they live in Canada, "Western ideas of romantic love are utter nonsense" (Jalaluddin 2). This speaks to the traditional cultural and religious values she and Khalid adhere to despite being migrants. Like many of the other mothers discussed in this thesis, Farzana believes in arranged marriages and the idea that "Love comes after marriage, not before." (Jalaluddin 2). The controlling nature of Khalid's mother is illustrated throughout the novel. As I previously stated, his wife will be his mother's choice so that she can ensure she is the perfect wife, a woman who is "modest, not too educated" (Jalaluddin 2). It is abundantly clear from Farzana's description of the potential match that she will choose someone that she will ultimately be able to control, as the man's parents typically live with him and his wife in their old age. Khalid has always obeyed his mother and maintained an excellent mother-son relationship. Farzana describes him as "such a good boy" with whom she has "never had any problems" (Jalaluddin 80).

While Khalid is highly influenced by his mother, he also acknowledges that his relationship with his sister has been detrimentally influenced by Farzana. This came after a "scandal" (Jalaluddin 212), at which time Zareena was sent to India and "forced […] into an unwanted marriage" (Jalaluddin 212) in order to mitigate any negative perception of the family as a result. Khalid keeps in touch with his sister through emails, but had not seen her in twelve years. She was not permitted to travel back to Canada for their father's funeral. Khalid and Farzana's relationship shifts during the course of the novel as Khalid realises the extent to which his mother manipulates him. As he begins to build his own sense of identity, he is able

to stand up to his mother and realise that he is being used. His love for his mother does not dissipate; instead, he learns to set healthy boundaries and speak up for himself. Unlike Faisal and Anil, who chose their mothers and their guaranteed love and devotion, Khalid chooses himself, "and it felt fantastic" (Jalaluddin 256). Khalid possesses the power to stand up to his mother and adjust their relationship. For much of the novel, he is Ammi's Boy, but when others need him, and he realises the detrimental effects of their relationship dynamic, he is able to course correct and be a better man for his relationships, both romantic and familial. Mothers show a clear delineation in their treatment of sons as opposed to their treatment of their daughters. I believe that these mothers, even though they are transnational subjects, see their position in their sons' lives as one of control. Great importance is ascribed to the sons, and responsibility is placed upon them to both continue the family line and respect their mothers' choices. The mother sees herself as ultimately the most significant person in her son's life, and this is to the detriment of any future romantic relationship and the new family he may form in the future. This relationship between mother and son is not necessarily unique but is brought to the forefront in the novels from these regions. Traditional and perhaps patriarchal roles are maintained in the diaspora, and this reflects in the mother-son relationship.

3.3.2 Distant Fathers: Understanding the Role of the (Seldom Seen) Paternal Figures in *Girls of Riyadh* and *No Sex in the City*

It is abundantly clear that mothers take on the primary parenting role in the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit genres. While mothers act as a support system and guiding influence for their daughters and an overbearing force for their sons, the father figure is seldom seen in the chosen texts. For many of the female protagonists, the father is a background character who is only seen when interacting with other fathers or uncles during formal family discussions, such as marriage processes. This is clearly seen in the instance of Gamrah in *Girls of Riyadh*, whose father takes on a disciplinary and ceremonial position in her life. When Gamrah's husband sends her back to Riyadh after immigrating to the United States for his studies, it is her father who receives the divorce papers. As previously discussed, it is her mother who conducts much of the family's affairs, and she did not tell her husband the reality of their daughter's situation – the divorce papers are a surprise to him due to his lack of participation in the everyday affairs of his family. However, his role as patriarch of his family means that he is the spokesperson and coordinator of this process. Gamrah's mother is not afforded any power to collude with Rashid's mother and rectify the situation through "possible maternal machinations" (Alsanea

106). Instead, the interactions take place between the men, affirming their roles as consummate leaders of the families. When the men in Gamrah's family decide that it is time for her to marry again, it is her uncle who brings a potential suitor. As Gamrah is a divorcee, her marriage prospects are significantly less than when she was younger and without a child. Her uncle and father agree on the suitability of Abu Musa'ed, who is far older than Gamrah. Despite the fact that he is not willing to allow her child with Rashid to live with them once they are married, her father and uncle find the match appropriate. Her father states that the uncle has "looked him over with [his] sharp eyes, and that's enough for [him]" (Alsanea 206). There is complete trust between the two men, but little consideration is given to Gamrah and her feelings or choices. As her uncle sees no issue with Abu Musa'ed, the family "shall rely on God and go ahead" (Alsanea 206) with the arrangement of marriage. Gamrah's mother is only able to liaise on her behalf to a certain extent, as the men have decided that this is the man Gamrah shall marry. Her father is not invested in his daughter's happiness. It is clear that it is more important to ensure that his daughter is married, even though she objects to the match. He values his brother's opinion here and disregards his wife's and daughter's opinions. Additionally, the prospect of a suitable marriage for Gamrah secures the family's place in society and maintains their good name. From this interaction, it is evident that the father is concerned primarily with the reputation of his family instead of his daughter's happiness. The father, unseen as he is, has ultimate influence over the lives of his family members. Despite the powerful role the mother plays, as I previously discussed, the father is the patriarchal figurehead of the family and, as such, is allowed to exert power over his daughter. In the case of Gamrah and her father, I believe that her father values reputation and norms over Gamrah, which speaks to the persistence and pervasive nature of patriarchal rule. Since women are the main characters in the novel, it is their experiences that are explored in the narrative. Part of this experience is the undeniable fact that women do not always have choices, as Gamrah illustrates. As a result, it is clear that the dominant female narrative presented in the genre is not necessarily representative of all facets of life. While chick lit presents women's narratives in a powerful and meaningful way, it also illustrates the patriarchal powers that affect and marginalise women.

In contrast to Gamrah, Sadeem and her father have fostered a supportive relationship. He has a visible role in her life, chiefly because of the death of Sadeem's mother when she was a young child. While aunts have taken on the maternal roles in Sadeem's life, it is still clear that her father is considerably more involved in her life than Gamrah's father. Sadeem's father loves his daughter a great deal and supports her. This is evident when Sadeem is divorced by

Waleed prior to the finalisation of their wedding ceremonies. She feels comforted and cared for in this moment and is able to "[collapse] in his arms and [explode] into tears without confessing" (Alsanea 37), even though she is unable to tell him the truth. His devotion and allegiance to his daughter is notable, as Sadeem's father takes it upon himself to find out from Waleed's father what went wrong between the young couple. Here again, we see the roles of fathers in formal affairs, as well as their mutual respect for one another as men. However, Sadeem's father attempts to use his power among other men to aid his daughter, who is deeply distressed by the termination of her marriage before it was even finalised. Unfortunately, Sadeem's father suffers from a heart attack and passes away, leaving her without parents. Sadeem's life is at this point filled with uncertainty, as she was "already without a mother and suddenly without a father to watch over her?" (Alsanea 212). While other women in the family, primarily her aunts, were able to step in and somewhat fulfil the role of mother or maternal figure in her life, the father is not easily replaced. Due to the significance of the male power role in Saudi Arabian society, the father functions both as a protector and an intermediary between other men in society, like potential suitors.

In *No Sex in the City*, we are presented with the only novel in which a father is truly present in the everyday life of the daughter. Esma's father, being a traditional and moderately conservative man, takes on the role of breadwinner in their household. Since their immigration to Australia, Esma's mother has not worked and allowed her husband to provide and handle their finances. He takes responsibility, in part because their migration was his decision, as well as because of his traditional and cultural beliefs. He is also exceedingly close to his daughter – she still lives at home and maintains a respectful and loving relationship with her father. In fact, their relationship is so close that her father is able to confide in his daughter about a secret that he does not feel comfortable sharing with his wife. Esma's father has accrued significant debt through gambling addiction, leading to their house being at risk of foreclosure. While Esma's father gets "his life back on track" (Abdel-Fattah 22), he relies on his daughter for financial help. As she is yet unmarried, her only responsibility is to her family. However, this revelation from her father irrevocably shifts the dynamic in their relationship. Up until this point, Esma had not seen her father in such a vulnerable state – he had only cried at the deaths of his parents. He had also, until this point, instituted gendered roles within their household – Esma's mother is a housewife and is not involved in the family finances. His daughters were allowed to navigate between their traditions and modern, Western life in Australia, but he and his wife maintained their traditional roles and preferred to live their lives in that way. At this point in their lives, Esma's father has to allow his daughter to see him in a "defeated and

helpless" (Abdel-Fattah 23) state. As their relationship shifts, she becomes no longer just his daughter but "also his confidante" (Abdel-Fattah 23). This shift is complex for Esma and her father due to the standards by which they have lived their lives, which shaped the father-daughter relationship. Esma respects her parents as "wiser and more experienced" (Abdel-Fattah 23) and has always respected the figurative line that has been "drawn out of respect, deference and gratitude – that [she] would never dare cross" (Abdel-Fattah 23). Her father's disclosure to her threatened the line in the relationship. As the provider for their family, Esma's father feels immense shame at his actions and the betrayal of his wife. Esma helps her father to pay this loan in order to preserve his reputation, and that of the family. He is particularly concerned about his daughter Senem's husband, Farouk. This speaks again to the patriarchal nature of society, as Esma's father is ashamed to confide in Esma, but practically unable to reveal his faults to Farouk. As two men in a traditional and culturally specific community, there are respect and unnegotiable relationship dynamics that must be maintained. Esma and her father enter into a strained relationship, as the debt and her "sense of duty and respect and love and pity" (Abdel-Fattah 105) suffocate Esma. Her father continues to be deeply ashamed of his behaviour, especially the effect that it is having on Esma. When she realises that she has to quit her job, Esma is forced to speak honestly with her father – something that she is comfortable with, especially given the covert nature of their interactions at this point in the text. While Esma does not wish for "anything to threaten [her] family" (Abdel-Fattah 139), she and her father agree that he must tell her mother about the debt in order to preserve the father-daughter relationship and her parents' marriage.

The roles of fathers in the chosen texts differ immensely from the roles of mothers. It is my assessment that the father figure in both transnational and domestic texts is similarly beholden to the cultural and traditional values of the patriarchal societies from which they originate or in which they live. Particularly in the chosen domestic texts, the father is unseen and largely irrelevant until there are meaningful interactions with other men, such as during the processes surrounding marriage. In some domestic examples, we see the role of the father as being more visible but still constrained by patriarchal structures. There is a particularly gendered experience of the fathers in both classes of text – they maintain the boundaries between father and daughter and largely allow for the mothers to be directly involved in their daughters' lives. In the case of transnational Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, the father is seen to have a more significant role in their daughter's life. Esma's father has to navigate his role as a transnational subject, and this is reflected in his parenting of his daughter. While he could be described as strict, he still allows his daughter personal freedom and trusts

her to make her own choices. Additionally, he trusts that she is able to aid him with his debts, giving her a responsibility that suggests he sees her as equal, but perhaps also the only person he could ask. It could be asserted that this is a result of their transnational subjectivities, which grants them both the ability to move away from gendered roles and have a relationship imbued with subtlety.

3.3.3 The Aunty Brigade: Considering the Surrogate Mother and Confidante of the Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit Protagonist

Outside of the immediate nuclear family, the most familiar and prominent character is that of the 'Aunty'. She functions most often as a neighbourhood figure, gossiper and matchmaker. Additionally, she takes on the role of trusted surrogate mother and confidante. This term and character take on a complicated position, particularly in South Asian chick lit. Kareem Khubchandani speaks to the disdain that is held for the Aunty figure, fuelled by "the fatphobia, sexism and ageism" (Khubchandani 71) that is directed at older South Asian women. Aunties are not often self-identified; instead, it is a term that is applied to women who do not think of themselves as such. Khubchandani describes this naming process as a "mode of interpreting and interpellating bodies and aesthetics" (Khubchandani 72). The Auntie is not just a relative; she is also a "neighbourhood gossip, perpetual match-maker, cultural gatekeeper, elderly fashionista, spinster, sexy older woman, unattractive younger woman, dance teacher, proxy mother, maid, shopkeeper or intimate stranger" (Khubchandani 72). The term is usually reserved for women who are familiar and close to an individual, like Um Nuwayyir in *Girls of Riyadh*, Aunty Mina in *No Sex in the City,* and Samira Aunty in *Ayesha at Last*. This closeness is requisite, there is also an apparent contempt for the Aunty figure. She is seen as "fat, aging" (Khubchandani 72), and contrasted with the protagonist, who is obsessive about her body and the maintenance of youthfulness. The Aunty comes to be a symbol of loss, as someone affected by age, who turns to matchmaking and potential marriages as a source of fulfilment. The Aunty is fundamentally seen as backward, wearing "gaudy or drab saris, *salwar-kameez* and nighties" (Khubchandani 74). However, this aesthetic view of the Aunty also renders her a homely and comforting woman. She is comforting and kind to younger women. Sarah Lee and Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan speak to the significance of the appropriate address term when referring to women in the lives of the protagonists, as failure to apply the correct term can be seen as "impoliteness, ill-breeding, or even signal the breakdown of social order" (Lee and Shanmuganathan 199). It is the norm for both Malaysian and South Asian women to address

those around them with terms that carry relational information (Lee and Shanmuganathan 199). Because the term is English, it can be seen as a method of elevating the Aunty to someone who is upwardly mobile with the traits of Western sophistication. It is undeniably culturally specific, as this can only function in a specific space and community. For instance, an Arabic or Hindi address term may be used to signify a particularly close bond or someone within the family, such as 'Ammah' or 'Chachi' and 'Didi', respectively. Aunty can then be used to maintain a close relationship, where family terms are not appropriate, but anything else would create an impression of distance between the two women. Lee and Shanmuganathan describe Aunty as a 'safe' term, as it can be used in polite daily encounters, but also for those who associate it with modernity and fashionable 'coolness' (Lee and Shanmuganathan 210). It is ultimately evident that the term has been reconceptualised in postcolonial spaces and has taken on a multitude of meanings and associations. While negatively perceived in some spaces, Khubchandani, Lee and Shanmuganathan see the term as a means by which to analyse the social order in both South Asia and Malaysia. The Aunty has become a "recognisable archetype" (Khubchandani 72) that allows for the analysis of South Asian society. For the purposes of this thesis, the term will also be analysed in the context of Saudi Arabia, where it is used in a comparable manner.

'Aunty' as a form of naming occupies a space of juxtaposition – not only can it be used as a disparaging name, but also a useful one in certain respectful situations. While this seems like an unlikely positioning, it is seen clearly in the chosen texts. *Almost Single* details the ways in which Aunty is seen as insulting. Aisha's anxiety about ageing and being single is embodied in her naming. Being called "baby and then the respectful didi" (Kala 11) by street urchins and peddlers amounts to youth and signals that a woman has not yet reached her "best before" (Kala 11) or expiration date. However, the transition to "the dreaded aunty" (Kala 11) has been applied to Aisha occasionally. She is still primarily referred to as "didi" (Kala 11), so her anxiety is abated to some extent. However, as Aisha states, there is a stage past 'Aunty', *mataji*, so her uneasiness about naming as she ages is not exclusive to being called Aunty.

The term brings forth insight into women's trepidation and unease towards ageing, which speaks to the lack of grace afforded to women as they age. In this context, the title of Aunty brings to mind a woman "past her prime, bumbling, docile, prone to idle gossip, uninformed, [and] judgemental" (Naraharisetty qtd. in Khubchandani 74). It is decidedly unappealing and signifies the removal of this woman from beauty, youth and potential. While it may be seen as disrespectful to a young woman, it is also appropriate when creating a respectful environment. It does bring about potential issues, as seen when Aisha must decide

what to call Karan's mother. There is nuance in naming, especially as Aisha has not met Gucci Mama, so "situational factors and experiences of particular [cultures]" (Lee and Shanmuganathan 210) must be considered when selecting the appropriate term. This complexity mirrors the "multi-ethnic, multilingual spaces" (Lee and Shanmuganathan 210) the protagonists inhabit, like modern, Westernised New Delhi. Aunty can be considered a modern term as the result of the usage of English in a multilingual postcolonial society. In both instances, it is possible to aggrieve the woman referred to. In *Almost Single*, Aisha's dilemma with naming Karan's mother revolves around familiarity. Her question about what is appropriate results in contemplating three possible terms: "Mrs Verma', 'Aunty', or the even more familiar 'Mummyji' (Kala 249), which would be reserved for a mother-in-law. This decision will define their relationship, and as Karan is a new boyfriend and a 'mummy's boy', it will also influence her relationship with him. Despite initially thinking that Aunty is too familiar, she does use this term, and both relationships are maintained and favourable.

While naming Aunties is powerful and symbolic of their roles, the Aunties themselves are prominent characters in the texts. Weddings and engagement parties are their domain, as the reception allows for the older women – somewhat affectionately deemed the "capital funds and mothers-with-sons" (Alsanea 6) by the narrator of *Girls of Riyadh* – to look for matches for the unmarried youths in their lives. They are undoubtedly women in control, keeping "a tight rein over their husbands" (Kala 212), who are at the bar while simultaneously occupying the buffet counter (Kala 212). Here, the image of the Aunty as older, unappealing, and overweight is reinforced as they maintain this proximity to the food. The primary purpose here is to maintain a commanding presence and occupy a space from which they can view all potential suitors. In *Almost Single*, Aisha describes the Aunties as "aces at multi-tasking" (Kala 212) who can effectively use their "x-ray vision" (Kala 212) to analyse the contents of everyone's glasses. The suitability of all the young people is gauged by the aunts, speaking to their influence, power, and control. Their role as matchmakers and societal influencers is clear. It is also in the best interest of (most significantly) young women to "smile at them […] especially if you are a single gal." (Kala 212). It is in their best interest to maintain a good relationship with the older women in their social sphere, even if from a distance, as one "never [knows] whose mummy or maasi one of them could turn out to be" (Kala 212). Despite the often-negative associations of Aunty, it is clear that they play a significant role in the lives of the young women in their circles. In the case of Sadeem in *Girls of Riyadh*, it is her aunt who takes on the role of mother and matchmaker after her mother's death. As such, she fields "a

number of phone calls from match-maker mothers asking for her pretty niece's hand in marriage for their sons" (Alsanea 21).

