

A Feminist Lens in the Works of Chetan Bhagat with Reference to his Select Novels

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper is an attempt to highlight the deep-rooted anti-feminism issues in India and to seek equal human rights for women. Bhagat is seen even more as a youth icon than just an author. The predominant emphasis is laid on his way of writing where he is shattering the hierarchal chain of order by giving the command in the hands of women protagonist. And trying to enquire how did he go about understanding of the systematic oppression that women face everywhere, from homes to schools and offices to public places? In his novel which is based on female characters, Bhagat tries to unveil the contemporary uneven gender roles, gender-biased social structure and inbuilt inherited sexist mindsets of Indians. Anti-feminism, sexism, misogynist and disequilibrium are so deeply rooted practices in the Indians societies that it has become the part of 'being an Indian' or so called 'Indian-ness.' His women are not accepting the norms as was seen in the earlier times writings, although; they are asking the question why? Predominantly his places of action (setting) are in the locale of Metropolitan cities. He portrays the women characters on the same pedestal where the men are. Men and women are no more seen unequal as in the old vision which marks men as superior and women as inferior.

KEY WORDS: Anti-feminism, Hierarchal, Gender-biased, Misogynist, Metropolitan.

Chetan Bhagat, presently, a leading and popular contemporary writer in Indian Fiction is one of the bestselling novelists today. While recognizing society's deep rooted patriarchal values and initiating a course of correction on gender rights, it's not only Chetan Bhagat but way back Henrik Ibsen, a Playwright known for his feisty women characters. These women characters are able to break off the traditions of familial confines and notions of social propriety. Ibsen says that a woman 'cannot be herself' in an 'exclusively masculine society with laws framed by men,' and laid it down as a guiding force for all future judicial proclamations. Powerful men seem to be reiterating misogyny besides carelessly linking sexual crimes to women being alone at night or wearing clothes of their choice (The Hindu). Likewise, Bhagat's approach towards feministic issues is not entirely different from Ibsen. Chetan Bhagat is not only raising the contemporary issues like education system, unemployment, inter-state marriages, communal riots etc. but also

the feministic point of view by giving command in the hands of women figure. This enables women as an independent, self sufficient, competent and rebellious. They do not afraid of saying what they really want of. In postcolonial India, women look intensified and confident to make their career. Essentially, one can observe how Bhagat turns the table upside down through the depiction of his women characters as bold, compassionate and extrovert in nature. Bhagat's novel *One Indian Girl* exultantly justifies this fact, which is entirely based on the woman protagonist, Radhika Mehta and her dilemma between career and love life. This is how novel get started and the female protagonist introduced herself in this novel:

Hi. I'm Radhika Mehta and I'm getting married this week. I work at Goldman Sachs, an investment bank. Thank you for reading my story. However, let me warn you: you may not like me too much. One, I make a lot of money. Two, I have an opinion about everything. Three, I have had a boyfriend before. Okay, maybe two. (1)

Radhika's character in the novel justifies Bhagat's intentions and his feminist approach. Through this novel Bhagat succeeded to highlight the mindset of the society and the struggle of a woman even though she is competent and successful but still has to suffer a lot. Thus, be a successful is not sufficient for a woman in this patriarchal societal set up because this society will never make the easy way out for the women. Bhagat wants to dig a ground for women where she can dwell or excel. Sachin kumar Pandey says: Men infidelity is just an inevitable matter in Indian social structure. The man and woman relationship/marriage in an Indian family is more or less one-sided. The man who is the head and dominates the family and his wife will be influential in keeping the family harmonious and united, irrespective of how valueless and cruel husband may be. Such condition in the families partially is known as patriarchal set up. In our society woman is worshipped not because she is considered to be the personification of Goddess. Even though just because of her sacrificing nature, her dedication and her selfless love towards family. Now these insensitive values and men's infidelity has taken a degree turn now. As in *One Night @ the Call Center*, Bhagat also elaborates the men's disloyalties' through one of the protagonists. Radhika Jha also named as Regina Jones (Call Center name). She is a young woman in her mid 20s and married to her love interest. Now she lives in a family with her husband and his parents. Her husband is also a working man in the same city. It is pleasant to see what women can do for their love in present times. Radhika has joined Call center to support her husband financially. Radhika, who is gentle and sober, does all the household chores and bears the rude comments made by her mother-in-law every day. Radhika proves to be the best instance of a good housewife and skillful customer care representative. She has becomes expert in handling kitchen and managing office promptly. She loves her husband very much and trusts him blindly. As in the novel Radhika's situation has been commented upon by Vroom: "Radhika did not look like a teenager out to party to me- she looked ill, with dark circles under her eyes. I wished the boy would give her the medicine soon" (197).

