

STUDY ON SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DISCOURSES IN CHETAN BHAGAT'S NOVELS: A REFLECTIVE STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract: Chetan Bhagat's narratives, deeply entrenched in the sociopolitical and cultural milieu of contemporary India, offer a unique lens through which to view the ongoing evolution of Indian societal norms and challenges. This study explores the themes presented in Bhagat's works, particularly focusing on the interplay between urban and rural settings, the impact of globalization on language and communication, and the societal expectations placed on the youth. Through novels such as *Half Girlfriend*, Bhagat not only entertains but also provokes thought regarding the complex dynamics of love, language, and social stratification. His work serves as a narrative bridge between diverse cultures within India, illustrating the conflicts and confluences that are shaping the modern Indian consciousness.

Keywords: Chetan Bhagat, Indian Society, Urban-Rural Divide, English Language, Globalization, Youth Culture, Sociopolitical Issues, Cultural Discourse, Contemporary Indian Literature, Social Stratification.

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat, the torchbearer of India's literary tradition, shifts the spotlight from urban and metro-polis society to rural life in his sixth book *Half Girlfriend*. Without taking gender or social norms into account, his torchlight endeavours to highlight and contrast rural and urban ways of life and societal issues. Reading the book is a great way to get a feel for Bhagat's expansive perspective on human nature and society. Bhagat has taken an entirely new approach to the canonical canon of Indian literature written in English. His fictions are written in a style that is accessible to the ordinary reader in countries like India where English is a second or third language. [133]

Despite the novel's apparent romantic bent, Bhagat once again demonstrates his worth as a writer by writing on social issues. He thinks that young people are important for society as a whole, not only for their own personal enjoyment and gratification. Reformation and revitalisation are brought about by their deeds. The current challenges faced by young people in several parts of life are now the centre of Bhagat's attention. The ability to communicate is one area where city life differs significantly from rural areas. When speaking one's native tongue, expressing

one's opinions is quite easy. The globe shrinks to the size of a tiny town as a result of the tremendous and quick advances brought about by globalisation. The thoughts and expressions of people remain unchanged, but the language also has to adapt to be relevant.

As a nation strives to keep up with global advancements, the need for a universal language to connect and communicate with its citizens grows. To keep the communication network running, English is the only language that matters. Bhagat stresses the importance of English and the causes of our youth's language deficit. Also, he tries to figure out why rural kids are more likely to default, even if the issue may not affect city kids.

As a symbol of India's youth, Bhagat brings to light the issues facing today's youth, the difficulties they face, and the practical questions that result from their ideology, romantic relationships, life experiences, and the need to rethink societal institutions. His laudation in "India Today" is well-deserved; he is a beacon for a brave new generation and a representation of New India.

Because of the authenticity of his characters, Bhagat has become the most widely read fiction author from India throughout the postmodern period of English literature. By painting a vivid picture of the story's beginning, middle, and finish, as well as its characters and the societal issues they face, he piques readers' interest in the work. Before the novel's release, it had already generated a great deal of buzz. The title is the only thing that has piqued people's interest; they have never seen a title like this before. A lot of people are trying to decipher the title, while other people are just commenting on it. Bhagat uses his wit to uncover it and put a stop to the buzz;

"Half-Girlfriend, to me, is a unique Indian phenomenon, where boys and girls are not clear about their relationship status with each other. A boy may think he is more than friends with the girl, but the girl is still not his girlfriend. Hence, I thought we needed a term like 'Half-Girlfriend'. Because, in India, that is what most men get." [134]

When it comes to creating sensations, Bhagat is always one step ahead, even when it comes with controversy. You won't find this in *Half Girlfriend* either. Comparatively, it receives more favourable and negative reviews than the previous books. The book depicts the narrative of Bihari, thus Raj Thackeray, head of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), decides to prohibit it in Maharashtra so that the Maharashtrians won't be robbed of their money. However, an NGO called Dost Kshetra Samuday (The Friend Zoned Community) is unhappy with the book and wants it changed since it brings shame to their community.