This decisive role as Aunties is further reinforced by their omnipresence in the protagonists' lives. Looking now to *Ayesha at Last*, Ayesha finds herself under the constant surveillance of Aunties as they occupy space in her home, "talking about [Hafsa's] *rishtas* for weeks" (Jalaluddin 8) and "peering through their windows" (Jalaluddin 23), hoping to detect any behaviour that can be shared amongst the other gossiping women in the neighbourhood. They are noted as being "in daily attendance, eager to share increasingly scandalous rumours" (Jalaluddin 292) when Hafsa attempts to elope with Tarek. The family "had spent the past two days receiving a parade of nosy aunties eager to gawk at the mighty Shamsi family brought so low" (Jalaluddin 267). Ayesha refers to the women as the "Bored Aunty Brigade" (Jalaluddin 23), again signalling their power and forcefulness as a collective. This naming of the Aunties and the descriptive terms used in both *Ayesha at Last* and *Girls of Riyadh* invite discourse about how these women are viewed. As stated by Khubchandani, the term "is tapping into the fatphobia, sexism and ageism that is often wielded against older South Asian women; it [is] meant to sting" (Khubchandani 71). In line with its connotations as a great insult to young women, it illustrates the negativity wielded against ageing women in society, as well as their roles. Their ability to make a match and hold weight in their communities is contrasted with insult. It is implied that the young women in question entirely use the knowledge and skills that the Aunties can impart despite disparaging them in the same breath. The disparity that is evident here speaks to the sexism evident in both Middle Eastern and South Asian societies and diasporas.

As a matchmaker and gossip, Aunty is often relegated to women outside the family. Within the family, or taking on the role of family or surrogate mother, there is significantly more respect regarding Aunties. While they maintain a "controlling image" (Khubchandani 74), they shift away from being an outside force that is negatively connotated (in most instances). Here, they can mentor the young women in the texts, supplying them with "irreverent forms of knowledge" (Khubchandani 79). Aunties can be "progressive and cool" and "normalise fashion, fun" (Khubchandani 79). While she is not kin to any of the women, Um Nuwayyir embodies the 'cool' Aunty persona in *Girls of Riyadh*. Um Nuwayyir is described as "an eternal fount of jokes […] humour and insights" (Alsanea 23). She is "one of the sweetest and most truly *good* women Sadeem has ever met in her life" (Alsanea 23), and after her mother's passing, Sadeem comes to see Um Nuwayyir as a mother, not just an older friend and neighbour. Um Nuwayyir only has a son, so she willingly integrates the women into

her life. She becomes a confidante and provides a "safe haven par excellence" (Alsanea 24) for women wishing to meet with potential suitors and boyfriends. In doing this, she becomes "the preserver of the girls' secrets" (Alsanea 24) and provides a safe, chaperoned space in which the women can "[try] out the freedoms to which they had but little access in any of their own homes" (Alsanea 24). This scenario is not only beneficial to the young women, as it provides "a diversion and source of entertainment" (Alsanea 24) for Um Nuwayyir. In this text, the women do not use the term 'Aunty'; instead, they choose a linguistically appropriate term, 'Um,' which means 'mother of.'[9]

She, too, takes on the role of mother for Sadeem due to her proximity to the family. Her primary role in Sadeem's adult life revolves around "checking out all marriage applicants thoroughly" (Alsanea 21). She acts as an intermediary between Sadeem and her father and the mothers of potential suitors. This role is done with some trepidation, as she fears they may feel superior to her and her daughters. Sadeem's beauty is somewhat aggrieving to Aunt Badriyyah, as she fields many more suitors for Sadeem than for her daughters. As a result, she informs them only of "the shortlist of key applicants" (Alsanea 21) in order to "protect [their] heads […] from the danger of swelling up larger than her own" (Alsanea 21). Related aunts in *Girls of Riyadh* are often demonised to some extent, particularly in the case of Michelle. Her parents are "open-minded" (Alsanea 50) due to their time living in the United States. Nevertheless, her father's sisters are able to "stuff [his] head with retrograde ideas" (Alsanea 50) when she wishes to study in the United States. She describes them as having "really gone out of their way in this case" (Alsanea 50) in order to warn her father about the potential consequences for girls who left Saudi Arabia to study – they "found lots of unflattering talk swirling around them when they returned" (Alsanea 50). Despite the liberal stance of her parents, this familial influence from her aunts and the probable difficulties with finding a suitable husband that can follow, Michelle finds that a tragedy occurs, and her father listens to the "ridiculous, stupid arguments" (Alsanea 50) of his sisters.

[9] *Girls of Riyadh* is a translation of the original Arabic text, and through this process, some Arabic terms were not replaced with English equivalents. However, Sadeem's Aunt Badriyyah is referred to as such.

3.4 "The most significant relationships in these women's lives are those they have with each other": Exploring Female Friendships in Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

The notion of female friendship is of the utmost importance in every variation of the genre. Chick lit conventionally features a core group of friends – often three or four women who maintain the closest of friendships with one another despite having friends outside of this group. The core group functions as a second or chosen family for the protagonists. In white, Western chick lit, this is a result of the lack of family input or support – this necessitates the close relationship between the women, as they are unable to turn to family as a means of acceptance and encouragement. As the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit protagonists experience no lack of family, their commitment to their friends displays an arguably more genuine love for one another and true solidarity and sisterhood. The chosen family of female friends becomes the source from which "the single woman or girl can truly draw her strength" (Johnson 151). The ability of the female friendship to overshadow and decentralise the romance highlights the ability of the chick lit protagonist to find joy, authenticity, and indeed life outside of heteronormative relationship expectations. For the young, contemporary protagonists in these texts, it is female friendship that solidifies their lives, and provides the everyday support and safe space in which to talk about and experience their lives. Johanna Webb Johnson speaks to the "clarity" (Johnson 151) that is found in friendships and the potential to make mistakes when one does not have the security of friendship within which to understand and discuss complicated situations. Furthermore, there is an undeniable solidarity found within the sisterhood of female friendships, illustrating the magnitude of this relationship and the positive dependence that the protagonists are able to elicit from this. While in some chick lit the dependence on friends is a result of the lack of understanding or support from parents, this is not true for Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, as discussed in the first part of this chapter. However, the role of friends does not lose its pertinence. As Mabry suggests, the "urban family" (Mabry 202) comes to outweigh the singular quest for romance and marriage. In the majority of narratives, the groups of friends are all single, bar one or two who may be married or engaged. Their relationship status does not detract from their ability to offer emotional support and advice to their friends, as the female friendship takes precedence over romance. Mabry describes the sisterhood of friendship as "such an attractive alternative" (Mabry 203) that it brings into question the notion of a romantic conclusion to the novels. This is a remarkable feat by the texts, which critiques have deemed homogeneous and singular in their promise of romantic happiness. Their idea of the genre fails to consider the fact that the

friendships are depicted as the characters' "primary community and family, their source of love and care" (Henry qtd. in Mabry 203). The genre's ability to discuss and present the real lives of the protagonists speaks to the value of the genre. In presenting the modern woman within culturally specific spaces, where marriage and family traditions are of a deep influence, the notion that romance is not the pinnacle of a young woman's life is both moving and indicative of the movement away from "patriarchally defined" (Young and Ferriss 10) lives. Juliette Wells affirms this notion, highlighting not only the romantic pursuits of the protagonists but also "her maturation and growth in self-knowledge, often aided by friends and mentors" (Wells 49). Chick lit is a women-centred genre, and as Mabry states, "truly […] *for* women" (Mabry 205), and it is directly because of this centring that the genre presents "affirmative notions of female identity, sexuality and community" (Mabry 205). The community of female friendship cannot be overstated, and provides positive, affirming images of a woman's life outside of romance, as girlfriends, wives, or mothers.

Girls of Riyadh by Rajaa Alsanea exemplifies the sisterhood that female friendships and female community can produce. Following the narratives of Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle, and Lamees, and examining their lives as young women living in Saudi Arabia. While their pursuits of romance take a prominent place in the text, it is the relationship between the women that ultimately drives the plot. Having been friends since school, the four women exhibit almost unwavering support for one another. While their "little clique – the *shillah*" (Alsanea 14), spend much of their spare time together and consciously make time for one another when responsibilities keep them apart, it is Sadeem and Gamrah who form a distinct pair within the group and Lamees and Michelle do the same. The two pairs are 'best friends', which does not invalidate the value of the foursome. When Gamrah moves to the United States with her then-husband, she and Sadeem have "daily phone conversations" (Alsanea 86) and take this time to maintain their friendship and connection despite the distance that is between them. As a result of their closeness, Sadeem is the only person that Gamrah feels she can confide in about Rashid's affair. Gamrah feels Sadeem is "the person most capable of really understanding her feelings at such a time" (Alsanea 86). She finds solace in Sadeem's care, as she does not feel ready to share her secret with the entire group. As Gamrah experiences her pregnancy alone after her husband's infidelity, it is Sadeem who stays by her side with Gamrah's mother. Similarly, Michelle's move to Dubai elicits a deep pain in Lamees. Michelle "alone understood her, really understood her" (Alsanea 201). Their relationship is more powerful than simply friendship – they are incredibly similar women, and Michelle is able to know Lamees more deeply than others, as she has "divined her true personality in a way that the others had not"

(Alsanea 201). The pair of friends are devoted to one another, and this significant moment in Gamrah's life is marked by the unwavering support of her friend after the failure of Rashid, her husband. This bond exemplifies the nature and significance of female friendships – Gamrah's marriage and husband do not rank next to the infallible friendship. This deep understanding and care that is exhibited by the women shows the dedication and devotion they have for their friends. While many of the protagonists detailed in this study go on to find romantic love and eventually husbands, the emotional quality and depth of the female friendships far surpass the romance experienced by the women.

No Sex in the City also chronicles the lives of four multicultural and multireligious friends. Muhammad Abdullah writes that their friendship is "representative of female sisterhood, crossing all ethnic and gender boundaries" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 87), as the women are not hindered by their differences but instead find camaraderie and support, able to draw on their distinct life experiences to aid their friends. Abdullah remarks on the lack of "any repugnance amongst the four girls" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 78), which speaks to both the obvious human respect between the women but also to the transnational environment that they inhabit. Due to their location, living in a metropolitan city in Australia, the characters are naturally exposed to a diverse group of people. Having met at university and bonded over morals, values, and causes, the women illustrate the potential merits of such a society, as there is consistent acknowledgement and acceptance of their fundamental differences. Esma jokes that they have to be friends because they would otherwise "lose one of the best things about [them] – [their] punchline!" (Abdel-Fattah 378). The diversity of their group lends itself to a well-recognised joke format: "A Christian, a Muslim, a Jew and a Hindu walk into a café …" (Abdel-Fattah 378). The four women, despite being members of different faiths, do not disregard the practices of each other but remain true to their personal "ideological positionality" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 79). The novel presents a picture of devoted friendship – Esma specifically begins their group (the No Sex in the City club) as a means for the women to spend time together and share tales of their woes. They commiserate with their friends' struggles, using the club as a way to share "emotional baggage, horror stories, impossible checklists, twenty-something angst" (Abdel-Fattah 16) while enjoying a "high-calorie emotional-eating pig-out session" (Abdel-Fattah 16). The prerequisites for the club involve a "proper dose of self-pity" (Abdel-Fattah 16), as positivity, optimism, and an active relationship are forbidden. The club meetings evolve into a regular opportunity for the women to socialise as their lives, jobs, and outside obligations threaten to keep them apart. Friends outside of their core group are having "engagement parties and baby showers" (Abdel-

Fattah 58), so the women require a space in which they can talk about their struggles as they face pressure from family and other friends to get married and move into a new stage of their lives. Their friendship is a reminder that they all live full lives despite not being married, which serves to "deemphasize a central romance and highlight the female protagonist's nonromantic relationship[s]" (Ferriss and Young 10). *No Sex in the City* is unique in its ability to accurately present the intertwined lives of religiously different people, as this is seldom seen in texts from white, Western chick lit. In so doing, the novel presents both an argument for the benefit of such as text as a learning tool as well as the importance of accurate representation in a genre that was initially narrow and homogeneous.

In *Almost Single*, the three friends, Aisha, Misha, and Anushka, spend as much time together as possible. The women are nearly always together when they are not working or visiting family. After Anushka's divorce, "most nights [become] girls' night out" (Kala 2). Despite the sadness that Anushka feels, she is able to immerse herself into her friendship group, knowing that she will be supported through this difficult time. Aisha summarises this well, thinking about their relationship while spending an evening together: "I savour the moment. Friends really are the family you choose. […] Misha, giggling and crazily vulnerable, her capacity to give love as fierce as her desire to find it. And, there's Anushka, a little removed, smiling her sadder but wiser smile, and well on the path to rediscovering herself" (Kala 119). She illustrates the all-knowing, accepting nature of their relationship. Chick lit is often aligned with romance novels, but there is a clear distinction here in the priorities in the women's lives. Mabry asserts that, in chick lit, it is the protagonist's "growth as a person and her relationships with her friends [that] outweigh the quest for romantic partnership" (Mabry 200). In both *Almost Single* and *No Sex in the City*, the female friendship group is presented as the primary source of community, despite ethnic or religious differences. The relationship transcends differences and becomes a relatable mirroring of readers' lives.

Within the friendship circle or core group, the women model unwavering support for one another. For the most part, there is unwavering support between the women. When Anushka's car is reclaimed by her ex-husband and his mother in *Almost Single*, Aisha and Misha help her to vandalise his car with toilet paper. Misha "can't wait to get him for what he's done" (Kala 19), immediately showing her willingness to annoy and do some harmless damage to Anushka's ex-husband. While Aisha is apprehensive due to her own friendship with Anuj, her commitment to Anushka overrides this, as they have been "best friends since third grade" (Kala 19). It is clear that nearly two decades of female friendship nullifies any relationship with Anuj, as Aisha "knew very clearly where [her] loyalties lay" (Kala 144). The three women are

dedicated to one another, and now that they are all single, their lives have once again converged, allowing them to find solace in the fact that their lives are similar and they are all working towards the same goals of finding suitable husbands while living modern, cosmopolitan city lives. For Aisha, girlfriends always come first, especially her "soul buddies" (Kala 3). She notes that "their opinions pretty much dictate [her] life" (Kala 3). *No Sex in the City* similarly indicates the devotion between friends – the 'No Sex in the City club' being the most obvious example of their attachment to one another. Esma describes her life as "real and enriching and full" (Abdel-Fattah 145), which can be attributed to her friends' role in her life. While the four women are dating with the intention of finding a good husband, they are all acutely aware that their friendships with each other are the most significant, lifelong relationships they will have. They have the same core values despite differing faiths, and the "things that unite [them]" (Abdel-Fattah 14) make their friendship "natural" (Abdel-Fattah 15). Esma is able to verbalise her love and faithfulness for her friends, a love that is not diminished by their desires for husbands, in the following way: "life can take people in different directions, but the closest of friends can remain so despite the tyranny of distance. […] if a friendship is threatened when you start to share your heart with somebody else, it was never anything special in the first place. And what the four of us have is special. That much I know" (Abdel-Fattah 336). This extraordinary connection between women is one of the hallmarks of the chick lit genre. There may be tension at times, but ultimately, the women are devoted to one another and find solace and community in their relationship. The role of female friendship cannot be overstated, as it allows women connection, love, support, and closeness that cannot be found in other relationships. As these friends experience life together, they rely on each other, able to "feel comfortable in [their] silences" (Abdel-Fattah 374), and maintain their friendships due to the history that they share.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the significance of the non-romantic relationships of the protagonists of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. In my analysis, it has become clear that the family unit plays an elevated role in these texts, in part due to the culture and traditions that underpin the protagonists' identities. By presenting the unique, complicated relationships present in their lives, the novels have been able to represent realistic experiences. In both the domestic and transnational texts, it is clear that the women live in family-centric societies, which are governed by the unity of the family, even if tensions arise at times. Outside of the familial relationships, the female friendships maintained by the characters are shown to be

fundamental to the everyday life of the protagonists, as it is here that they find their 'chosen family'.

For the purposes of this chapter, I separated the mothers into two groups: the interfering mothers and the supportive mothers. Though I made this distinction, it is clear in my analysis that the mothers are not able to be described in just one word. There is of course ambivalence and ambiguity. While the domestic texts tend towards representing interfering mothers, there is evidence that she exists in transnational texts as well. However, domestic mothers maintain their relationships with their daughters under the guidance of the rules and conventions of their respective regions. These mothers exhibit fears for their daughters, especially over their singlehood and future stability, which informs their positions as interfering mothers. The transnational mother manages to balance her fears more effectively for her daughter with the possibilities afforded to them as transnational subjects. They see new freedoms for the daughters, and are open to the dreams and desires of their daughters. I briefly discussed the mother-son relationship, which features in the texts in the form of mothers of potential romantic partners. These relationships are seen to be co-dependent, with a number of mothers suffering from 'mummy's boy syndrome'. Their mothers are portrayed as matriarchs, and a strained relationship is often evident.

I have described the fathers of chick lit protagonists as profoundly background characters, particularly in domestic texts. They take on particular roles in their daughters' lives, which are usually limited to the arrangement of affairs concerning marriage. In transnational texts, there is evidence that fathers have been able to move out of this space and seek greater involvement in their daughters' lives and are perhaps freed from assumed stereotypes and traditional roles where it concerns their daughters.

The Aunty has similarly been shown to make a deep impact in these texts, as she takes on the role of surrogate mother and confidant. The aunties represented in the chosen texts have been able to both conform to and reject stereotypes surrounding the Aunty figure, which is a highly theorised element of Middle Eastern and South Asian literature.

Finally, in this chapter, I contend that female friendships are the most significant of the relationships experienced by the chick lit protagonist. This vital element of the genre is part of what sets chick lit apart from other romance genres. It is obvious that the chosen family functions as a form of sisterhood, and the close bond defines the lives of the characters, despite the previously mentioned importance of the actual family. By drawing attention to the female friendships, the romantic relationship of the protagonists is deemphasised, thus bringing the love between friends to the foreground of the texts.