Eventually, when she comes to know the truth about her husband's disloyalties towards her, she reacts like a cobra and immediately breaks off her relation with him. She leaves to Chandigarh with Esha forever. This shows if women are able to sacrifice everything for the sake of men, then women are also competent to take stand for her self-respect. Furthermore, in the novel Priyanka

asks Radhika to give a second thought over her marriage on which Priyanka says: “Won’t you try to work it out?” Radhika said ‘We’ ll see. I am in no mood to compromise. And I am not going back to his house now for sure. Today, my mother-in-law will make her own breakfast” (269). Disloyalties, hence, has resulted in deteriorating of relationships and mostly women are the worst sufferers, but it also shows the courageous side of the women as well. This is not wrong to say that Bhagat’s women have their own terms and conditions or one can say their own rule-book. Lastly, they are ready to accept its consequences.

The literature is a reflection of the society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged. Literary forms have always been the medium of expression. Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills too. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view of making the society to realize its mistakes and also make amends (Web). Bhagat dared to do the same he is somehow depicting the present society as it is. Bhagat has shown his women characters with their own intellect and abilities; they are seen to be working with shoulder to shoulder with men. Women in order to achieve their own identity they move out in search of jobs. As one noticed in contemporary times, commingle of men and women working in call centers are equal and women choosing to work in night shifts as well. They earn their own living and make their own choices. For instance, Esha, in the *One Night @ Call Center*, for getting modeling assignments leaves her home for Delhi to translate her dreams into reality. She struggled very hard for keeping her head and ambitions up. Unlike, earlier times, a marriageable boy-girl was bound to marry the ‘match of their parents’ choice and that was considered as their spiritual duty to repay the debt of parenthood (Pandey). Irrespective of Bhagat’s heroines marry to their love interest through the consent of their parents. For the same Bhagat’s women create such different thought provoking situations to make their parents realize and introspect, so that they can change their patriarchal mind set up. The same is Ananya in *2 States: The story of my marriage* tries to convince her parents till the end in order to wed her lover Krish. Here is an instance of Krish and Ananaya conversation:

Ananaya, you don’t get it. We have decided to get married. Our parents haven’t approved—yet,’ I reminded her. ‘C’mon, mine are a bit conservative. But we are their overachieving children, the ultimate middle-class fantasy kids. Why would they have an issue?’ ‘Because they are parents. From biscuits to brides, if there is anything their children really want, parents have a problem,’ I said. (39)

So, Bhagat’s woman characters are even modern in their outlook, in their life-style but they are traditional in their inner thoughts and ideology. That is why they want to win their parents consent rather than choosing the easy way of eloping. This also shows the sense of understanding and maturity in Bhagat’s women characters where they are self sufficient or courageous enough to handle the situations. Therefore, Bhagat’s writing is more feminine than masculine. He gave special preference to her heroines than to his heroes. Bhagat alarms and also set up the landmark towards women empowerment. He admit the fact that women empowerment as one of the best outcomes of the globalization which he desirous to explain through his novels. His writing also shaking up the cultural norms and somehow he becomes the D.H. Lawrence of India. He glorified sex which was considered to be sin in India. He prefers his heroines to be the leader and nation builder. He openly discussed the masses psyche and their insecurities. So he is considered

to be unique in many ways and so loved as well as hated by both strata of the society. Bhagat inadvertently, believes in the notion of Mary Wollstonecraft. “She in *A Vindications of the Rights of Women* rejected the idea that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. The unequal nature of gender relations, she proposed, was because of lack of education kept the women in a secondary position. Wollstonecraft proposed that women must be treated as equals because they play a crucial role in society, namely, bringing up children. Women themselves should strive to become ‘companions’ rather than mere wives to their husbands” (Nayar121). Bhagat believes in the same as his portrayals of women characters are self-reliant because they are well read and educated. He justified the Wollstonecraft notion by not keeping women in secondary place. These changes represent the pathetic cry of a majority of women in Indian society. Thus it is understood that being under the patriarchal social set up there is no reformation but degeneration in the status of women. This research paper aim is to bring out the sufferings of modern women who have not totally become modern but stuck somewhere between traditional and modern course of time. Times may have changed but our attitudes have remained rooted! With all this growth we haven’t been able to outgrow our old mindset. By depicting female characters as a metaphor for social crisis in *One Night @ the Call Center* and explore the tension between traditional gender roles, especially, for those woman who required a new contemporary ‘global’ work-place that appears to be in conflict with ‘traditional’ values and practices. These tensions are best exemplified in this novel through the motifs of clothing, sexual harassment and the free mixing of young men and women at work, all of which leads to generational clashes. In *One Night @ the Call Center* Esha expresses her Pain over her exploitation: “Yes, my agent said this man was connected. I just had to sleep with him once to get a break in a major fashion show. Nobody forced me. I chose to do it. But ever since, I feel this awful guilt. Every single moment. I thought it would pass, but it hasn’t”(156). Thus, Our so-called modernity hasn’t erased ingrained ideology. In the present novels commingling of young men and women is portrayed as a healthy process which can lead to a career, in which financial and personal opportunities for women are tremendous. This shows how much this modernistic setup pushes us; whatever had been rooted in our culture still remains in the form of values, customs and traditions.