"They get a girl friend, if they get two copies of *Half Girlfriend*," Bhagat jokes to entice the irate engineers, but his quip causes a stir. This is seen by some as an inexpensive form of advertising. In addition, the segment that sees the evil side has demanded the book be renamed to "half friend" via social media. Disagreements help the book gain popularity while also piquing readers' interest in different parts of it. Bhagat uses his own words to clarify the book *Half Girlfriend's* general theme in reaction to the criticism and remarks about it;

"Half-Girlfriend is an out-and-out love story so it is not a morality tale with a big message as such. It is also a story about a person who doesn't speak good English and how he copes in India. It also talks about the state of primary rural education in the country. Hopefully, the book will make people believe in love again and also make them more sensitive and less judgmental towards people who may not have the best language skills." [135]

By using a symbolic photo on the cover as a hint, Bhagat heightens readers' curiosity and encourages them to visualise the tale. The striking feature about the illustrations of a young girl and a boy on the book's cover is their stance; the girl is striding ahead with assurance, while the boy stands still, his outstretched hand suggesting a lack of self-assurance. The girl lives her life in the Western and metropolitan metropolis shown by the raised multi-story buildings in the backdrop. Filling it up using the script of the Hindi alphabets, on the other hand, represents the rural background and regional limits. The inclusion of a ball on the reverse of the front page suggests that sports and

games are also significant components of the narrative. Games and sports tend to pique the interest of young people. So, the mere sight of this website may entice them. The novel's back cover provides a synopsis that readers might use to back up their assumptions.

"Once upon a time, there was a Bihari boy called Madhav.

He fell in love with a girl called Riya. Madhav didn't speak

English well. Riya did.

Madhav wanted a relationship.

Riya didn't. Riya just wanted friendship. Madhav didn't.

Riya suggested a compromise. She agreed to be his half girlfriend." [136]

There is another side to the coin, too; the book *Half Girlfriend* is well praised and anticipated. Producers, directors, and actors have contacted Bhagat both in person and over the phone to discuss adapting his work for the big screen, according to the author. This reaction is received just after the book trailer is out. In 2017, Mohit Suri, the film's director, adapted the book *Half Girlfriend* for the big screen. After its global premiere on May 19, 2017, the film was a financial triumph. "Be wary of *Half Girlfriend*," warns film reviewer Ananya Bhattacharya. You're going to lose half your sanity at the theatre" [137]. Meena Iyer, another film reviewer, states;

"The assumption that many have read Chetan Bhagat's 2014 novel of the same name should be a safe one because Bhagat's fluff has its own following. But, *Half Girlfriend* is definitely not one of his best works. Finally, *Half Girlfriend* or boyfriend is that person many of us have encountered on campus. However, do we really want to relive those memories? It depends entirely on the mood." [138]

Despite the fact that Chetan Bhagat has raised several weighty topics pertaining to modern society in his previous works, love serves as the central focus in this story. Perhaps it's only the title and the symbolic picture on the cover that give the impression that love is a high-class emotion. He attempts to lighten up his serious tone with a love story, but it's only for laughs, since *Revolution 2020* exposed a whole revolution on corruption. For Rajina Bhanu, "*Half Girlfriend* is old wine in new bottle" is much like old wine. While creating *Half Girlfriend*, Bhagat drew inspiration from *Revolution 2020* in several ways. [139]

Even though Bhagat tells stories about any kind of fiction to make people laugh, he always keeps his social and youth issues front and centre. Whether he intends to or not, he does include society issues and teenage challenges. That is the reason he has become a youth icon—a man adored and revered by his audience, particularly the younger generation. He is aware of his own ideas;

"I want to share something with you. With this book ...I write for change. A change in the mindset of Indian society. It is a lofty goal, and I am not foolish enough to think I can ever achieve it. However, it helps to have positive intentions and a direction in life, and I am glad to have found mine" (HGF, vii).

Using love as a springboard, Bhagat aims to bring attention to the influence of elite communication in English on rural youth and the reality faced by those in rural and metropolitan areas. This book is an homage to Bhagat's mum, rural India, and all those who don't speak English.