Chapter Four: Shopping for Love: Exploring the Interplay of Romance and Consumerism in Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

4.1 An Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the non-romantic relationships experienced by the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit protagonists. My analysis demonstrated that the Middle Eastern and South Asian forms of chick lit consider the role of the family in ways that white, Western chick lit does not, while similarly maintaining the importance of female friendships. While the familial and friendship relationships are of profound significance when considering the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novel, the romantic relationships that the characters engage in are fundamental to the texts. In this chapter, I will discuss romantic relationships, which are a fundamental element of chick lit, while also interrogating the connections between romance and the consumption and consumerism that has become a hallmark of the genre. This chapter understands romance as referring to the potential relationship or feelings of love and adoration. Consumption and consumerism work in tandem to relate to the preoccupation with consumer goods, the purchasing of and desire for items of value. In considering both these compulsory elements of the texts, I assert that romance and the practice of dating become inherently tied to consumerism and consumption practices for the protagonists, through which the women 'shop' for husbands who can provide a particular lifestyle and social capital, despite being economically independent, educated women. Furthermore, in this chapter, I will discuss the role of consumer goods and consumption-specific locales that the protagonists inhabit in their romantic pursuits, as well as the function of 'Islamic capitalism' in two of the novels. I would like to investigate the function of romance in domestic and transnational spaces, and determine whether there is a noticeable difference in the execution of romance. I will consider the locations, as well as ethnic and religious specificities in order to question the circumstances of romance and its links to consumption and consumerism. In this chapter, I begin with an introductory section, followed by the theory that underpins my discussion. This is followed by two main sections. In the first I will consider romance and consumerism in the chosen transnational texts, while the second section will look at domestic texts. The first section will focus on the protagonist of *No Sex in the City* by Randa Abdel-Fattah and characters from *Ayesha at Last* by Uzma Jalaluddin as examples of diasporic or transnational subjects experiencing romance in Western society. The second section will discuss *Almost Single* by Advaita Kala and selected protagonists from Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* in order to explore women seeking romance in their homeland in the Middle East

and South Asia. In addition to the discussion of romance, the characters' interactions with consumption and consumerism will be discussed.

In this chapter I examine two transnational novels, *No Sex in the City* by Randa Abdel Fattah and *Ayesha at Last* by Uzma Jalaluddin. *No Sex in the City* follows Esma, a Muslim woman navigating life in Sydney, Australia. Esma and her friends take advantage of the cosmopolitan city, frequenting coffee shops and restaurants. Throughout the narrative, Esma is seen intentionally dating a number of men, most of whom are not suitable potential husbands. She does not wish to engage in romance for fun – her purpose remains marriage. She is often set up on dates in her family home, organised through familial connections and her parents' friends. There are only two men of note: Aydin and Metin, both of whom she seriously considers for a future partnership. She ultimately chooses Aydin after finding Metin to be incompatible and unsuitable for further relationships.

Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last*, which is set in Canada, follows the protagonist, Ayesha, who dreams of being a poet and writer but has resigned herself to substitute teacher work. Ayesha is nearing thirty, and is no longer being presented with options for an arranged marriage due to her age. Her cousin Hafsa is fielding numerous rishtas or proposals, as she is twenty one. Having only met Ayesha when she was covering for Hafsa at a meeting at the Mosque, Khalid becomes engaged to Hafsa, mistaking her for her cousin. The mistaken identity forces both characters to reevaluate their choices, the influence of their family, and what they would like their potential spouse to embody. The novel resolves with Ayesha and Khalid preparing to marry, and Hafsa is married to Masood so that they can pursue their business dreams together.

The two domestic texts are *Girls of Riyadh* and *Almost Single. Girls of Riyadh* by Alsanea focuses on Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees. While the four women have been raised differently, they all struggle with love and romance. The novel begins with the marriage of Gamrah, who is quickly divorced by her husband after they move to the United States while he completes his PhD. She returns to Riyadh to live with her mother and raise her son, Saleh. Michelle is the most adventurous of the group, in part due to her Western upbringing and American mother. She, too, faces issues with relationships, particularly with Faisal, whose mother will not allow him to marry her, instead choosing a wife for him whom she deems suitable. Sadeem marries Walid, but after she spends a night with him before their official marriage ceremony, he divorces her without explanation, telling her father that they are incompatible. Lamees chooses to marry only after her graduation, and of the five friends, is the first to find true love. Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* presents Aisha as she seeks marriage and romance while being close to thirty years old and a modern woman. She works in a luxurious

hotel, where she meets Karan, whom she eventually marries. Before she meets Karan, she spends much of her time with Misha, who is single, and Anushka, who is a divorcee. The three women dedicate themselves to fun nights out, shopping, and, most importantly, dating. They help one another build online profiles, perform rituals to promote romantic success and consult astrologers to ascertain the likelihood of their perfect husband coming into their lives.

4.2 The Theory of Romance and Consumerism

Jenny Heijun Wills writes about chick lit as a previously homogeneously white normative genre. Her main argument is that South Asian American representations in chick lit specifically look at "individual empowerment" (Wills 72) and the "characters' engagement with femininity and gender are often articulated through questions of race, nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class" (Wills 73). She states that the lives of the chick lit protagonists cannot be separated from "race and its social articulations and consequences" (Wills 73). It is through themes of "assimilation, migration, […] and stereotypes that the unique struggles faced by women of colour" (Wills 73) are brought to the forefront, "even in stories that promise happy endings and the universality of love" (Wills 73). Her chapter also navigates the "antiquated dating customs of their parents' generations" (Wills 73) that are commonplace in the lives of South Asian American women and the methods through which they choose to pursue romance. In Lauren O'Mahony's exploration of Anita Heiss's Aboriginal chick lit, she focuses on the complicated cultural context and differences that are apparent in relationships portrayed outside of white, Western chick lit. O'Mahony discusses the importance of political compatibility, "especially in terms of culture and ethnicity" (O'Mahony 48). Through this lens, she discusses the ability of chick lit to adhere to romantic conventions while engaging in "cultural critique" (O'Mahony 46). It is through this discussion that she considers the significance of the genre in building on engagement with cultural issues and intercultural empathy (O'Mahony 60). While this article does not discuss the same location or cultural background as explored in this thesis, O'Mahony's discussion of culture and ethnicity in line with romance and the chick lit genre can be similarly applied to Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit.

According to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, chick lit is known for its realism, and this is evident in the romantic plot and the representation of the romantic lives of women. Since the genre primarily features heterosexual relationships, Cherise Pollard notes that the male figure is positioned as a "contemporary version of the Knight in Shining Armor" (Pollard 125). This ideal man comes at the end of an often tumultuous search for a husband by the

protagonists and serves as a reward of sorts. The romantic journey mirrors that of many 'modern' women as they navigate romantic relationships with multiple men and the gendered roles often presupposed in dating and romantic pursuits. However, Pollard also highlights the "personal transformation" (Pollard 125) that the protagonist must undergo in order to be rewarded with her perfect match.

As the women featured in chick lit are often nearing thirty, the age of the protagonist influences the nature of the plot. She is often eager, or desperate, for marriage and is ready to settle down. As explored in the previous chapters, it is clear that the non-romantic relationships of the protagonist, particularly the familial in Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, are valued above the romantic. A. Rochelle Mabry rightly contends that romantic relationships are "often given much less narrative and emotional weight" (Mabry 200) in comparison to the other relationships and experiences of the protagonist. The protagonist's family and female friendships are brought to the forefront of the texts, which illustrates a shift in priorities. This is not to say that the women in these texts are unconcerned with romance – it remains a primary concern of the texts. Rather, the dating and romantic explorations of the characters are mediated through their other relationships. The reader gains more insight into the success of the potential romantic partner through the conversations the protagonist has with friends, often in spaces that are exclusively female and intimate, such as the home of one of the women, as she plays host to a 'girls' night in'. It is here that the protagonist can share any and all details about the man she is dating at present and is also able to gauge the opinions of her friends. A potential suitor who is not well-liked by the group of friends is unlikely to be 'chosen' as a husband, as their opinions are valued and taken seriously by the protagonist.

As a result of this, it becomes clear that the romance is not the only force driving the story. In chick lit, the genre allows for the "heroine's growth and experiences [to] stand on its own, rather than simply making it part of a larger romance narrative" (Mabry 202). Maria Törnqvist argues that the "gendered, heteronormative, racialized and class-based power regimes operate" (Törnqvist 92) through the romantic plot line, and should be examined as a vessel through which the lives and experiences of the protagonists can be considered. Törnqvist asserts that romantic partners are most commonly from backgrounds similar to the protagonist and are able to operate in the same social fields. While romantic relationships are not the only significant relationship in chick lit, especially in the texts chosen for this thesis, they are an avenue through which the socio-political circumstances of the chick lit protagonists are explored. It is here that the reader is given insight into the social and financial mobility of the

character, which is especially relevant in the discussion of romance as it relates to capitalism, consumerism and consumption.

Mabry contends that despite portrayals of chick lit protagonists as "sexually powerful, economically independent women" (Mabry 204), they are still subject to a formulaic ending which relies on marriage or the promise thereof. Mabry further asserts that within the genre, this focus on the romantic ending ultimately ends up "silencing" (Mabry 204) the voice that sets chick lit apart from earlier women's writing. In spite of the 'modern', independent lives portrayed by the chick lit protagonist, the texts ultimately "emphasize that what a woman really wants is to find the right guy with whom to spend the rest of her life" (Mabry 204). Even though the male romantic interests are sometimes lesser seen characters – Stephanie Harzewski describes them as "virtually jettison[ed]" (Harzewski, "Postfeminism" 35) in favour of other elements of the texts – they still perform a function that cannot be fulfilled by any other character, and thus cannot be substituted. The potential husband acts as the 'right' man and fulfils the ultimate goal of the protagonist, which is to make an appropriate match. This comes after (potentially many) years of unsuccessful dating and navigating what it means to be a young woman within the particular sphere in which the text is set. In this article, Mabry highlights only the romantic relationships of the chick lit characters. While I agree to some extent with the importance that she ascribes to the romantic relationship, I do not see the notion that the 'voice' is silenced in any way by this focus. The women in chick lit do actively seek romance, but this is not to the detriment of other aspects of their lives. As seen in the previous chapter, a great deal can be gleaned from the non-romantic relationships. Mabry is ultimately speaking to white, Western chick lit, and perhaps has not considered the differences that this thesis explores as a result.

In my analysis of the romantic relationships of chick lit protagonists, I also draw on Maryam Mazloomian, Raihanah M. Mydin, and Shahizah Ismail Hamdan's work on romance and identity in Asian American chick lit. Their article considers the experiences of the transnational subject in diasporic locations and the specifics of their romantic encounters while speaking specifically to Asian American transnational chick lit. The content of this article can also be applied to the examples of transnational Middle Eastern chick lit explored in this thesis. In their analysis of romantic relationships in South Asian American chick lit, Maryam Mazloomian et al. consider the intersections of romance, culture and diaspora and the development of the self-identity of an individual. The crux of their argument is that the identity of a female protagonist will inform her choice in partner. In the diasporic home, one might choose someone who is outside of the cultural or ethnic community, leaning towards the culture

of the diasporic home. Alternatively, a protagonist may be influenced by their own culture and, therefore, choose someone within their community. It highlights the hybrid identity that is often formed in diasporic subjects and how this informs their romantic relationships. Mazloomian et al. note that Indian chick lit often revolves around the potential arranged marriage, informed by the protagonist's family's "struggle to find her a suitable match" (Mazloomian et al. 161-162). Additionally, Mazloomian et al. speak to Indian cultural practices in marriage and the notion that love comes after marriage. There is little dating or time when romantic feelings could develop. They highlight the significance of the family's influence, as their cultural expectations inform the decisions of the protagonist, particularly involving the choice of a romantic partner. Mazloomian et al. speak to the significance of love and romantic relationships in the identity development of the protagonists, citing romantic relationships as the "most intimate human communications" (Mazloomian et al 167). They consider both romance, and cultural and family traditions as deciding factors in the choice of a marriage partner. Romance is at times defined by culture, as they see to be true in Indian cultures, it can also be pivotal in self-development. Mazloomian et al. see identity and romance as being interlinked and, therefore, affecting one another. The choices in romance can be influenced by culture, and culture can impact choices in romance. In this chapter, I make use of their argument that culture affects the romantic choices of an individual, which will be explored further. It is through their discussion that the value of romance in South Asian chick lit will be considered.

Muhammad Abdullah has written about Middle Eastern chick lit and the conventions of romance that are explored in these texts. His work looks specifically at *No Sex in the City*, foregrounding Esma as a transnational subject who is negotiating romance through her cultural and religious upbringing. Firstly, Abdullah notes that marriage is the primary goal, as it is through marriage that love is solidified. (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 86). He highlights that marriage is seen as a bond between families instead of being merely a bond between two individuals. Secondly, he questions the ability of modernity and tradition to coexist and frames this discussion around Esma as a character who attempts to engage with both. In a separate article, he also considers *Girls of Riyadh* to be a text through which Islam and romance coexist in the Middle East. In this article, he speaks to the role of religion in romance, in particular, the 'rules' that have been established as a result of Islamic law in Saudi Arabia. Abdullah notes the sanctity of both marriage and sex (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 20). He also considers the role of women in religious states and notes them as being "independent individuals" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 21), contrasting the idea of Muslim women as victims. He states that chick lit's appeal, particularly in *Girls of Riyadh*, is that the

"entire search for love and matrimony is not betraying indigenous religious and cultural norms, but instead subtly negotiating with them in a sense of victory rather than victimhood" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 21). He suggests that ideas of freedom and choice may be shifting in Saudi Arabia due to Western influence, but that this is not indicative of the entire society as of yet. He sees *Girls of Riyadh* as taking on some postfeminist ideals, as the women have some autonomy in their choice of love and marriage and breaking away from some "old traditions" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 27). Lastly, he observes that the texts "resist[s] stereotypes, challenge[s] taboos, and create[s] spaces for increased pleasurable living in these parts of the world" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 27). He sees *Girls of Riyadh* as a representation of new expressions of love in Saudi Arabia. Lastly, his article, written in partnership with Safeer Awan, highlights the significance of beauty and commodities in Middle Eastern romance writing. They state that beauty is to be "capitalized on" (Abdullah and Awan 99), which highlights the role of consumerism and commodities. Women's bodies are "advertised" (Abdullah and Awan 99) to them, adding to the responsibility given to women to maintain their beauty. Abdullah's ideas that romance is the primary goal of the narrative can be debated to some extent, but as he is viewing the texts through their representation of religion, this is true, specifically in *No Sex in the City* and *Girls of Riyadh.* Abdullah and Awan's discussion of consumerism in Middle Eastern texts speaks to the core of this chapter, as consumerism disproportionately affects women.

Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff write about the conventions of chick lit, in which they describe romance as an "economic, cultural, ideological, and pleasurable phenomenon" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 492). In particular, they note that there are increasingly racialised discourses when considering the genre, as it now can "challenge or disrupt traditional generic and normative expectations" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 492) in chick lit writing. Additionally, they speak to the renegotiations of the genre, highlighting, in particular, race and sexuality. Gill and Herdieckerhoff outline the conventions of chick lit, namely the sexually liberated, career-driven women who are featured. They note the negative portrayal of singlehood for women, as well as the idea of the beautiful woman who requires effort to maintain this. It is here that commodities and consumption are again highlighted, and appearance is seen as a constant "preoccupation" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 497).

As this chapter is concerned with the interplay of romance and consumer capitalism, it is necessary to draw on Eva Illouz's analysis of this intertwined relationship. She states that the "modern definitions and practices of romance are intertwined with [the] duality of consumer capitalism" (Illouz 2). Illouz states that the core of capitalism, as exchange, buying

and selling, has permeated all facets of romance. Cultural and social norms are evident in the romantic relationship, and capitalism is a large component of the global cultural landscape. Romance has been redefined, which Illouz describes as the "political economy of romance" (Illouz 66), speaking to the class and economic relationships that made the incorporation of romance in "the sphere of consumption" (Illouz 66) possible. Illouz also speaks to the consumption and commodities that are deemed necessary for women when pursuing romance, which she called "self-enhancement" (Illouz 66) products. The rituals of self-enhancement required for the upkeep of both body and beauty are a financial demand made primarily of women. Illouz states that romantic love should be the only expectation of the romantic relationship, as finances and social standing "are not supposed to interfere with sentiment" (Illouz 75). She notes that marriage is also a financial decision and can be a "profitable transaction" (Illouz 75), a notion that predates modern stances on romance and marriage.

While Illouz considers the intersections of romance and consumerism, it is of equal importance that this chapter considers theories applied only to consumption and consumerism. Melissa Tandiwe Myambo writes that chick lit relies on specific microspaces or Cultural Time Zones (CTZs) that are 'global' in nature. She contends that it is through these global or First-World-like microspaces that chick lit can exist, specifically in South Africa, China, and India. It is Myambo's argument that chick lit protagonists must occupy spatially and politically 'First World' Cultural Time Zones, like shopping malls, cafés, and nightclubs – spaces that are culturally similar to those seen in the Western canon of the genre. She goes on to interrogate these spaces and those who inhabit them by considering class divides, economic factors, and the neoliberal nature of the spaces. She further considers the uneven development in India, South Africa, and China, and the methods through which Western capitalism and modernity define these CTZs. Myambo also considers the individual freedoms awarded to women in these microspaces but also questions and critiques the lack of discourse around postcolonialism and postmodernity. The implication of Myambo's theory is that only middle- or upper-middle-class women are able to be chick lit protagonists. There is an assumed financial requisite for participation in certain activities, but the spaces she describes, like malls, cafés, and clubs, are increasingly accessible and operate at various price points at present. To this point in time, the middle-class, socially mobile woman has almost exclusively occupied the chick lit text, but that is not necessarily reflective of the societies that the novel is drawing on.