Ram Avtar refers to different aspects in Chetan Bhagat’s work. He suggests, unlike his predecessor, Bhagat has celebrates sex in his works. He uses to unite two families and two states. Valutha’ in *The God of Small Things* was thrashed to death because he made love with a high class woman. Arundhati Roy employs sex as a catalyst in the process of ‘sense-gratification’ and especially in ‘genital-satisfaction.’ She does not elevate it to social acceptance. Whereas Bhagat hits on the hypocrisy of the people and turns them towards Vedic interpretation of this creative energy called sex. He succeeds in making the young men and women openly accept it and deal with it as a mutual need for the betterment of society. In fact Bhagat says: Sex is against Indian culture, a bizarre notion for a country where the sage Vatsayan was born. It is shameful to ignore it (sex) in a country where people worship Kamdev—the God of sex. Bhagat believes in sanctity of sex, that he validates. Bhagat’s treatment of love and sex distinguishes him from other writers. His men characters are not rake and womanizer. They do not follow woman. Even though the women are the follower and the men are followed in his novels. Likewise, has shown in *3 Mistakes of My Life*, his heroine, Vidya chases Govind. On which Govind reacts to Omi: ‘I didn’t hit on her. She hit upon me,’ I said. ‘But you let her hit upon you. You let her.’ Well, it

wasn't exactly like being hit. It didn't hurt. It felt good,' I said (101). Bhagat's women take the lead of their courtship and decide what suited best for them. Should they live with the person or not are entirely her sole decisions. Unlike earlier men who were the future determiner for their wives whether she like it or not. Wives were like a scarecrow standing and frowning, being submissive but not spilling out a word. Now Bhagat has changed the scenario men are the hunted and trying to avoid the situation which can trap him in the charms of a woman. In *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, Vidya is a girl who does not afraid of saying what she is feeling. When she felt a sensual feeling towards her tutor and his brother's best friend, she immediately takes a chance upon him. She is younger, but bolder than all other lady characters of the novelist. As she says: "She speaks; Wow, I am an adult now and am no longer a virgin, so cool. Thank God,' she said and giggled" (116). Altogether, Govind know that it is wrong, but Vidya doesn't let him think anything at all.

In India, a boy and a girl living together without getting married is an immoral sin. But the majorities of Bhagat's protagonists enjoy pre martial sex relationship. Since, the constitution of India made it legal this became the trend in India to stays Live in Relationship before marriage. And mostly parents are unaware of it. Since the ages we have seen the reluctance of woman in the sex. They found it in the sadism of man. Bhagat has instilled it in the willingness of the women perform it and break virginity knot without social rituals. At last, they either get married or are committed to live together. Bhagat not only probes the psychological stream of the women but even he portrays the women characters, ambitious like Ananaya in *2 States*, Passionate like Riya in *Half Girlfriend*, Successful like Aarti in *Revoluton 2020* and sensuous like Vidya in *3 Mistakes of My Life*. In Bhagat's opinion, girls are in no way secondary to boys. They are equal to men in all respects as he has portrayed in his majority of novels. It is clear that the attitude of this generation towards sex and ambitions are not laden with guilt. Even if they have to leave their parents it is justifiable to them because they give more preference to their feelings and dreams. The same is the case with Krish and Ananya in *2 States*. They fall in love with each other by knowing the fact that they belongs to the different states. Ananya, is bold, open-minded, outspoken and an independent girl. She dares to oppose the mess-in-charge because he provides bad quality of food to all the students. It is here that Krish offers her his help and takes her into a restaurant. And they become friends and start meeting frequently. Krish proposes to her and she does not decline his offer. They start a live-in relationship for which Indian society is not prepared. And they were fine with the matter of fact that they had love or sex relationships earlier. They discuss openly their sex life. For instance:

This is my first time,' she said after we did it... 'Was it your first time?' 'I'd rather not talk about it,' I said. 'Did you have a girlfriend in IIT?' She sat up to wear her top. I kept quiet. 'Did you have sex with a guy?' Ananya asks, eyebrow up. (26)

This means the facilities of the modern times which make it convenient them to sleep and spend more time together. For the current generation sex is not a sin but is a way of expressing their love to each other. Even Bhagat's heroines are the rules breaker that is why; they indulge in sex every now and then. As in *3 Mistakes of My Life* the conversation where Govind and Vidya are discussing to follow one's own passion above their parents: "Medical college is one key, but not

for me,' she said. 'In that case, break the cage,' I said. 'How?' 'What makes the cage? Your parents, right? Do you have to listen to them all the time?'" (103). His women use all diplomacy to serve the female instinct. Simultaneously, his characters possess a vision of life and influential to accept the challenges, facing them and try to change their situation. Notice one another example from the same novel where Govind saying to vidya : "Who you are, what do you want versus what people expect of you. And how to keep what you want without pissing off people too much. Life is an optimization problem, with tons of variables and constraints" (114). They have clarity in their vision what to do and how to deal with it. Apparently, Bhagat possess such kind of attitude in his real life. The novel *2 States*, is a memoir of Bhagat's life where he has seen as a supportive life partner, encouraging his girl friend towards her carrier, passion and so on. In one of the interview with Sharanya Harishkesh of Chetan Bhagat has been asked "Why a book from woman's perspective now?" On which he replied: there are two reasons," "One is I wanted to challenge myself—I've done several books, they've been accepted, read by many. So I wanted to come up with something fresh, because when you do so many books and all your books are read so much, you could end up repeating yourself... And second is, I write books about issues... All my books have a social issue in them, and I try to find a very universal sort of issue; something which a lot of people can relate to. So feminism is one issue. But this was a tough one, because I'm a guy and... you know. I just thought I can do this, because I've done many columns on women and got a very good reaction." On further asked upon "having a female point of view does not necessarily mean the book is feminist one, does it? And what exactly does feminism mean for Bhagat?" He replied: "Well, firstly, just a male author telling a story from female point of view is, it's kind of bringing attention... Because a popular male author is doing it, I think that itself... It tries to understand feminism... This is a world designed by men, and it doesn't take into account certain basic needs women may have. For example, say, work career and being a good mother... And woman may have both needs. But even the so called feminists will say, okay, women should have the choice... But men are not asked to make a choice. Men get what they want... In (2013) *Times of India* column titled "Five Things women need To Change about Themselves." He says: That too many Indians women are "emotional fools" who try to demonstrate "eternal selflessness" by giving up "their lawful property rights for their brothers, sons or husbands." In the same piece, he advised women not to laugh at "men's jokes when they aren't funny" and to stop judging other women for being fat, wearing a short skirt or cooking a bad dish (Web). In one of the other latest article on women empowerment by Prasanna says:

Women empowerment is when women have the freedom and choice to make their own decisions. They have the most potent right in deciding what's right for them and what's wrong for them. Women have suffered through the decades because they didn't have any rights. They suffered in the hands of their male counterparts. (Web)

Conclusion

Only drawback one can find in Bhagat's portrayal of female characters is; he paid more attention towards advanced strata of the society. He took into consideration of the women who are self-sufficient and well educated. He also depict them exaggerating immoral deed like sex and

plundering the relationship, which is not entirely true. Regardless, he didn't pay attention to that section of society where women still are not allowed to have a proper education. Those women are still struggling for their identity and existence in the family and society. He is well read and known writer of the contemporary times and also pioneering the campus, Popular and cult novels. He should write to motivate, to influence and to highlight to that section of society as well where women are still marginalized. Irrespective of it his writing has shaken up the stereotypic society because it can't handle the educated, well read and successful women. They thought women are physically weak so men should be the head of the house hold and must make all the decisions related to the family; women should be submissive and obedient. Although, women are battling society's ingrained prejudices, and the judgment acknowledges this bitter reality, saying gender violence is most often shrouded in a culture silence. And this attempt is to put women 'in a cage.' To break the silence on bias against women, everyone must take responsibility; especially the institutions and those who are in important positions. So women cannot be in an exclusively masculine society with laws framed by men. It is apt to say Bhagat's writing is succeed in depicting women as strong and powerful characters in a male driven society. Even though, his majority of women characters is shown sexually driven and believes in their freedom of thoughts. They all are working women and are carving out a new pavement to future.

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