The narrative stays true to Bhagat's strategy of division in terms of storyline. Like most novels, *Half Girlfriend* has a prologue, the main body of the tale, and an epilogue. A Bihari lad from Dumraon, eighty km outside of Patna, the protagonist Madhav Jha, and Chetan Bhagat are having a chat in the novel's prologue. This takes place when Bhagat is on his own business at the Hotel Chanakya in Patna. He invites the little lad to peruse his diaries that he has brought along. Some of the notebooks and note books he displays have handwriting that is almost unreadable due to deterioration. Since the author believes they are his own works, he is advised by the writer to submit them to a publishing house. However, he does admit that they are really his half-girlfriend's. Unexpectedly,

Bhagat's half-girlfriend agrees to let him read her notebooks for a term. Since Madhav's half-girlfriend Riya has passed away, he is unable to read them, he says. Then he comes clean about his lack of formal schooling and his rudimentary understanding of the English language, which he speaks with a Bihari accent. Madhav tells Bhagat why he approached him. Riya and Madhav would read Bhagat's writings together as a means for Madhav to improve his English skills.

It hurts Madhav to think of Riya's demise. The subject is too delicate for Bhagat, so he declines to accept the written materials. However, Madhav puts them on the table beside his phone number and instructs Bhagat to give him a ring whenever he needs anything in Dumraon. Bhagat makes heroic efforts to refrain from reading a girl's diaries after she dies. But the word "*Half Girlfriend*" has piqued his interest, and he has read with interest. To get the whole story, he dials Madhav's number and demands an account.

'So tell me everything. Tell me the story of Madhav and Riya.'

A story that fate left incomplete,' he said.

'Fate can be strange indeed.'

Where do I start? When we first met?' 'Always a good place,' I said. (HGF, 5)

The narrative follows Madhav and Riya as they go through three distinct locations—New York, Delhi, and Bihar—throughout the course of the book. Now it's Madhav's time to tell the story. The protagonist, Madhav Jha, narrates the story in the first person. At St. Stephen's College in Delhi, the protagonist, Madhav Jha, is a young guy from the countryside who develops romantic feelings for Riya Somani, a wealthy city girl, at the beginning of *Half Girlfriend*. Riya is from Delhi, an urban elite, and Madhav hails from Dumraon, a rural area in India; nonetheless, the story depicts the peculiar pairing of these two individuals, despite their very opposite backgrounds and mindsets.

The author deviates from his prior works by addressing an uncharted territory—the challenges faced by Indian pupils while learning English—in this one. When a Frenchman or German talks English with an

accent, it's considered romantic. However, when a man from a small town in Bihar speaks English with his natural accent, it is seen offensive. For *Half Girlfriend*, this is the one thing that makes it more than just another traditional love tale.

In his portrayal of the subject, Bhagat paints a stark picture of a class struggle in the nation between native English speakers and those who do not speak English well. It is challenging for someone who does not speak English to continue their studies at St. Stephen's College because of the college's well-known emphasis on the English language. Non-English types are those who do not speak English as their first language. Chetan Bhagat's statement on Hindi Medium Types (HMTs) is supported by examples. Having to speak in front of a jury when interviewing for admittance makes Madhav nervous. Moving at St. Stephen's, Delhi drastically changes Madhav's life since good English is the bare minimum that every student is expected to have. Once he meets Riya, he too makes an effort to pronounce words correctly while speaking English. For him, mastering good English is just as important as winning Riya's heart. The way he describes his connection with Riya relies heavily on language.

He comes to appreciate education and language while he is relentlessly pursuing linguistic proficiency. Beyond that, Chetan Bhagat explores the present scenario in Bihar, the terrible condition of schools in rural India, and the need of beginning over. There is a depiction of a heated debate on the need of real school facilities and curriculum. When compared to Madhav, Riya possesses an excess of English-thinking abilities. With Riya's assistance, Madhav was able to put his effective ways into action, and the situation is now solved.

Inadequate facilities contribute to subpar teaching and learning, which in turn prevents students from remote areas from reaching their full potential. When you consider that everyone has problems speaking in English, you may begin to comprehend Madhav's terror and anguish. Since this is a major problem for kids in India, Chetan Bhagat decides to write about it since it is socially relevant. His inability to communicate well in English is one of the obstacles that prevents Madhav's love from blossoming. Despite her outward displays of commitment, Riya is still uncertain about her life choices and hence does not completely commit to Madhav as her spouse. She goes so far as to accept to be his half-girlfriend, a move she casually observes.