In my analysis of *Ayesha at Last,* I will draw on Banu Gökariksel and Ellen McLarney who have examined the intersection of Islamic culture, consumer capitalism, and women. They put forward the idea of "Islamic capitalism" (Gökariksel and McLarney 1) as seen in the chick

lit text. They state that women's identities and lifestyles, in particular, are "mediated through increasingly commodified cultural forms and spaces" (Gökariksel and McLarney 1). Their article highlights the nature and nuances of consumption for Islamic women. Gökariksel and McLarney note that consumerism can have "simultaneously empowering and subjugating effects […] on women" (Gökariksel and McLarney 4). They also speak to the notion of the "ideal Muslim woman" (Gökariksel and McLaney 6), one that is defined by both the ethics of Islam and the influences of consumerism and consumption. They assert that a new cultural industry has been created, aimed primarily at Muslim women due to the "new market for commodities, media, advertising, businesses, and consumer segments identified as "Islamic"" (Gökariksel and McLarney 1). Both domestic and diasporic Muslim women and their construction of femininities are influenced in some way and mediated through consumer capitalism. This form of 'Islamic capitalism' functions somewhat differently from Western capitalism in that it does not just rely on the women engaging in consumerism in everyday life, but instead markets it as a means for women to navigate their "expression of piety, formulation of communities, and construction of identities" (Gökariksel and McLarney 3). They further argue that Islamic consumer culture is reliant on women and takes on gendered forms of expression. The theories of 'ideal womanhood' and the mediated identity as a result of consumerism, particularly for Muslim women in Muslim countries, are of value to the discussion of consumerism in this chapter.

4.3 The Price of Love: Examining Transnational Romance and Consumerism in *No Sex in the City* and *Ayesha at Last*

Romance, along with conspicuous consumption and consumerism, forms the foundation of the chick lit genre's narratives. Dating and the pursuit of love are often linked to consumption and consumerism in chick lit, as they work together by dictating the romantic choices of the protagonists, as well as their practices. Romantic dates take place in restaurants, meeting potential partners in cafés, nightclubs, and shopping malls, meaning most of the romantic process is reliant on consumption and consumerism. Chick lit protagonists "wrestle with a barrage of material temptations" (Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement" 41) as they navigate their personal lives. Illouz states that the "modern definitions and practices of romance are intertwined with [the] duality of consumer capitalism" (Illouz 2), which is exemplified by the chick lit genre. Illouz's notion of 'modern definitions' of dating and romance speaks to the need for monetary exchange in dating, The core of capitalism, as exchange, and buying and selling, has permeated all facets of the societies that the chick lit protagonists occupy. Cultural

and social norms are evident in the romantic relationship, and capitalism is a large component of the global cultural landscape. In this section, I will discuss the notion that romance has been commodified both in the application of dating, the locations and expectations of dating, and in the very nature of dating itself: it can be likened to 'shopping', browsing for potential partners and engaging in consumption practices simultaneously. In chick lit, the majority of the plot is dedicated to the pursuit of a suitable husband. Novels often end with an engagement or even a wedding, but the act of dating and pursuing romance is the primary purpose of the romantic narrative. Women in chick lit are seen to be 'shopping' for a husband. They have a list of requirements, not unlike a shopping list. Given that dating is a leisure activity, it is marked by the participation in activities that read as intimate and romantic. Dating has come to replace courtship and as a result, the location and actions of romance have moved to the public sphere, away from "family parlours and community events to restaurants, theaters, and dance halls" (Illouz 56). This change in location for romance also results in its ties to the market and consumerism. Romance has been redefined, which Illouz describes as the "political economy of romance" (Illouz 66), speaking to the class and economic relationships that made the incorporation of romance in "the sphere of consumption" (Illouz 66) possible. Dating now often requires disposable income of some kind, and as a result financial status is tied to success in relationships.

In transnational or diasporic locations, the romance narrative functions both as a plot point, but also engages with the protagonists' role as consumers in globalised societies. In *No Sex in the City*, Esma is a valuable insight into romance in the diaspora, as a second-generation migrant of Turkish ancestry living in Australia. Romance is not a pursuit of her individual needs and wants – it extends further than this, as she believes that marriage creates a bond between two families, not just two individuals. While dating Aydin, she is concerned that he is unable to be honest and open with her about his family because they "both had it drilled into [them] that you 'marry a family, not a person'" (Abdel-Fattah 287). This suggests the influence and importance of the family and, by extension, the cultural and ethnic background of the character in choosing a potential husband or romantic partner. Esma's choices in this regard are dictated by her dedication to and acknowledgement of her cultural background and her religious beliefs. Muhammad Abdullah draws on this text as an example of how Arabic migrants navigate romance and love when in the diaspora. For Esma and those of a similar background, romance is not just the pursuit of love but also of marriage, as this is presented to them as a "source of joy and as an institution that solidifies love" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 86). As seen in Esma's narrative, romance is governed by rules or ideals that

recommend alignment with their Islamic faith. This is not to say that lesser freedoms are permitted, but rather that certain behaviours are modelled in line with the religious beliefs of the protagonist. Islam is a significant element of Esma's life, and she wants "to marry a Muslim […] and […] be able to share [her faith] with [her] partner" (Abdel-Fattah 51). It is clear that a partner would only be deemed suitable if they share religious beliefs. Törnqvist states that people tend to choose romantic partners from "similar racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to themselves" (Törnqvist 92). Some migrant individuals choose to live in communities that are made up of similar ethnic or religious groups that mirror their homelands, and this proximity suggests that potential partners may be from the same ethnic or religious groups. Esma does not consider herself a devout Muslim, but her faith informs much of her life and is an important element when choosing a potential partner.

Esma also engages in the traditional practices associated with her parents' country of origin and the religious upbringing they gave her. She is open to arranged meetings with potential suitors, often set up and chaperoned by family and close connections to her family. She is open to an arranged marriage, but is now older than most women going into such arrangements. Abdullah writes that "the age of a female is an important aspect of marriage prospects" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 86), and if a woman passes a particular age, this adds an increased "difficult[y] for them to get married in an arranged fashion" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 86). It is here that we see the influence of Western Australian society on Esma's life and the lives of her parents. Despite their religious and cultural views, Esma's parents did not want her to get married before she graduated from university (Abdel-Fattah 67). While this is contrary to their upbringing, it is evidence of the changing ideals of an older generation of migrants, as well as an awareness of the changing society they inhabit. It could be argued that if they were not diasporic subjects, this may not have been their outlook on Esma's potential marriage. But, they show this awareness and wish for her to "focus on [her] studies" (Abdel-Fattah 67) instead of getting married at a time that might be considered her 'prime'. It is specified here that getting engaged would be permittable, but getting "married would have to wait" (Abdel-Fattah 67). Esma agrees with her parents since she "wanted to start working, enjoy financial independence, travel. Work out who [she] was and what [she] wanted in life" (Abdel-Fattah 67). She exhibits here a desire to enjoy and engage in the choices afforded to her in Australian society and negotiate modernity and tradition. Here, Esma exemplifies the influence of Western society, with obvious deference for her parents and their ideals, faith, and culture.

While Esma is intentional in her dating, with the express purpose of finding a husband, she does have a checklist of requirements for her "Mr Right" (Abdel-Fattah 12). This checklist can be likened to a shopping list as she searches for a potential partner. This illustrates that while Esma desires a religious fit, she is also looking for someone "educated and employed and [who cares] about social justice" (Abdel-Fattah 12). Being a Muslim is her first requirement, but she also wishes for an attractive partner. It is clear here that Esma has priorities for her future partner but simultaneously is searching for the most desirable partner. Her concern is that most men "barely make it past dot point one" (Abdel-Fattah 12), and the only requirement they meet is being Muslim. While I have emphasised Esma's desire for a partner who is religiously like-minded, she does not wish for this to be the only area in which they align. At the end of the day, she also wants to be attracted to her partner and fulfil her desires in every aspect of their relationship. Her shopping list may not be extensive, but she is not willing to settle simply because a man is in religious agreement with her.

If we consider Esma, a diasporic subject, from a transnational feminist point of view, it is evident that she has increased agency in her choice of partner. She utilises her position in society, both as a modern woman and a woman of faith, to capitalise on this agency, even if it only reflects in the choices she makes in her personal life. Due to her religious convictions, she chooses not to enter into physical relationships in her dating pursuits. Instead, she is seen to be 'courting' two men in *No Sex in the City*. She dates Aydin and Metin, who both show a genuine interest in her, in line with her ideals of intentional dating.[10] Abdullah states that this situation, in which both men are interested in pursuing a serious relationship with Esma, reads of a "strong feminist appeal" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 90). This is compounded by the power Esma holds – the men are aware of each other and the 'competition' they pose to one another. At a base level, the "power of decision remained with Esma to pick either of the men" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 90). Notably, Esma is not portrayed as being grateful for the attention. She knows her value and worth as an independent, educated young woman with hobbies, friends and a good moral base. She "DESERVE[S] TO BE SWEPT OFF [HER] FEET!" (Abdel-Fattah 11, emphasis in original) and acknowledges her own viability and suitability as a potential wife. While Abdullah questions what freedom and liberty mean for women in the West and in other locations – it is my assertion that Esma exemplifies these notions in her approach to dating. Esma remains true to her faith and convictions despite her location and the influence of Western ideals. I believe this is in part owed to her parents, who

[10] That is, dating with the intention of marriage and not casual dating 'for the sake of dating'.

simultaneously acknowledge their heritage, cultural, and religious ideals but do not attempt to utilise these ideals to restrict their daughters in any way. They acknowledge the opportunities and experiences that are available to Esma and her sister Senem as a result of their immigration but strive to keep their daughters aligned with their heritage in meaningful ways.

There is similarly an immense power in the portrayal of Esma as a Muslim woman. Abdullah writes that "Islam bestows on women a great deal of socio-religious freedom" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 20), but these freedoms are often not seen in the cultural practices of Muslim societies. As is also common in other religions, it is at times used as a means of oppression, particularly for women, despite this not being in line with the actual tenets of the faith. While Esma does not engage in casual dating, let alone casual sex, she is not portrayed as the stereotypical "caged virgin" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 21) that is often associated with Muslim women. Her celibacy stems from a personal choice made by Esma, one that is in line with her convictions and faith. It is clear here that Esma's faith-driven dating practices are brought about by the freedoms afforded to her by her parents and her ability to choose. Her positioning as a diasporic subject invites the reader to broaden their notions of what it means to be a Muslim woman, actively dating and pursuing her ideal potential partner. Her religious beliefs are tied to her romantic life, and as a result, these elements are entangled in her narrative. Esma's narrative is distinct from the other chosen texts in that her romantic choices are not aligned with consumerism. We see her occupy the spaces associated with consumerism, like cafés and shopping centres, but this is usually with friends. However, her goal of intentional dating does align with consumerism, as her checklist for a husband (Abdel-Fattah 12) is a clear 'shopping list' of suitable attributes.

If we return to the notion of dating as 'shopping' for a husband, Hafsa, Ayesha's younger cousin in *Ayesha at Last*, best exemplifies this notion. Hafsa is just twenty years old, but she is eager to get married. Their family is traditional where marriage is concerned, and they make use of the system of rishta proposals, which form part of the process of arranging a marriage through family and connections. A Rishta proposal may come in the form of photographs and biographies of potential partners sent to the young woman from whom she may choose, especially if there are many interested parties vying for her partnership. It is a "sort of vetting process for both parties" (Jalaluddin 31). Family members may visit one another in order to facilitate this process, especially mothers and aunts. Hafsa is from a wealthy and influential family, and as her father is involved in their mosque and various business pursuits, therefore received a large number of rishtas. While she wishes to get married, she is not particularly serious about the process, stating that she will "not [...] pick a husband until

[she] get[s] a hundred proposals" (Jalaluddin 31). This number seems excessive, but Hafsa is described as being very beautiful and knows that her husband will be her choice. She is a desirable match for any man wishing to gain both a beautiful wife and upward social mobility, and her awareness of this fact gives her security. She is able to wait for what she deems acceptable and also does not have to date or even meet any man who would not live up to her standards. She is hoping to meet someone who will sweep her off her feet (Jalaluddin 32), as this will give her the opportunity to begin her wedding planning company. While she does want a "storybook romance" (Jalaluddin 32), she is primarily concerned with the image and opportunities that come with being married.

Hafsa's life and the goals she has are entirely aligned with the notion of shopping for a husband. As she is not dating and instead choosing a partner from a group of candidates vetted by family and perhaps professional matchmakers, her role as a consumer is magnified. She enjoys consumer goods profoundly, which is in part illustrated by her bedroom. She has a walk-in closet the "size of Ayesha's bedroom" (Jalaluddin 30) and a bookcase filled with books "kept for decoration" (Jalaluddin 30). The sheer vastness of her room, filled with clothes and items she will never use, speaks to the luxury she is used to but also to her mindset. Her choice of husband is informed by her desire for financial stability rather than a love for the man. She is occupied by consumerism and being affluent. This stems from her reliance on her father's wealth, as she has become accustomed to a particular standard of living and wishes to maintain this in her marriage. Her engagement to Khalid is a good opportunity to showcase this. She chooses dresses for her cousin and sisters, revelling in the chance to shop. For herself, she opts for a white lengha, "decorated with so much lace and beadwork that it weighed close to ten pounds" (Jalaluddin 187). The dress and her choice demonstrate excess, especially as the dress is from a "famous designer" (Jalaluddin 187) and "cost $2,000" (Jalaluddin 187). Her identity and how she presents herself is largely defined by her ability to engage in consumerism. While Gökariksel and McLarney suggest that consumerism can be both empowering and oppressive, Hafsa takes part in consumption as a means of identity formation. It is integral to her character and her narrative in the novel that she engages in conspicuous consumption in this way. It sets her in stark opposition to Ayesha, who does not appear to like or enjoy shopping and does not want her family to "pick out [her] husband like they're ordering something off Amazon." (Jalaluddin 111). While they view consumer capitalism differently, it remains true for Hafsa that her identity and femininity is influenced and mediated by consumer capitalism. Hafsa partakes in what Gökariksel and McLarney dub "Islamic capitalism" (Gökariksel and McLarney 1). 'Islamic capitalism' is the idea that consumerism is marketed to Muslim women,

particularly transnational subjects, as a way to navigate "expression of piety, formulation of communities, and construction of identities" (Gökariksel and McLarney 3). Hafsa's active engagement and reliance on consumerism illustrates that it has shaped and formed her identity. The accessibility of consumption practices has permeated every facet of her life, so much so that she applies the same principles to her proposed marriage, and embodies the notion of 'shopping' for a husband instead of looking for love in an organic way, arranged marriage or otherwise.

Gökariksel and McLarney further argue that Islamic consumer culture is reliant on women and takes on gendered forms of expression. The theories of 'ideal womanhood' and the mediated identity are 'sold' to women and, in this case, are presented as aligning with this religious positioning. As consumption is an integral part of modern romance, it follows that other areas of consumption would follow to be incorporated into dating rituals. The female protagonists of chick lit are focussed on the self in many ways – this is not necessarily negative, but rather a reflection of the inclusion of consumerism in every facet of life, particularly aimed at women. In order to maintain attraction and meet conventional beauty standards, certain financial sacrifices need to be made. "Self-enhancement" (Illouz 66) products are relied upon in order to be most attractive to a potential partner. In *No Sex in the City*, Esma describes her sister's ritualistic behaviour regarding the upkeep of her image:

> Senem is gorgeous and works hard to maintain her beautiful hair, beautiful skin and beautiful white teeth. She is scrupulous about what she eats (organic mainly), sips on herbal tea and warm water between meals, and even now still maintains her Friday-night ritual of a face mask, nail kit and rom-com DVD. (Abdel-Fattah 27)

This ritualistic behaviour, which is concerned with the upkeep of the body and beauty, is sometimes driven by capitalism. It is clear that women are required by conventional beauty standards to participate in costly practices to maintain beauty, and this imposes a need for both "disposable income [and] leisure time" (Illouz 66). Women are, in some ways, 'victims' to the massive culture of consumption and consumerism, both of which disproportionally target female consumers. Romantic practices and the various preparations that are deemed necessary for successful romantic endeavours are costly and marketed towards women, thus making up a large part of consumerism and overconsumption. Elaine May aptly states that the "cultivation of romance [is] not cheap" (qtd. in Illouz 66). This statement from May suggests that beauty, however it is achieved, is necessary for successful dating. This is not to say that romance cannot

be successful without the products and treatments that are aimed at women, but rather that they are seen as obligatory, especially for the transnational subject who potentially engages in conspicuous consumption as a means of assimilation.

While women are maintaining beauty and the consequent financial imposition thereof, it is most often left to men to provide suitable dates. Illouz suggests that under the new rules of modern dating, men are expected to take a woman out "someplace exciting" (Illouz 67), or otherwise risk rejection. It is considered customary to 'treat' the woman on a date. It is here that we see that frequent dating results in a financial imposition on both men and women, as "women [compete] for attractiveness and sexual allure, men [compete] in their ability to provide for the price of entertainment" (Illouz 67-68). Illouz suggests that middle-class men are disadvantaged by this arrangement, as they are not promised a return on their investment in dating. However, I argue that the woman's output of beauty, appeal, and the concerted effort they make is the return for men. If romance is by nature transactional, both parties must be affected financially – which they are. It still remains that dating requires a financial output by both men and women, intrinsically linking romance and consumption under capitalism.

It is clear that consumerism, consumption, and romance are inherently linked for the chick lit protagonist. This is true in every variation of the genre, and not limited to the transnational subject. In Esma and Hafsa's lives, there is evidence of the interplay between their religion, 'Islamic capitalism', and romance that positions them as modern women. Esma's goals for romance and the role of beauty and ritualistic behaviour in her life and her sister's speak to the total integration of capitalistic consumption. The onus is put on women to maintain certain standards of beauty in order to successfully date and find a partner, which results in their dependency on consumer goods. This is similarly evident in Hafsa's life, as she is seen to value luxury and wealth over future-defining choices. She revels in the idea of a proposal, and her goal to amass one hundred proposals before accepting one is evidence of her reliance on and indoctrination by consumer capitalism. As transnational subjects, the characters are influenced by Western ideals and the saturated market that defines these locations. Their romantic lives, as a result, become entwined with their consumption practices and come to mirror them.

4.4 Romance in a Material World: Evaluating Love and Consumption in *Almost Single* and *Girls of Riyadh*

This section will discuss Aisha from *Almost Single* and Sadeem and Michelle from *Girls of Riyadh,* all three of whom embody the interplay of romance and consumerism in chick

lit. While I have established that transnational subjects partake in consumerism as part of identity formation in the diasporic home, as well as mirroring material consumption in their dating habits, the domestic chick lit protagonist is similarly able to engage in both her romantic desire and consumption in her homeland. The inescapable nature of consumer capitalism means that it is difficult to make a distinction between the transnational and domestic experiences thereof. In this section, I will look to the domestic sphere primarily to highlight the role of Islamic capitalism, not to try and distinguish it in any way from transnational texts, but rather to affirm the unique ways in which capitalism functions outside the West, further emphasising the notion that romance and consumerism are intrinsically linked.

Chick lit exemplifies the ideals of capitalism, and the novels work towards presenting the lives of young women who are driven by financial pursuits and the use of disposable income to enjoy life to its full potential. In the case of chick lit novels from the Middle East, the preoccupation of chick lit with consumer capitalism can be examined through the lens of Islam and the intersection of women, the Islamic faith, and consumerism and consumption. Gökariksel and McLarney consider this intersection and put forward the idea of "Islamic capitalism" (Gökariksel and McLarney 1). By marketing particular commodities as being necessary for Muslim women, these commodities, in turn, become a means for women to navigate their religion and their identity formation. Muslim women and their construction of femininities are influenced in some way and mediated through consumer capitalism. Islamic capitalism is seen to be dependent on women and reflects the dominance of women in consumerism in every sphere. Women are fundamental "not only to consumption, purchasing, and shopping, but also to the marketing and circulation of commodities" (Gökariksel and McLarney 3). In *Girls of Riyadh,* which features Muslim protagonists engaging in consumerism and consumption, there is little critique or even questioning of the role of capitalism in their lives, and it is embraced as a means to forming identities, engaging with friends, and, most importantly for this chapter, dating rituals and practices.

As this thesis undertakes a transnational feminist reading of the chosen texts, Myambo's analysis and theory of CTZs is necessary for the understanding of chick lit outside of the West, as well as the means through which global capitalism functions in Middle Eastern and South Asian spaces. The chosen domestic chick lit takes place in locations that Myambo would describe as appropriate microspaces or CTZs. These microspaces are culturally similar to 'First World' spaces and rely on consumption and consumerism in the "high-end shopping mall, the Western music-playing nightclub or the cappuccino-serving café" (Myambo 111). These CTZs, such as the nightclubs, hotels, cafés, and bars, inform the romantic pursuits of the

chick lit protagonist, as well as the type of man she may find in these spaces. "Romantic adventures" (Myambo 126) take place in modern, global spaces, as these are the spaces most suited to the "hybrid, transnational, feminist identity" (Myambo 126) of the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit protagonist. In addition to this, Myambo speaks to the consumption-driven, modern space as forcing the protagonists to walk "a cultural tightrope that attempts to straddle modernity and tradition but to also embrace choice and feminism" (Myambo 127) as they navigate romantic choices and pursuit of a suitable husband. This is particularly true for the characters in *Girls of Riyadh*, who consciously engage with shopping and consumption at the locations Myambo mentions. Instead of throwing a party to celebrate Gamrah's upcoming wedding, much like the bachelorette party, the group of women instead decide to do "something so bold and so much fun that others after them would imitate it" (Alsanea 15). They choose to dress in "gear that artfully concealed any sign of femininity" (Alsanea 15), like abayas and thobes, so that they have the freedom to travel alone in a rental car. They visit a famous café and a shopping mall and eat their dinner at an "elegant Italian restaurant" (Alsanea 18). Instead of a DJ party or a more refined event, the women choose to celebrate Gamrah's wedding by engaging in consumerism. The mall is portrayed as a suitable choice of location for such a celebration and proves that consumerism and consumption are a serious concern of the protagonists of *Girls of Riyadh*. As stated by Gökariksel and McLarney, the Muslim protagonist is able to navigate identity and sense of self through consumption, and the four women find both pleasure and freedom in their consumerism. Um Nuwayyir speaks to the 'types' of women that can be seen in Riyadh, and notably highlights one group that she calls the "Fashion victim" (Alsanea 78):

> This woman changes her behavior according to the current fashion. If the trend during a certain time is to act all spiritual, attend religious gatherings and wear the hijab outside the kingdom, she will do it and "go with the flow." But if the trend is to dump your hijab once you get outside the country, and when you are inside to spend a lot of time in the malls wearing a tight-fitted abaya that shows off the features of a woman's body, then she will go with that flow, too. These trends are usually under the control of men's preferences during their search for suitable wives, or mothers who are hunting for future daughters-in-law. (Alsanea 78)

It is clear that for Muslim women in Saudi Arabia, 'trends' can both dictate the consumption practices and the religious expression of women. There is a sense that

consumerism and the advertisement of fashion, both in clothing and religion, have the ability to influence women to a large extent. The sense of self is affected by trends and one's ability to conform. Additionally, Alsanea highlights the notion that these trends are directly related to marriage and romance. Men's preferences are noted here, which will influence how a woman is presented, especially when in search of a partner. Furthermore, the "mothers who are hunting for future daughters-in-law" (Alsanea 78) are also seen to have leverage here. If certain trends are endorsed by the mothers of men, who have significant sway in their sons' choices, young women will attempt to attune themselves to these trends in order to successfully engage in romance.

For Sadeem, it is the failure of a romance that precipitates her further engagement to consume. This does not take place in Saudi Arabia – Sadeem uses the opportunity of spending time in London to engage in buying clothes and jewellery, as she is in a new market that has been unavailable to her until this point. Gamrah's mother suggested that Sadeem uses her trip to London to "buy […] the latest fashions in clothes and accessories […] instead of buying them in Riyadh" (Alsanea 69). Sadeem is open to participation in capitalism and takes joy in her (or rather, her father's) ability to purchase and engage with the new fashions available to her. The text offers no critique or discourse about Sadeem's reliance on her father's finances. In fact, when he passes, this raises considerable issues for Sadeem, as she loses her financial stability, offered to her only through the presence of a man in her life. Here, the reader is given insight into women's positions in society in Saudi Arabia through the subtlety of an offhand mention of her father's money. Michelle is similarly willing to assimilate into Western society, having lived in the United States in her childhood, and also because of her disdain for Saudi society, especially after Faisal calls off their relationship in favour of a wife chosen for him by his mother. Michelle highlights what she sees as "backwardness, its benighted rigidity and overall reactionary nature" (Alsanea 133) of Saudi Arabia, in stark contrast to the "new life in a healthy place" (Alsanea 133) that she will be able to build in the United States. Her youth and her parents' less traditional ethos mark her as different – Western society is 'free' in comparison to Saudi Arabia, and she utilises her time in the United States to engage in the consumer freedoms that are available to her.

Much like Hafsa, who sees her choice of future husband as an opportunity to 'shop' for a suitable partner, in *Almost Single* the protagonist Aisha describes her online dating profile as "[her] online shopping for a husband" (Kala 8). For Aisha and her friends Misha and Anushka, much of life is dictated by consumerism and consumption practices. It would be accurate to state that dating is seen by women as a means to 'try on' potential partners to see what fits. The

rituals of dating mirror the women's lives. Misha is described as cycling through fad diets in order to lose weight and then requires "a tighter pair of jeans" (Kala 39). As she loses weight and buys new clothes, constantly adapting or changing parts of herself, so goes her dating life: 'trying on' new boyfriends and seeing what fits with their lifestyle, their friends, and their expectations.

When a pair enters into any relationship, the financial requirements of that relationship are not exclusive to the personal maintenance of beauty and the practice of dating. Instead, both partners are mutually participating in consumption. While they may believe they are benefitting from this participation in the market, they are instead compensating others in the pursuit of their own romantic desires. This becomes entirely necessary under modern dating ideals. It is the very act of consumption that makes moments romantic – buying flowers, candlelit dinners, and gifts and creating a beautiful appearance (Illouz 116). These events are repeated until the desired result is achieved, culminating either in an engagement or marriage. It does appear as though the onus falls on men after marriage, as Anushka's ex-husband Anuj is described as part of the group of married men who "usually do pay for their wives' single gal pals" (Kala 266). There is a clear adherence to prescription gender roles, and men are financially responsible for their wives and even their friends. Dating and the financial needs of the process are concluded here, but appear to remain constant for the men in relationships. Anushka and Anuj's divorce means that the group is now forced to pay for their own Sunday brunch, their taste for which was "not dull[ed]" (Kala 85) by his exit. In this instance, the women are taking advantage of the love a man holds for one of their friends. They are financially independent women but are not adverse to being treated by a man. There is a tension apparent here between the desire to be independent, modern young women and appreciating the financial input from another. It is my belief that the female characters do not see the contradictory nature of this and easily revert to the traditional values of being a woman who is 'looked after' by a man. As they desire a husband or a stable romantic relationship, it follows that they would also appreciate the input of a partner, even if it is not their own. As with Sadeem, whose shopping trip is paid for by her father, the friends Aisha, Misha, and Anushka are reliant on the contribution of a man. In the event of their own marriages, Aisha and Misha's husbands would be similarly implored to contribute on behalf of their wives' friends. It is clear that romance and marriage are one of the fields where the chick lit protagonist does not feel beholden to being a 'modern', independent woman, and this is perhaps a theoretical stance for the women. There is a desire for traditional or patriarchal roles here that are worthy of critique. Given the domestic location

of *Almost Single*, it follows that there may be a more rigorous adherence to traditional values in practice.

In the chosen texts, the serial nature of dating is evidenced by the constancy of dating and its associated rituals. Aisha describes dating as akin to gambling, as "Gamblers have losing streaks, and single women who date have a loser's streak: Misha has been on a loser's streak ever since she started dating" (Kala 79). Misha's dating history is full of unsuccessful stories, but she remains driven by the prospect of marriage and security. This ritualistic dating, governed by consumption and market influences, is seen primarily in *Almost Single*, set in Delhi. While the other texts feature dating to some extent, it takes a different form, largely due to the religious views of the protagonists, who are Hindu. While *Almost Single* portrays the reality of dating for a young woman in a cosmopolitan city, including all the appropriate locations or microspaces, Aisha is not 'limited' in any sense by her personal convictions and religious beliefs. As a result of this and her location, she engages freely in the consumerism and consumption that is requisite for 'serial' dating, along with her friends. They partake together in the preparation for dates, going through a well-established routine: "The salon appointment is fixed, the nail bar visited, and the only detail pending is the outfit. It is going to be brand new and completely off-the-rack" (Kala 39). It is clear that consumerism, participation in consumption, and financial output are tied to the romantic process, and one cannot function without the other.

4.5 Conclusion

In the other chapters of this thesis, there is a clear distinction to be made between the transnational and the domestic texts. As I look to romance and its intersection with consumerism capitalism, it becomes evident that there is little difference between the experiences of transnational and domestic protagonists. All the women mediate their romantic lives through consumerism, and they are inherently linked. Romance, consumption and consumerism become intertwined at various points in the protagonists' lives. In transnational texts like *No Sex in the City* and *Ayesha at Last*, the romantic relationship mirrors the consumption habits of the characters Senem and Hafsa, respectively. Even after her marriage, Senem sees the practices of grooming and the financial burden thereof as necessary in her life, both to maintain the relationship and to maintain herself as a woman. It is clear that consumption is tied to the formation of identity through this character, as she engages in ritualistic behaviour that requires a significant financial output in order to present herself and her femininity. For Hafsa, luxury goods are a distinct part of her life, and it follows that she

would choose a husband who would be able to help her maintain her lifestyle and live as she sees to be appropriate. Here, her hope for romance is also likened to consumerism, as she wishes to receive a large number of rishtas or proposals before she makes her choice. She is essentially 'shopping' for her future husband, perusing her choices as they become available to her. Her status and beauty allow her to emulate shopping in her relationships, and her social mobility allows her to maintain power in this scenario. In chick lit, the vast majority of the plot is dedicated to the pursuit of a suitable husband. Novels often end with an engagement or even a wedding, but that forms a very small part of the overall plot. Women in chick lit are seen to be 'shopping' for a husband – dating consistently and with their requirements in mind, not unlike a shopping list. Both examples of transnational chick lit present the characters engaging in consumerism in conjunction with romance in their lives. While Esma also seeks romance in *No Sex in the City*, she is less concerned with the ritualistic and consumerism practices that her sister engages in. Instead, she sees romance as an intentional practice through which she engages with her sense of self and her identity as a diasporic subject living in Australia. Her relationships give valuable insight into her life and how she negotiates womanhood, religion, and hopes for marriage in her location.

In the chosen domestic texts, the notion of 'shopping' for a husband is similarly true. As both India and Saudi Arabia can be described as suitable CTZs in which chick lit and the core of the genre can take place, the women represented in the texts are seen to exemplify the ideals of capitalism. The characters in both *Girls of Riyadh* and *Almost Single* are seen to be driven by finances and their ability to enjoy life through their disposable income, whether from their jobs or their parents. For the protagonists of *Girls of Riyadh*, the women's identities are mediated through their ability to engage in Islamic capitalism and participate in the appropriate trends. They choose shopping malls and cafés as meeting places and places of leisure, which speaks to the prominence of consumerism in their lives. Similarly, the three friends in *Almost Single* embody the notion of 'shopping' for husbands and see their dating lives as occupying much of their time due to the importance of this choice for their future. The women have a 'modern' understanding of dating, which aligns with Illouz's theories on the nature of dating under capitalism. Romantic love can, in some ways, be tied to financial standing, given that both men and women are required to make a financial offering to the practice of dating, although in different ways. While women are burdened with physical upkeep and beauty, men are expected to pay, even for their wives' friends, which aligns with more traditional values found in the domestic texts. While Aisha and her friends are not limited in any sense by their religion or the religion of the country, like the characters of *Girls of Riyadh*, it is clear that

consumerism, participation in consumption, and financial output are tied to the romantic process, and one cannot function without the other.

Chapter Five: Exploring How Religion and Culture Inform Identity Formation in Middle Eastern and South Asian Chick Lit

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the connections between romance and consumerism as depicted in selected Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. I argued that romance and consumerism work in tandem at times, with romance becoming an instrument for participation in conspicuous consumption. Romance and dating are inherently tied to consumerism and consumption practices for the protagonists, through which the women 'shop' for husbands who can provide a particular lifestyle and social capital despite being economically independent, educated women. Additionally, the chapter considered how Islam and capitalism intersect as Muslim women navigate new subjectivities both at home and in the diaspora. In this chapter, I will examine how religion and culture inform the identity formation of the protagonists of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. This chapter will compare and contrast the experiences of domestic and transnational texts, looking at the nuances of religion and culture as they pertain to identity in differing locations. It is necessary to distinguish the protagonists by location, as their experiences are markedly different. It is my contention that religion and culture are vital elements in the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novel, as it is through this lens that the protagonist mediates her life and her choices. This chapter will discuss the significance of cultural identity in relation to the transnational subject, as well as the nature of the hyphenated identity (Woolston 112) undertaken by the women in the novels. In this thesis, a hyphenated identity refers to the dual or multifaceted nature of identity, in which an individual takes aspects of their identity from different cultures, ethnicities, and experiences. The implication of this hyphenation is that one does not 'belong' entirely to any one group, and there is a fluidity in the identity that is reliant on circumstance.

This chapter will be divided into two sections: the first focuses on domestic texts, while the second section will look at transnational texts. In the first part of this chapter, I will focus on two novels, namely Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and *Almost Single* by Advaita Kala. Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is an example of a domestic text, as the novel follows four religious women living in Saudi Arabia, a society that is defined by Islamic practices. In my analysis of *Almost Single*, I will concentrate on Aisha and her representation of spirituality and culture in New Delhi. Following this, the second part of the chapter will discuss *Ayesha at Last* by Uzma Jalaluddin and *No Sex in the City* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, both of which consider religion in transnational locations, namely Canada and Australia, respectively.

As previously mentioned, Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is set in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The text follows four women, Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle, and Lamees, who are navigating their love lives and friendships while grappling with their positions as religious women in a religious society. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country governed by laws derived from the Quran. Gamrah battles with the stigma of divorce, complicated by her mother's fears and her father's desire for her to remarry. The other three protagonists, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees navigate the search for a suitable husband while remaining steadfast in their religious beliefs and cultural expectations. Michelle spent her youth in the United States and as a result, maintains her desire for particular freedoms and Western ideals, which informs her choices throughout the text. For Lamees, religion is a significant part of her life, and her marriage marks a turning point in her practice of Islam. After her wedding, she chooses to veil or wear a hijab. Her marriage and "wonderful husband" (Alsanea 261) are seen as gifts from God, and she wears the hijab as a symbol of her appreciation. Through this series of anonymous emails, the stories and lives of the four women are explored, and their religious and cultural values are intrinsic to the plot.

No Sex in the City sees Esma navigate Australia as a Muslim woman. She is seeking a husband who is on "the same religious level" (Abdel-Fattah 12). While she practises her religion, she does not consider herself observant since she does not observe the five tenets of Islam. Islam does, however, inform her life choices. For example, she does not drink alcohol or date without the express intention of potential marriage with that romantic partner. Esma's father is an observant Muslim, while her mother and sister, Sanem, are similar to Esma. She lives in a secular society and is routinely exposed to other religions, as her three best friends belong to different faith groups. Lisa is Jewish, while Ruby is Greek Orthodox, and Nirvana is a Gujarati Hindu.