In the novel's epilogue, the story picks up after Madhav and Riya's three-and-a-half-year marriage, which ends pleasantly with self-discovery and self-assurance. This episode proves that with determination, everyone can achieve their dreams.

This chapter delves into topics such as "contrast between the rural and the urban societies," "English as a language of communication and its significance," "love," "unyielding will," and "human relationships in modern society," among other socially prominent dilemmas.

By detailing Madhav's past, Bhagat hopes to draw attention to the differences in rural India. India is varied in every aspect of its identity, including race, culture, language, and way of life. As a growing nation, India is bound to follow some trends in modern language, culture, and technology if it wants to keep up with the rest of the world. In contrast, the rural parts of India are experiencing a period of unprecedented prosperity. We need to think about whether these spots can really be transformed into places with all the necessities.

People living in rural areas lack the level of competence seen among urban elites in almost every domain. Bhagat observes that young people in rural areas, especially, are not climbing the corporate ladder in the contemporary world, regardless of their IQ and physical abilities. The fact that kids obtain a basic education in their own tongue, which gives them the freedom to express themselves emotionally, is an undervalued and sometimes ignored part of their development. We live in a world where communication is essential, and the English language is the most vital tool for this task. English is unparalleled in its ability to instill confidence and the conviction that one is capable of achieving their deepest ambitions. Having no means of communication is also seen as a social stigma in today's society.

Half Girlfriend examines the struggles of the city and country elites through the prism of a love story. Beginning with his admissions interview at St. Stephen's institution, New Delhi, a symbol of urban society and a prestigious English elite institution, the protagonist Madhav Jha explores this colossal disparity between rural and urban life throughout the narrative. Students with a remarkable grasp of the English language have the best chance of succeeding in the very tough admissions procedure.

Half Girlfriend stresses the need of rural

schools having enough resources and fundamental education standards. His mastery of the trade is on full display as he expertly blends the necessary components in just the right amounts to produce an engaging and relevant work. The title alone piques my interest. *Half Girlfriend* demonstrates how the educated class perceives the proficiency level in English as a barrier to entry for the rural population, who speak Hindi as their first language and see English as foreign.

The writer's ultimate goal is to help young people in Delhi and other big cities overcome their feelings of incompatibility. It is Bhagat's desire to highlight the model of education prevalent in rural schools. Sabina, K. Musthafa notes that "the novel *Half Girlfriend* focuses on the English speaking capability of the young generation, which is overlooked in the contemporary Indian society" [149]. Given the present state of affairs, she contends that young people must acquire English proficiency in order to participate in the global economy. Problems in rural education systems are laid forth in this book, along with a simple solution to those problems.

Bhagat presents a realistic picture of contemporary Indian society via the events that transpire in the life of a little boy from a remote region who has trouble communicating because of his inadequate grasp of the English language. These conflicts have their roots in the awful reality of ignoring a segment of society. Academics and administrative authorities should take note of Chetan Bhagat's scathing assessment of rural education today. It would seem that the words are having an impact, but actions are failing to bear any results.

Bhagat delves into a multitude of themes throughout his work, including but not limited to: the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, inflexibility and flexibility, corrupt practices, individualism and public good, the lack of regulation in rural areas, problems encountered by younger generations in English communication, and numerous more. He also makes a point of contrasting the awful rural schools with the great urban ones. It is a striking depiction of the urban-rural class split in contemporary India.

Conclusion

Chetan Bhagat's oeuvre serves as a vibrant tableau of modern Indian life, capturing the essence of its complex societal structures through engaging

storytelling. His novels, including *Half Girlfriend*, provide a critical reflection on the urban-rural divide, the pivotal role of language as a tool of social mobility and inclusion, and the nuanced portrayals of young love and aspirations within the framework of Indian cultural expectations. Bhagat's narratives are not just stories; they are a mirror to the shifting paradigms within Indian society, highlighting the struggles and triumphs of the youth as they navigate these changes. His contribution to Indian English literature has sparked conversations about the need for a more inclusive and equitable society, making his works significant not only for their entertainment value but also for their social and cultural commentary.

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