Ayesha, the protagonist of *Ayesha at Last,* is an observant Muslim living in Canada. While her story mirrors that of Esma to some extent, Ayesha is more devoted to her practice of Islam and observes prayers and other rituals. She lives in Canada with her mother and grandparents, having moved from India with the help of her uncle after her father's death. Ayesha wears a hijab and does not drink alcohol or date. She is an active member of her Mosque and spends her free time helping the Imam plan events. Her narrative is intertwined with that of Khalid, who lives on the same street. He is similarly devoted to his religion. He dresses in robes and a skullcap at work and in his home. He chooses to outwardly project his religious views, which causes conflict.

In *Almost Single,* Aisha is not a religious woman. She does however partake in cultural and spiritual practices, which are indicative of her cultural and ethnic identity in India. Instead

of religion, Aisha utilises the services of an astrologer, and uses his predictions to inform her choices in life. Her mother, a religious woman, prays consistently for her daughter to find a suitable husband. Her best friends, Misha and Anushka, have similar views on the role of religion in their lives. As a young, middle-class woman, Aisha is representative of a growing class of economically independent young women in India and the changing ways in which they interact with culture, both local and global.

5.2 A Discussion of Theories of Religion and Culture

Discussions of religion and culture make up a significant portion of the scholarship concerning Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. This literature review also considers critical writing that extends to similar topics but does not reference the texts chosen for this thesis. In looking at existing scholarship on religion, culture, and ethnicity in the genre, it is clear that this is not a topic of study that has been applied to white, Western chick lit. Little academic consideration of cultural nuances or religious practices that are represented in the genre has been undertaken. This is an emerging field, in which increasing consideration of women of colour and differing religious backgrounds in the genre are being pursued. Lucinda Newns discusses the Western notions of Muslim women, particularly the perception that they are "'oppressed' and 'downtrodden'" (Newns 285), a typical portrayal of the "Muslim Other" (Newns 285). Newns challenges the stereotypical view, especially the notion that the West has superiority due to its treatment of women. She further explores the responsibility of Muslim writers to create new possibilities for representations of Muslim women and initiate resistance on behalf of both readers and represented women. Her discussion of the religious representation of women and the culture to which they belong is pivotal for understanding the significance of the genre as a means through which dominant ideas can be questioned. The idea that gender is a notable arena where culture is debated (Newns 297) further illustrates the value of women-led narratives through which Islam and Islamic culture can be discussed, both for a local and knowledgeable readership and one in the West. Newns notes that, by not utilising recognisable tropes and stereotypes about Muslim women, these texts have immense power in reframing the social commentary of Muslim women in the West.

Jennie Chapman's discussion of religion in popular culture, especially in novel form, illustrates the benefit of writing about transnational Muslim women living in the West. Her discussion is focused on *The Size of a Mustard Seed* by Umm Juwayriyah. While not a romance or chick lit novel, the ideas and themes that Chapman highlights are meaningful to this study. Transnational Muslim women are presented as being part of a "new era of fiction" (Juwayriyah

qtd. in Chapman 201), one through which different stories about Muslims can be told, in stark contrast to the "dominant discourse" (Chapman 202), especially that which was circulated after 9/11 in the United States. Chapman focuses on the audience of these texts, which is both the Muslim reader and those from outside the religion, a clear indication of the purpose of the texts as both relatable material and educational. This is signalled by the inclusion of language and concepts that would be familiar to the Muslim reader but are also explained, thereby not excluding or alienating other readers. Finally, Erin Hurt considers the function of ethnicity in chick lit. She asserts that white, Western chick lit protagonists do not need to engage with their ethnicity or nationality and do not "contemplate […] cultural identity" (Hurt, "Introduction" 9); this is not true for Indian protagonists from the genre. Intersectional issues become significant to the Indian chick lit protagonists, and understanding of the genre cannot be disconnected from "analysis of issues of race, empire, national and political economy" (Ponzanesi qtd. in Hurt, "Introduction" 14). As a genre, chick lit has been able to create cultural narratives that incorporate a variety of issues that are pertinent to women in many circumstances, primarily as a result of the production of "local variants" (Ommundsen qtd. in Hurt, "Introduction" 16). Hurt states that this leads to the production of "different versions of womanhood" (Hurt, "Introduction" 13), allowing women of colour to see themselves in the texts they read, no longer forced to use "white women and white femininity as the yardstick for protagonists of all ethnicities" (Hurt, "Introduction" 13).

Critics such as Butler and Desai have considered the role of chick lit as a genre through which race, ethnicity, and class are increasingly important. Not only do the texts engage with womanhood, but they serve to politicise the genre and act as a means of creating a more heterogeneous genre. Butler and Desai discuss South Asian American chick lit as a space in which these discussions can take place, as the transnational subject is uniquely placed. The family relationship, driven by cultural and religious ties, becomes a point of contestation as the "new, independent" (Butler and Desai, "Manolos" 17) woman navigates her home or parents' culture and the diasporic home culture where she lives. This article looks at the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity as it affects the life of the chick lit protagonist. Sonia Vashishta Oberoi discusses Indian chick lit, highlighting the "crucial point" (Oberoi 128), or turning point for young, independent and cosmopolitan Indian girls and women. She sees immense value in the genre as it allows women to read narratives that "reflect their lives" (Oberoi 128) and do not make use of stereotypical images of Indian women. Oberoi states that Indian chick lit exemplifies the "amalgamation of traditions and modernity" (Oberoi 129), presenting a genre that touches on the experiences of young women in India but also notes their cultural and ethnic

experiences. While the novels feature contemporary and liberated women, they are open to arranged marriages, engage in spirituality and religious rituals, and are mindful of their cultural values and upbringings. The turning point for young Indian women is defined by the conflict between Western values while maintaining cultural ideals. The texts also make use of Hindi phrases and curses, imbuing the texts with authenticity and the potential to educate those outside the country on the realities of Indian middle-class society.

Ulka Anjaria looks at literature and popular culture in India as one of the key methods for representing "the new India" (Anjaria 31) and the changes in societal organisation that are increasingly present in modern India. Speaking specifically to Anuja Chauhan's chick lit novels – *The Zoya Factor* (2008), *Battle for Bittora* (2010), *Those Pricey Thakur Girls* (2013), *The House That BJ Built* (2015), and *Baaz* (2017) – she describes India as a "place of futurity rather than backwardness" (Anjaria 31), a notion that is achieved entirely through the use of female characters in the genre. In presenting the "woman who can have it all" (Anjaria 31), Anjaria states that writers like Chauhan show female desire as central to success in all facets of life. These novels include "fun and female desire" (Anjaria 31) not in contrast to, but in addition to what Anjaria calls "earnest masculinity" (31). Anjaria concludes that Indian chick lit exemplifies the specifics of a local setting, themes, and femininity that is desired by the modern woman who sees the value and necessity of these examples of womanhood.

Nalini Natarajan also considers the implication of 'Woman' as a symbol in India's nation-building. She contends that women are inherently tied to the movement and change of ideas in India, becoming a "signifier in many ways [of] the contrary dialectic of stasis and change in the imagining of India" (Natarajan 79). The idea of the woman becomes multifunctional, and it is through the coverage of "real *women*" (Natarajan 85, emphasis in original) that the "heterogenous, various" (Natarajan 85) realities of the Indian woman come to the forefront. Natarajan contends that women become the means through which the "East-West cultural battle" (Natarajan 87) is fought. In addition, in Heike Mißler's work discussing African-American, Asian and Latina chick lit, she notes that these iterations of the genre no longer force "romance readers of colour to assume identities that are not available to them in the real world" (Mißler 156). She highlights the spectrum of experiences that are culturally significant and specific to women of colour, thus magnifying the unique experiences that are presented in the texts. Through this, the readership of these novels learns that "these identities are more heterogenous than […] expected" (Mißler 187), thereby disrupting the unified or homogeneous identities that they might be assumed to have. Mißler focuses on racial and ethnic identity as a vessel for both education and representation and presents "an experience of

womanhood that differs from the white mainstream" (Mißler 187) while reaffirming those who relate to the material.

Jenny Heijun Wills interrogates the idea of chick lit as a homogeneous and primarily white genre. She highlights an increased focus on the individual lives that are depicted in the genre, but this works to foreground the "unique struggles faced by women of colour" (Wills 73). Wills further considers the cultural heritage of South Asian American women, how the "antiquated dating customs of their parents' generations" (Wills 73) are commonplace in their lives, and the methods through which they choose to pursue romance. Lauren O'Mahony focuses on the complicated cultural context and differences that are apparent in relationships portrayed outside of white, Western chick lit, looking specifically at Anita Heiss's Aboriginal chick lit. In this article O'Mahony considers the significance of political compatibility, "especially in terms of culture and ethnicity" (O'Mahony 48). Through this lens, she discusses the ability of chick lit to adhere to romantic conventions while engaging in "cultural critique" (O'Mahony 46). O'Mahony highlights the potential of the chick lit genre in building on engagement with cultural issues and intercultural empathy (O'Mahony 60). While this article does not discuss the exact location or cultural background as explored in this thesis, O'Mahony's discussion of culture and ethnicity is in line with romance, and the chick lit genre can be similarly applied to Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit.

The theoretical basis for this chapter comes in part from Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, who discuss the need for a transnational and intersectional viewpoint in academia. They argue that notions of globalisation can lead to monolithic and homogenised cultural representations instead of celebrations of "cosmopolitan possibilities of […] new 'communities'" (Grewal and Kaplan 9). Furthermore, the cultural flows that are accepted to be true are seen as "unidirectional (i.e., from the 'West' to the 'rest')" (Grewal and Kaplan 12), which negates the influence of a nation's own cultural diversity and the potential for that to disseminate, particularly in an increasingly transnational society. They consider Western societies to be extensions of 'home' countries that are situated globally, acknowledging that the flow of ideas and culture is a result of transnational influence. This is particularly relevant in their discussion of Islam, which they contend is seen as singular; that is, there is only one interpretation of the religion and thus only "one way of living that reality as Muslim women" (Grewal and Kaplan 25). These notions are of particular relevance to the diasporic characters that will be discussed in this chapter, living in secular, Western societies, which show a limited understanding of the protagonists' Muslim religion. While they are speaking about making use

of this approach when considering media and feminist theory in general, it can be used to examine chick lit from the Middle East and South Asia in particular.

Additionally, William Lafi Youmans' consideration of the representations of Islam as a whole and those who practice the religion, particularly media representations, is of value. He contends that the media has presented what he calls the "good or safe Muslim [who] is the 'moderate Muslim'" (Youmans 465), who is contrasted with the "bad Muslims, often by those who are largely ignorant and hold skewed understandings of Islam" (Youmans 465). Youmans highlights the role of Muslim texts written by Muslim authors, where "self-representation is an option" (Youmans 471) and Muslims and Islam are "profoundly ordinary" (Youmans 471), unhindered by stereotypes and politicised viewpoints. Media becomes a powerful tool through which Muslims can seek belonging, as positive media provides an enclave, while negative press can result in Muslims being perceived as "foreign or threatening" (Youmans 472). His discussion as to the positionality of Muslims in popular media speaks to the value of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit as a vessel through which ordinary Muslim lives can be presented, especially transnational texts set in the West.

5.3.1 Religion on Familiar Ground: Analysing Islam in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*

In this section, I will turn my attention to the way in which Islam functions in one of the domestic novels, namely Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh*, which presents its protagonists as grappling with their positionality as Muslim women living in an Islamic state. Since Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country, it is governed by laws derived from the Quran. While Saudi Arabia makes use of Islamic laws, it offers the space for Alsanea to interrogate the notion of religion as "an affair of personal choice" (Abdullah and Awan 102). Through this text, Alsanea offers an honest and nuanced view of how Islam functions in the domestic Middle Eastern chick lit genre. In opposition to stereotypical views of Islamic women living in Islamic societies, this text instead offers "alternative images" (Salhi and Alfraih 911) of women who are "affirming their feminist agency through the expression of their needs and desires as human beings" (Salhi and Alfraih 911). The four main characters – Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle, and Lamees – engage with religion and the unique expression of their religious values. Barring Michelle, the protagonists consider Saudi Arabia to be a bona fide Islamic country, in opposition to a country like the United Arab Emirates, which allows "its people […] a lot of latitude in their social behaviour, and […] even allowed [people] to practice other religions" (Alsanea 238). Michelle sees the religious influence in the country as making it Islamic, as

opposed to 'just' a Muslim country. This discussion relies on the distinction between a nation making use of "law derived from the Qur'an" (Alsanea 238) or Shariah law and one also utilising "human-made law" (Alsanea 238), which is how Sadeem, in particular, perceives the United Arab Emirates. In contrast, Michelle sees both nations as equally Islamic, and the influence of the Islamic religion is indeed undeniable in both, as seen in Michelle's experiences when she moves to Dubai. The women in the text are able to debate the influence of religion, as they are actively challenging the notion of Saudi Arabia as a "pious and ultra-conservative society" (Salhi and Alfraih 911), with particular note of women's roles. They are often seen as "passive victims" (Salhi and Alfraih 911) of their society. In *Girls of Riyadh*, the engagement with their religion and the religious laws in Saudi Arabia show that the protagonists are "free to reinterpret" (Abdullah and Awan 102) their religious positionality and engage in social critique. The novel challenges perceptions of Muslim Middle Eastern women and subverts the pervasive stereotypes that are often utilised in Western media. Sadeem in particular engages in interrogating religion and its role in society. Muhammad Abdullah states that "Islam bestows on women a great deal of socio-religious freedom" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 20), but this does not always translate to actual cultural practices due to the nature of human intervention in law-making and society. A pertinent moment for Sadeem comes after her marriage to Waleed is officially signed but before the marriage ceremony. While Waleed maintains that she is "his wife according to the religion of God and His prophet" (Alsanea 36), the couple refrain from engaging in overtly sexual behaviour. Shortly before their wedding ceremony, Sadeem decides to sleep with Waleed, which ultimately causes him to serve her with divorce papers, citing his discomfort with his bride. This is a contentious moment for Sadeem, who hesitated over this decision but allowed her love for Waleed to inform her choice. Unfortunately for her, it becomes clear that the "fine line between what was proper behaviour and what wasn't" (Alsanea 36) is defined by Waleed's 'discomfort'. This moment in the text is thought-provoking, as the reader is informed of Sadeem's reluctance, but also of Waleed's attempts to pressurise his bride, as he had "criticized her every time she put a stop to anything" (Alsanea 36), acknowledging at this point that she is his wife under the covenants of their religion. Sadeem highlights the differences between religions as written in religious texts in opposition to the practices of that religion, even in an Islamic country. She questions, "Who would draw for her the fine line" (Alsanea 36) between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour – religious texts and doctrine or the mind and practices of her husband? It is here that the reality of religion and what is prescribed in religious texts is examined, as well as the contradictions and conflicts that arise as a result. Sadeem can be described as a victim in a sense, as she

practised her religion in a meaningful way, but this was not acceptable to her husband. He allowed his own hypocrisy and dogmatism to overshadow their lawful marriage and practice thereof. Sadeem also serves to act as a counter stereotype, breaking away from the notion of Muslim women as "caged virgins" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 21), as she navigates the acceptable expressions of love and marriage while trying to mediate the male and conservative response to her actions. It is through this that the "female body becomes a site of resistance" (Salhi and Alfraih 914), confronting and, in some ways, opposing the politics and power relations seen in Saudi Arabian society.

Michelle is uniquely positioned in her group of friends, as she had a markedly different upbringing. Her mother is American, and having spent much of her childhood in the United States, she attempts to navigate women's rights and freedoms in Saudi society when she reaches adulthood. The two distinct locations and experiences cause Michelle to interrogate the values and customs of Islamic society in Saudi Arabia. Michelle attends college in the US and, while living in San Francisco, spends the majority of her time with her cousin Matti. She comes to realise that she is attracted to him, and begins to think about marriage. This, as she comes to realise, will not be possible due to their religious differences. Matti is a Christian man, and as a Muslim woman, she is not permitted to marry him. This predicament is contrasted with her parents' experience of marriage: her Muslim father was "able to marry her Christian mother" (Alsanea 198). The same freedom of choice is not afforded to Muslim women, who are not "permitted to marry non-Muslim men" (Alsanea 198). The novel highlights the unequal nature of Islam, which applies different rules to men and women. This is particularly distressing for Sadeem and Michelle, as both feel limited by their religion and the Islamic rule of the country. While Michelle has chosen to engage with Western values and is significantly influenced by these ideals, Sadeem is devout and in complete understanding of the Islamic values that dictate Saudi Arabia's laws. This results in a more nuanced examination of the rules by which she lives her life.

In *Girls of Riyadh*, an attempt is made to present an alternative viewpoint of Islam by introducing the nuances of the experiences of women living in an Islamic state. Sadeem grapples with her expression of religion and its function in her life at various points in the text. This representation of a realistic engagement with Islam provides an alternative narrative "from those circulating in the dominant discourse" (Chapman 202), especially where it concerns women. Sadeem shows that she has space and the ability to question religion and express it differently at different stages of life. She acknowledges that this is because she "had a *somewhat* liberal father" (Alsanea 115, emphasis in original), which allowed her to be "free of

the kinds of constraints and worries of most Saudi girls" (Alsanea 115). The 'freedom' that is afforded to Sadeem contrasts the "stories of fundamentalism, terrorism, and barbarism that circulate in the dominant cultural discourse" (Chapman 202). Sadeem sees religion as a personal expression, albeit one that can shift and change due to personal growth or outside intervention. When she is pursuing a relationship with Firas, Sadeem becomes introspective about her religion and her expression and practice thereof. Firas displayed "utter devotion to religion in spite of having spent more than a decade abroad" (Alsanea 156), which Sadeem sees as a positive attribute. Having maintained his devotion to the religion and Saudi Arabia as a kingdom, Firas encourages Sadeem to be "a better Muslim" (Alsanea 156), which she welcomes. Here, we see the role of religion in both the experiences of the chick lit protagonist and in their romantic pursuits. Sadeem is described as "trying to move closer towards religious perfection so that she would be worthy of Firas" (Alsanea 156-157). While she obviously lives in an Islamic state and practices her religion, the "*somewhat* liberal" (Alsanea 115, emphasis in original) nature of her upbringing has positioned her to be open to a more fervent display of her religion. This is a somewhat contradictory statement, as it can be interpreted that Firas will only approve of her if she is 'more' religious. However, it is my assertion that Sadeem sees this as an opportunity. Her experiences with Waleed led her to question Islam and her, and at that point, she did feel inferior in her expression of Islam. She sees her relationship with Firas as a means to further explore her religion and what shape it takes in her life. Firas encourages her to veil and become more devout. Sadeem's openness to his suggestions suggests the ever-changing thoughts and opinions of the young Muslim woman as she navigates her religion and practice in line with the dominant influences in her life. This paints her as remarkably 'normal', adding to the positive representation of Muslim women and the realism that is inherent to the chick lit genre in the Middle East. Sadeem's ability to grapple with her religion and expression thereof, even in Islamic society, is described accurately by Chapman's statement that "Islamic fiction […] 'normalizes faith and makes Islam as regular and ordinary as apple pie'" (Chapman 202).

Gamrah and Lamees are similarly devoted to their religion and practice thereof. After her divorce, and the birth of her child, Gamrah's male relatives attempt to arrange a marriage for her. Gamrah explicitly asks for guidance and direction when posed with the question of Ubo Musa'ed's proposal. He is much older than her, and does not wish to raise her child as his own. While Gamrah sees the value and need for a marriage after her divorce, she is conflicted because of Ubo Musa'ed's shortfalls and unappealing nature. She says:

> O Allah, if You know that marrying Ubo Musa'ed is good for me in my religion, worldly life, and my ultimate destiny, then facilitate it for me, and then bless me in my action. If, on the other hand, You know this thing is detrimental for me in my religion, worldly life, and ultimate destiny, turn it away from me, and turn me away from it. (Alsanea 208)

She invokes the knowledge of Allah to guide her and help her make this decision. It is clear that she has a deep reverence for her religion and believes in its power to ensure her life and choices will be good and keep her on the correct path. This is further illustrated by her interactions with her son, Saleh. Despite Rashid being an absent parent, Saleh has excellent role models of religion and Islamic practice in his mother and her family and friends. When he is a small child, he mirrors his mother's prayers, "stand[ing] next to her imitating every one of her moves, from the very beginning with saying 'Allah Akbar' to reciting to bending down and prostrating himself on the carpet-covered floor" (Alsanea 249). Saleh's appreciation of spirituality at a young age shows both Gamrah's good practice of religion and the positive influence she has on her child, again working to normalise Islam and make it "regular and ordinary as apple pie" (Chapman 202). The spiritual journey and convictions of the Middle Eastern chick lit protagonist are placed at the forefront of the novels. While her romantic pursuits did not develop into successes, the text instead offers her "faith and spirituality […] as an alternative 'solution' to the malaise left behind once the romantic myths can no longer hold water" (Newns 296). The idea of romance being mythological ties into the discussion of religion and belief systems. It is a system of belief in the potential of a romantic relationship and a stable partnership, but without the certainty that faith and religion hold. Gamrah is certain of her beliefs and her Islamic religion, but romance has not been fruitful for her, except in giving her son, Saleh. The reliability and surety that can be found in religion is what the women hope they will find in romance, but it is clear that religion is ultimately the source of solace which is most crucial to the women's lives.

Lamees undergoes a development or journey of her religion. In Saudi Arabia, wearing some form of hijab is compulsory, but within the home and outside of the country, women are given the choice to remove it. After her honeymoon with Nizar, Lamees decides to "start to wear it even when she didn't need to, following the rules of Islam" (Alsanea 261). This is a profoundly personal choice for Lamees, as it shows a growing spirituality and devotion to her practice of Islam. While the law in her country dictates certain circumstances in which hijab can be removed, her choice to wear it at all times is "a bold spiritual step" (Alsanea 261), one

for which her friends applaud her. The personal nature of this choice is emphasised – she did not ask for outside opinions on the matter, not even her husband's (Alsanea 261). It is only Michelle who views this choice as unnecessary, citing how "hideous *hijab*-wearing women usually looked and how the *hijab* restricted a girl from being fashionable" (Alsanea 261, emphasis in original). Michelle's opinions differ starkly from those of the other three women due to the Western influences in her life. However, Lamees is not dissuaded, as this decision comes from a desire to "pay her dues to God" (Alsanea 261). She feels that her youth and time before marriage allowed her a great deal of freedom and liberation, and the fact that God had granted her "such a wonderful husband" (Alsanea 261) was proof that he saw her devotion in her practices. Lamees's choice highlights the personal nature of religious practice, which challenges the notion of religion as restrictive – a viewpoint that is commonly applied to Islam and its treatment of women. Through this character, Alsanea is able to showcase an "alternative to the perceived binary between Islam and the liberal values that have come to be associated with 'the West'" (Newns 296), particularly when considering women's agency and choices.

As mentioned, Michelle interacts with religion and the Islamic rule of Saudi Arabia with significantly more hesitation. She grew up in the United States of America, and her mother only became a Muslim after Michelle's birth. While her friends exhibit devotion and piety, Michelle instead considers herself to be a "wonderful free spirit" (Alsanea 121), which she has to protect when in Saudi Arabia under "*their* rules; *their* poisonous thoughts and insidious ways" (Alsanea 121, emphasis in original). Michelle is a transnational subject and illustrates the influence of Western ideals on a young woman in the Middle East. While much of her teen years and adult life are spent in Riyadh, Michelle rebels against the rules and conventions of the state, having grown contemptuous of the state. Michelle's perception of Saudi Arabia is described as "truly frightening" (Alsanea 188), as she wishes to engage in conversation about "freedom and women's rights, the bonds of religion, conventions imposed by society and her philosophy on relations between the sexes" (Alsanea 188). When she migrates to the United States for her university studies,

> Michelle could talk of nothing but the corruption of Saudi society, its backwardness, its benighted rigidity and overall reactionary nature. She was bursting with enthusiasm about travelling in two days' time to begin a new life in a healthy place – somewhere other than 'this rotten-to-the-core, toxic environment that would make anyone sick. (Alsanea 133)

Michelle consistently exhibits disdain for Saudi society and, by extension, the Islamic State and its practices. Her Western influence is evident, but this is not to say that only outside influence is capable of causing a disconnect between an individual and their religion. Michelle garners sympathy from the reader as she is outspoken about the limitations placed on women in Saudi society. Her character is a vessel through which many of the negative aspects of society are explored. However, she is extreme in her reactions towards her country – she sees the West and anywhere outside Saudi Arabia as being inherently better and ignores the value the other see in their society. Her distrust and derision for Saudi Arabia are only spoken in the safety and comfort of friends and family, and she does not make her opinions known to the wider community. Michelle appears outwardly to accept the laws of the state, even though she personally objects. This creates contentions about the role of religion in her life, as it is not resolved in the novel, even when she moves to Dubai to finish her studies and find work. For the other protagonists, religion is an integral part of their daily expression, whereas Michelle looks to fashion, consumption, and the love narrative. It is clear that religion is significant to women to varying degrees – for some, it informs all choices and expression, but for others, it becomes a hindrance, something they believe is holding them back. Overall, the treatment of the topic of religion in *Girls of Riyadh* shows the readership the nuances of religious expression in Saudi Arabia and allows these protagonists to "assert a place for their Islamic worldviews within the [Western] cultural milieu, rather than in opposition to it" (Newns 297).

5.3.2 Rooted at Home: Considering Culture and Identity in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and Advaita Kala's *Almost Single*

As I discussed religion in the chosen domestic text in the previous section, in this section, I will consider ethnicity and culture in *Girls of Riyadh* and *Almost Single.* Ethnicity and culture are perhaps a lesser-discussed aspect of the chick lit genre in the Middle East and South Asia. While religion is explored in some depth in both domestic and transnational texts, the ethnic and cultural identities of the protagonists are not explored to the same extent. This element may not seem relevant, as the characters live in societies that largely mirror their cultural identities. But, as the characters being considered in this study are women, specifically women of colour, their racial identity and cultural practices are significant in patriarchal societies. Muhammad Abdullah writes that the "cultural practices of some Muslim societies where patriarchy is unjustly justified by religious orthodoxy" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 20) lead to a lack of freedoms afforded to women. This is in spite of the "great deal of socio-religious freedom" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 20) that should be afforded to women in Muslim countries. It

is here that religion and culture intersect, as the practices of a country are both defined by law, religion, and specific cultural expectations. In *Girls of Riyadh*, the religious nature of the state informs the cultural practices at large, as well as the individual practices of the women. *Girls of Riyadh*'s success as a text comes in part from its ability to portray the reality of the lives of socially and economically mobile women living in Saudi Arabia. The cultural stereotypes that are often applied to Muslim women are discarded, instead using female characters to show the mobility and agency afforded to women as they "search for love and matrimony", moving away from brokering marriages through family connection and father's decisions exclusively. The women are portrayed as having a "sense of victory rather than victimhood" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 21). The novel's 'insider' view into real women's lives means that it is able to present role models who are "relatable within their social reality" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 27).

This tension with culture and social expectations is seen particularly in the case of Michelle, who epitomises the blurring of cultural and social spaces within Saudi Arabia. Michelle is referred to by the English translation of her actual name, Mashael. Even her family called her Michelle (Alsanea 7). She also speaks to her friends in English (Alsanea 7) and, at every opportunity, attempts to subvert the cultural practices that she 'should' be adhering to. This is in part due to her Western upbringing, being born in the United States, and her constant wish to return. But Michelle could be described as making the most of her life in Saudi Arabia, although her actions at times undermine the laws and social systems in place. She initiates the ideas for Gamrah's bachelorette party – a Western notion in and of itself. She suggests that the women dress in abayas and thobes, ropes typically reserved for men, and certainly in the style of men's dress. The group of women rent a car under Michelle's male driver's name and go to the mall unchaperoned. It is through these events that the reader is shown the real lives of the women, who are seen to be "living their lives fully" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 21), remaining true to their religion and religious positions while also "tapping into taboo spheres like female drinking, driving, and travelling alone" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 22). These restrictions are more cultural than religious and speak to a conservative interpretation of Islam that is enacted in Saudi Arabia. These women are elite, economically privileged women who have the ability to oppose, however minimally, the status quo of their society. Besides Michelle, all the protagonists in the text have been "exposed to Western notions of freedom of choice and liberty" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 26), which has shifted their interactions with the cultural values of their society. Abdullah states that this text and those like it are stories that "evoke the joy of partial female success" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 27), highlighting

the nuances of society and the cultural assumptions that those outside the nation might hold. Notably, the story does not go against the religious and cultural laws that are deemed most important, like premarital sexual relationships, but does show the "blurring of boundaries of religion and culture" (Abdullah, "Saudi Sensibilities" 27) that is unmistakable and inevitable as ideas shift and change.

In the domestic South Asian text chosen for this study, *Almost Single,* Aisha navigates her culture as a woman in India. For the urban Indian woman, a text like *Almost Single* serves to exemplify the potential life of "the contemporary independent and liberated Indian girls and women leading cosmopolitan lives" (Oberoi 127). Aisha could not be described as traditional and would be offended at the thought. She states: "The ability to truly appreciate the nuances of our ancient culture has always eluded me. In my desire to be a liberated Indian woman, am I missing out on the basics? Are garlic and pyaaz integral to my existence?" (Kala 163). This statement is made in response to news of an unsuccessful attempt from her mother to arrange a marriage with someone she deemed suitable for Aisha, who was a "pucca vegetarian" (Kala 16), and did not even eat onions and garlic. While the potential engagement is cut short from the man's side and is not of consequence, this instance highlights Aisha's flippancy when considering the crucial aspects of her "ancient culture" (Kala 163). It is implied that her family is Hindu, but she does not mention religion in her own life at any point in the text, only through her mother's religious values. She is at times dismissive of the rituals and beliefs her mother holds dear, instead choosing to shift her priorities towards fashion and fun. In some ways, she regrets her focus on modernity, as she feels that this has led her to miss out on traditional and culturally specific experiences. This uncertainty stems primarily from her singlehood rather than from an actual desire to embrace her cultural background. Her mother is relatively successful in convincing Aisha that traditional cultural values will aid her search for a romantic partner, but Aisha's desire to be a liberal and liberated young woman overshadows this. Her willingness to espouse modern values speaks to shifting cultural identities among young women in India and reifies Hurt's notion that chick lit can "construct representations […] missing from the larger national cultural imagining" (Hurt, "Introduction" 21).

However, she does show some inclination towards certain aspects of her cultural upbringing. Aisha is open to an arranged marriage, but would like to choose if this is the correct option for her life. She is shocked when her mother expresses doubt about the possibility of an arranged marriage, as "it's time to worry" when "your parents stop matchmaking and turn philosophical" (Kala 12), as her mother references her karma. Sonia Vashishta Oberoi speaks to this event in Aisha's life, stating that "educated middle class girls of the twenty-first century

[…] want to make it big in their lives" (Oberoi 129) but do hold some concern for their futures. Like Aisha, many are not averse to an arranged marriage, as it has been shown to be a successful avenue for mothers, aunts, and sisters around them. Nevertheless, Aisha "smokes and drinks and wants to enjoy her life" (Oberoi 129) before she finds a husband and would preferably keep her life much the same should she find one. This is complicated when she realises that her mother sees her as past the age for an arranged marriage (at nearly thirty years old) and "asks her to find a match for herself" (Oberoi 129). Aisha epitomises the state of flux experienced by many contemporary women, trying to find the balance between new ideals and traditional and cultural norms.

While Aisha exhibits little religious inclination, it could be said that she is spiritual and in tune with the cultural acts associated with spirituality. Her astrologer is her first call after the aforementioned conversation with her mother, and "Nothing is more indicative of [her] belief in him than the Number One status he enjoys on [her] speed dial" (Kala 13). She acknowledges that she is a "traditionalist in that sense" (Kala 13) and makes use of the family astrologer for all important questions regarding her future. He is vague about any given question, telling her that "the time is auspicious … so let's see … there are indications" (Kala 13) when she questions him about a possible marriage in her future. Her relationship with and belief in the astrologer shows that Aisha is still connected to the cultural elements that are important to her family despite her cosmopolitan and Western-influenced lifestyle. Aisha is part of the movement of Indian women who are "redefining" (Oberoi 131) themselves, and choosing what aspects of their culture they wish to move into the future with them.

5.4.1 Belief Beyond Borders: Examining Islam in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *No Sex in the City* and Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last*

In the previous section, I focussed on the significance of religion and culture in the domestic Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novel. It follows that these elements would be similarly significant in the transnational text. This section considers diasporic subjects who practise their religion devotedly in their transnational homelands in the West, where particular viewpoints and stereotypes about Islam may be projected onto the characters by those around them. In discussing religion in transnational texts, I will consider how Esma in *No Sex in the City* and Ayesha of *Ayesha at Last*, practice Islam and are proud of their religious identity, but their expression of their religion differs.

Esma is set apart from the "chick lit 'type'" (Newns 294) by her "ethnicity, cultural background, and most importantly, her religious faith" (Newns 294). As a religious woman in

Australia, she is immediately positioned as an 'other'. While it is officially a secular state, the majority of its residences are Christian or atheist. Her values and her practices in life may seem extreme to the Western reader; in actual fact, Esma "personalises a postmodern Muslim woman" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 78). Muhammad Abdullah describes her character as "simultaneously gracious and belligerent" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 78). This framing of Esma speaks to her chosen role in society – she adheres to most of the tenets of Islam and is able to staunchly defend herself and her principles when questioned by those who do not understand her values and religion. Her value system and sense of self are entirely defined by her religion. Her family are not overtly religious – only her father "pray[s] the five daily prayers" (Abdel-Fattah 111), which only began later in her life. While her parents were religious, her father's increased participation in Islam came after recovery from his gambling addiction. Esma understands her father's dedication to his religion and respects that he had never asked or pressured his wife and children to join him – he instead withdraws to pray "quiet, humbly. It seems to give him some solace and peace" (Abdel-Fattah 111). In contrast, she and her mother are "Spiritual" (Abdel-Fattah 12) but "Quite lazy" when it concerns the rituals of Islam. However, Esma does not "drink, [she's] never had a boyfriend (in fact, most primary-aged children would have more experience than [her]), and [she's] inconsistent about keeping up with the five daily prayers" (Abdel-Fattah 12). She attempts to fast for Ramadan since this is one of the five pillars[11] of the religion, and she can "get through most of the month, but there are days when [she] cave[s] in to the temptation and end[s] up going to McDonald's" (Abdel-Fattah 12).

Esma is "not exactly observant" (Abdel-Fattah 12). Here, we consider 'observant' to refer to the care taken in observing rites, laws, or customs. While Esma does not describe herself as observant and instead as spiritual, it is not a word typically used to describe Islam. In using the word 'observant', Esma reiterates that she does not maintain all the practices of Islam or the five pillars. She is open and widely exposed to other faiths, as her best friends are Hindu, Jewish, and Christian. They cross both ethnic and religious boundaries but are all accepting of their differences. While her friendship group is open-minded, her wider community, particularly her workplace, is not shown to exhibit this same tolerance for others. Esma illustrates that the "secular and the religious can coexist" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 90), but her boss, Danny, is disparaging of her religion and life choices. He refers

[11] The Five Pillars of Islam are the most important Islamic practices and are considered ritual obligations. They are Shahada (faith), Salah (prayer), Zakat (almsgiving), Sawn (fasting), and Hajj (pilgrimage).

to her desire to marry another Muslim as "want[ing] to hook up with an asylum seeker" (Abdel-Fattah 20), implying that Muslims are most likely to be immigrants in Australia and unable to "afford a ring or house when [they're] locked up in a detention centre" (Abdel-Fattah 20). Danny is often explicitly racist and Islamophobic towards Esma and other immigrants despite seeming to like her as a person. But, he makes constant remarks about her "way of life" (Abdel-Fattah 22) in an attempt to highlight their differences, focusing on her "not drinking, making up excuses to get out of after-work partying sessions at the local club, wanting to settle down with a Muslim, volunteering to help 'queue jumpers'" (Abdel-Fattah 22). Esma's personal choices become a point of contestation for her boss, who comes to represent the facets of Australian society that hold disdain for Esma and other Muslims in the diaspora. He does not understand her romantic choices and "think[s] [she] make[s] Mormons look wild given that [she's] a twenty-eight-year-old non-drinking virgin who is open to the idea of a blind date organised by family" (Abdel-Fattah 12). Her interactions with her boss emphasize the difficulties of practising and living as Muslims in secular, although Christian-leaning, Western societies. Islam is most commonly seen as a "foreign, non-Western religion" (Youmans 474), although William Lafi Youmans describes it as being inherently "transnational, and […] part of [the West] for centuries" (Youmans 474). Esma's relationship with her boss serves to highlight the tenuous position sometimes occupied by migrants, particularly those who practise other faiths, as they are deemed as "not quite belonging in countries that either celebrate their Christian or Jewish and Christian heritage in public discourse" (Youmans 472). Esma is proud of her religion and practises elements that may be deemed conservative despite the fact that she describes herself as "not exactly observant" (Abdel-Fattah 12). As a result, the perception of her from a secular viewpoint positions her as going against the idea that Muslims in the West should "offer themselves as sanitized, de-politicized, overly friendly to other denominations, and seem non-controversial" (Youmans 465). This is a difficult point to contend with as we read Esma's perspective and thus are ingratiated with her and her views. The reader may not be able to understand the nuances of her position as a religious 'other' in Australia if they have not contended with similar circumstances. Esma presents herself as authentic and wholly herself despite the fact that her religious identity and actions are questioned due to the location of her diasporic home. It is deeply significant that she positions herself as within Australian society rather than inherently outside or in opposition to it due to her religious and cultural identity.

In *Ayesha at Last*, the protagonist Ayesha is represented as 'more' religious than Esma. She wears a hijab, a marker of her devout adherence to Islam. This in and of itself can be

considered a somewhat revolutionary act because it immediately marks her as "other" (Abdurraqib 56) and shows her to be in some way separate or not "fully incorporated" (Abdurraqib 56) into Western society. In this conversation, we can draw on Youmans' idea of the "good or safe Muslim [who] is the 'moderate Muslim'" (Youmans 465) as opposed to the "bad Muslims" (Youmans 465). Youmans highlights the fact that an 'invisible' practice of Islam may lead to being perceived as a 'good' Muslim. For Ayesha, wearing a hijab is part of her religious practice and is an overt act. The way that veiling is perceived in Western countries is often negative and seen as a symbol of the oppression of women in Islam. In some cases, it has been vilified, with forms of veiling being banned in public spaces. Samaa Abdurraqib notes the veil as a symbol of "religious identity" (Abdurraqib 57) but acknowledges the 'difference' that is perceived as a result. In wearing a hijab in a Western country, Ayesha positions herself as being first Muslim before anything else. While her cultural and ethnic background is essential, it is clear that her religious identity is most significant in her life, again speaking to her adherence to Islam and the value she finds in her life as a religious woman.

Similarly to Esma, she does not date and appears to have little interest in men after attempting to arrange a marriage when she was younger. She went through the 'traditional rishta proposal process" (Jalaluddin 8) but did not feel a connection to any of the men despite them being vetted and deemed suitable by her mother and close family members. She is also actively involved with her Mosque and religious community, having attended "Sunday school and Friday prayers at the Mosque" (Jalaluddin 60). She agrees, at the request of her uncle, Sulaiman Mamu, to help the Mosque with the planning of a conference. Her young cousin, Hafsa, wants to be an event planner and is supposed to be offering her services to the Mosque. Her father wishes for Ayesha to "help her take this seriously" (Jalaluddin 33). Ayesha is mistaken for Hafsa, but due to the responsibility she feels to her uncle and the Mosque, she agrees to continue planning the event. This devotion to her religion and the tenets thereof are frequently touched on in the text. Despite this, the perception of Ayesha is similar to that of Esma – she has a job and ambitions and is not married despite her age. Other characters express disdain for the way in which she chooses to live her life and express her religion. Her cousin Hafsa thinks she is overly conservative, and makes a pointed statement about not wanting "to turn into one of those women who never gets married. No offence." (Jalaluddin 32), aimed at Ayesha, her age, and her unmarried status. However, it is clear that Ayesha is happy with her choices and ultimately prioritises her religion. She exhibits patience in waiting for a suitable partner, especially one who aligns with her religion and personal values, instead of going against her values and faith.

Religion can be seen to be a contentious issue in diasporic Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit. While Esma and Ayesha are proud of their religion and their practice thereof, it is not always seen in a positive light by the people around them. But, as Abdullah and Youmans highlight, the positive media and literary representations of Islamic women create tremendous value in that they reframe Islam in the minds of those outside the religion. These texts illustrate how the "secular and religious can coexist" (Abdullah, "Postfeminist Discursivity" 90) and also show the "profoundly ordinary" (Youmans 471) lives of Islamic women in the West and the diaspora.

5.4.2 Between the Global and the Local: Looking at Cultural Identities in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *No Sex in the City*

I would now like to turn my attention to the ways in which culture functions in *No Sex in the City*. Religion and culture are intrinsically linked, especially for the chick lit protagonist in the diaspora. Much of the recognisably cultural activities in which they partake are also religious, as these distinct ideas become blurred when outside of the homeland. This is also a difficult path to navigate for the protagonists, as they take on a multitude of cultural identities – they are both of their homeland and their diasporic home, and take on the "hyphenated" (Woolston 112) nature of this subjectivity. Not only do they have to navigate their womanhood, but they also must be able to "balance work, relationships, and family life with unique insight into cultural challenges and identity formation" (Woolston 112). In *No Sex in the City*, Esma does not see herself as needing to claim the identity of her diasporic home to become an acceptable citizen of that place, instead choosing to honour her cultural and ethnic background while embracing the Western ideals to which she is exposed. This is not to say that she has become Westernised – Esma relies on her cultural identity as she grapples with her life and experiences in the West.

It is clear that the protagonists have to "navigate their own cultural identities as well as the expectations and assumptions that other characters have about [their] ethnic identity and [their] gender" (Hurt, "Kavita Daswani" 194). In the case of Esma, she navigates her cultural identity with some difficulty – she is confident in herself, but she is subject to disparaging comments and ideas from her boss. For Esma, her cultural identity means that she is undoubtedly going to produce for the reader a "different [version] of womanhood" (Hurt, "Introduction" 13), as it is essentially connected to her "ethnic and/or diasporic [identity]" (Hurt, "Introduction" 13). Esma is an Australian citizen who was born in the country, but her

story and her identity are not only representative of an Australian narrative. She takes on aspects of her Turkish heritage, her Australian citizenship, and her multiethnic and multireligious social circle. It is through this that her narrative and transnational chick lit as a whole has the ability to "construct representations […] missing from the larger national cultural imagining" (Hurt, "Introduction" 21). In presenting the transnational subject in this manner, chick lit becomes an avenue through which the realism of the cultural complexities can be experienced by the reader.

Esma and her friends see great value in marriage with someone who shares their cultural identity. While they also extend this desire to religion, it is clear that cultural similitude is advantageous to them because it does not require additional 'learning'. If the women are to marry someone who comes from a similar background, it is perceived that they may be enthusiastically received by parents and extended family, having already established the familiar ground in the bonding of the two families after marriage. She is of the opinion that you "marry a family, not a person" (Abdel-Fattah 287) and that the two families can be most easily integrated if they are culturally similar. As Esma's parents are traditional and culturally minded and very much in tune with their homeland of Türkiye. Esma wishes to find a husband who would be both acceptable and culturally alike.

While she was raised in Australia and has taken on some Western ideals as she grew up, her homeland culture is still profoundly significant due to the influence of her parents. As Esma is a second-generation migrant, her positionality differs from that of her parents, who moved to Australia as adults. Esma has adopted part of her culture and ideals from Western society, as both Australia and Türkiye are key elements of her identity. There is a perceived difference here, especially when contrasted with her brother-in-law Farouk, who only immigrated to Australia to marry Sanem. While Esma is dedicated to her work and career, an element of her life that she sees as part of being Australian, Farouk is shocked by the working and career-driven focus in Australia, and it takes him some "time to adjust to the reality that life [in Australia] was pretty much focused around long work days" (Abdel-Fattah 138). Esma, too, acknowledges the "difference in lifestyle" (Abdel-Fattah 138) that is evident in the two sides of her cultural makeup but appears here to lean towards her Australian side, especially given her own dedication to her career and her volunteer work, despite this leaving less time for her personal life.

Esma celebrates both sides of her cultural heritage but has to mediate what this means for her life. She is routinely exposed to different cultures, all of which come together to create a 'new whole' in Australia. Her friends mirror her desire to be both Australian and respect and

observe their parents' cultural background. Through Esma and her friends, it is clear to the reader that all four of the women wish to be their own individuals in their own space but acknowledge and revere the backgrounds they share with their parents. For Esma, her identity as both Australian and Turkish is able to coexist, and neither facet of her identity overshadows the other. As a character, she speaks to the reality of existing in a liminal space, belonging to neither nation fully but embodying the parts of both countries that fit into the best version of herself. Esma epitomises her cultural values and presents an optimistic viewpoint into the life of migrant women in Australia while maintaining her unique cultural identity.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has considered perhaps the most significant aspect of the Middle Eastern and South Asian protagonist's life, their religion and culture. These elements are vital to the identity formation of the characters, both in the domestic examples, as well as in the diaspora. There is some distinction to be made between the two, as domestic chick lit presents characters that embrace and engage with the religious and cultural values of their homeland, in many ways mirroring their home and the larger populations, whereas transnational characters may be at odds with the larger populations of the nations they live in.

Transnational examples of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit have illustrated the hyphenated identities that the protagonist must take on. While they are steadfast in their religious and cultural heritage, there is evidence that they take on and are influenced by their locations. They are seen to adapt to and embrace the diasporic home while being careful not to neglect their homeland or their parents' ethnic and religious identities. It is clear that much of the cultural identity seen in transnational chick lit is deeply intertwined with religious identity, and the two facets become, in some ways, conflated for the transnational subject. Religion and culture are of profound significance to the characters and come together to form a whole identity. Both Ayesha and Esma are young Muslim women living in Western societies during the late 2000s and early 2010s, a time in which fear and hatred surrounding Islam permeated the public sphere after the September 11th attacks in the United States. However, both women are seen to maintain their chosen forms of religious expression despite repercussions in both their professional and personal lives. Ayesha makes the choice to wear a hijab, despite it being a physical symbol of her religion, and maintains the values and ethos that she has been raised with. While Esma does not outwardly project her religion through a symbol like the hijab, her values and choices in life directly reflect her religious tenets, which gives her comfort.

Throughout all four texts, the women are seen to grapple with religious and cultural identity. Due to an increasingly globalised society and the movement of ideas, all the protagonists are confronted with alternative and, at times, confusing ideals, which differ from their own upbringings and religious backgrounds. Through this chapter, it has become clear that chick lit holds immense value in its ability to represent the multifaceted nature of womanhood, where characters are able to find the means to express themselves as both modern and religious women in various locations. Chick lit from the Middle East and South Asia, therefore, holds significant power in that it presents a heterogeneous view of these areas and works against the often homogeneous image presented in the West. The texts serve to prove that globalisation and the evolution of spaces can be represented in the genre to show the realistic shifting and multiplying of expressions.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

I began this research because I had a desire to explore emerging stories from women writers. I find that at times, it is easy to reduce narratives as being singular or representative of a whole. This is especially pervasive when looking at stories from religious women, which are often viewed through a narrow lens of perception. Little attempt is made to understand the nuances of a woman's life. There is both a similitude that surrounds womanhood and fundamental differences. Through the chick lit genre, women are able to come together in unity, experience the joys and camaraderie of their friendships, and find solidarity in the idea that, at the end of the day, they are all women. Chick lit, especially as it spreads to global audiences and global writers, is making a concerted attempt to create authentic representations of these multifaceted and hyphenated identities that make up womanhood as a whole.

The chick lit genre is a personal favourite choice for my own reading outside of academia, and as I became aware of the new texts and locations that were emerging in the genre, I realised that very little weight was being afforded to these texts in critical scholarship. The specificities and nuances of the female experience that were being explored drew me to look at Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, especially given their interdependence with religion and particular class and social structures.

As I discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, there is a sometimes subtle and sometimes overt disdain for writing from women about women. I noted the perceived difference between women's *literature* and women's *fiction*. There is an ongoing battle for female writers to be taken seriously, and some may argue that chick lit does not help this cause. It is my opinion, especially after reading and writing about the genre in this study, that this is a narrow viewpoint that neglects to consider the value of realistic and authentic representations of womanhood. One of my aims for this thesis was to reframe how womanhood in the Middle East and South Asia is perceived in the West. In particular, Muslim women are often reduced to stereotypes and, therefore, in need of representations like *Girls of Riyadh*, which thoroughly explores the ideas of Muslim womanhood in Saudi Arabia and interrogates the homogeneous representations that pervade. While this text was written for an Arabic audience, I hope this study shows the value for readers outside of this sphere, who might otherwise not be exposed to true and unbiased representations.

Chick lit has grown considerably as a genre but remains synonymous with novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*. Such iconic texts allow people to presuppose that they know everything about the genre and reduce it to 'fluff', which fails to include the new works from various locations, which represent a multitude of women. It is my belief that, given

time, the new texts globally can enter the zeitgeist in the same manner, especially if they are given respect and gravitas through critical studies. Ferriss and Young have had success in achieving this for white, Western chick lit, so it follows that global iterations of the genre need to be paid the same attention in order to elevate them to the realm of scholarship and academia.

In conducting this research, I was faced with some challenges in that I was unable to find any critical work that looked at the Middle East and South Asia alongside one another and little that considered them individually. It is for this reason that I repeatedly turn to the same texts and scholars in this thesis. Popular monographs on chick lit featured articles about a singular area or nation, comparing it to Western examples, and largely ignored the unrealised potential that can be found outside of Western texts. While at times I did draw parallels to Western chick lit, it was more important to look at the Middle East and South Asia alongside one another as distinctive spaces but also tied together in some ways.

In this thesis, I have endeavoured to fully examine the chosen examples of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novels. By focusing on form, family, romance, consumerism, as well as religious and cultural identities, I have been able to highlight the nuances and cultural specificities that are evident in these texts, which are simultaneously able to be unique to their respective regions, as well as instantly recognisable examples of chick lit. My objectives for this thesis were, to first compare and contrast the selected Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit, and as a result ascertain the differences and similarities between the chosen domestic and transnational texts. Moreover, I wanted to undertake a transnational feminist reading of these texts to identify the themes and tropes that are unique to the examples of the genre from these two regions. Through the course of this study, it has been clear that chick lit from the Middle East and South Asia is not derivative of Western chick lit but rather stands alongside it as part of the sisterhood of the genre. The chosen texts make use of the recognisable form and conventions of the genre and successfully appropriate the 'mother of chick lit', Jane Austen. In Chapter One, I argued that Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit is more closely aligned with Austen's work, as it features both allusions and cultural similarities. The religious underpinnings of the works have resulted in the romantic plot and dating presented in the text, mirroring the courtship practices of the Regency Era to some extent. *Ayesha at Last* is a culturally specific retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is a frequently seen basis for contemporary romance narratives, in particular chick lit. Moreover, *No Sex in the City* makes frequent allusions to Austen's revolutionary text in that it presents reworked quotes from some of the most iconic moments in the text. I also argued that Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit has utilised the confessional nature of the genre to present female characters that are

identifiable and relatable female characters, ones to which the reader is drawn due to the intimate and emotional portrayal of lives not unlike their own.

In looking at the non-romantic relationships in Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit in Chapter Two, it is abundantly clear that cultural specificities have given the family an increased importance in these novels. The mothers, both interfering and supportive, are a constant feature in their daughter's lives and highlight the value of the family, particularly for women from these regions. I also briefly discussed the mother-son relationships touched on in the texts, as this shows a clear distinction between relationships with daughters as opposed to sons. I assessed the role of fathers, who tend to be an unseen background figure in the lives of their daughters. To finalise the section on family relationships, I looked at the role of the Aunty, who is a highly theorised figure in Eastern literature and has come to take on a prominent role in the communities represented here.

When discussing non-romantic relationships, I made a distinction between the domestic and transnational texts, given that there were different contexts for the family relationship and a differing social order that informed the relationships to an extent. However, in looking to romantic relationships, it became clear that romance differs very little along these lines. In Chapter Three, I found that romance is inherently linked to consumption and consumerism, and this does not change whether in the homeland or in the diasporic home. Romance remains the underpinning of the chick lit genre and, as such, informs the choices made by the characters. Romantic habits mirror that of consumption habits, whereby women are seen to be 'shopping' for romance and a husband. However, I did find that consumerism plays an additional role in transnational texts, given that it becomes a means of assimilation and identity formation.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I contemplated two of the most important elements of the Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit novel, namely religion and culture. I considered these elements as they pertain to identity formation for the characters, who, in both domestic and transnational examples, are devoted to their religious principles. My discussion primarily focussed on Islam in both domestic and transnational texts and the ways in which the characters mediate their religious views in Islamic states and secular societies, respectively. Throughout this chapter, I have made clear the value that chick lit holds in representing the multifaceted nature of womanhood, where characters are able to find the means to express themselves as both modern and religious women in various locations. The characters are devoted to their religious practice but also make an attempt to interrogate what that means and how it fits into their lives as modern women.

While this thesis has made an attempt to look broadly at the experiences and writings of Middle Eastern and South Asian chick lit authors, it is abundantly clear that a great deal more academic enquiry into this subject is necessary. Many novels have been published since the start of this study, and many others were excluded due to overlaps with the novels chosen for the scope of this study. This study is underpinned by a commercial desire for this genre and representations of real women from various locations who are connected in their womanhood but so diverse in their experiences and values.

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