

Chetan Bhagat- a Maker of ‘Change’ or Stereotype and Gender Roles?

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat is one of the most renowned modern Indian English novelists. Postmodern themes like as youth aspirations, love, sex, marriage, urban middle class sensibility, and issues of corruption, politics, and education, as well as their impact on contemporary Indian society, repeat frequently throughout his fictions. He has mostly depicted the contemporary urban social environment of Indian society in all of his fictions. Though Chetan Bhagat's fictions are romantic in nature, present Indian society and its key themes are central to all of his works. In his fictional writings, he has centred on modern challenges affecting middle-class families. All of his major protagonists are sensitive adolescents who refuse to compromise with society's common scenarios.

Keywords: postmodernism, marriage and urban class sensibility, politics, corruption, etc.,

The majority of the characters are parodies of various aspects of current Indian society. The author possesses an uncanny ability to persuade the reader about the current state of society in such a way that one can easily recreate in one's mind a vivid vision of contemporary Indian society. The following essay is a sincere attempt to give a detailed literary analysis of a selection of Chetan Bhagat's fictions, with an emphasis on how the fictions represent modern Indian culture.

Literature serves as a medium to express ones' ideas, thoughts and opinions about a wide range of aspects. One can understand the history, societal conditions, human relations, life style, family, political scenario, culture and traditions and a lot through literature. Many writers such as, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Krupabai Sathianadhan, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee etc., used literature as a tool to bring about a change in the society through their

works. Out of the several issues that have been in focus through literature, since a long time, Gender, the perceived or natural difference between men and women is one of them. The word ‘Gender’ in literature deals with how individuals define themselves and how they are evaluated by others, based on their gender.

Gender, according to WHO is defined as- socially constructed roles and attributes, given by the society that are considered appropriate for men and women. It is a Latin word for ‘Kind’ or ‘Variety’. These roles, responsibilities, behavior patterns, mannerisms that are confined to a particular gender (male, female) are called as gender roles. It is observed that, to a certain extent, these gender roles or codes of conduct for a particular gender are socially constructed. For example, women are expected to be home makers, looking after the family and managing household chores where as men are expected to be the bread winners of the family, going out and working. Not only has this been observed and practiced since ancient times but also it is nurtured and promoted in the modern times through most of the advertisements and media. It is seen that men are depicted working in the offices, playing, driving and so on, while women are portrayed in the ads promoting household appliances, cooking etc.

Such a categorization, in a way, leads to gender stereotyping. The gender stereotyping or Gender roles are observed right from childhood in ones’ own family system. As children mostly learn through imitation, if a girl imitates her mother by draping a saree or playing with kitchen set, and a boy- his father, when he tries to shave or playing with super hero toys, it is considered normal and acceptable. But if they, do it the other way, it’s not seen as something acceptable and even the child may be punished sometimes – boys, for being feminine and girls for being masculine. The word Gender is often associated with feminism, feminists and women’s studies. It can be understood that it is because women are being subjected to suppression by the opposite gender, over a period of time. Feminists and feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva etc., argue that human behavior is learned and not innate. The behavior exhibited by a particular gender is a part of their ‘Gender Identity’.

The society in which one lives in also plays a vital role. It has certain idea or a fixed image about particular gender, which paves a way for the formation of gender roles, prejudices and stereotypes. Women are considered/ expected to be caring, gentle, attention seeking, fragile, damsel in distress, emotional etc. Similarly, Men are expected to be strong, brave, career oriented, bread winners’ and decision makers etc. It is observed that the same

has been nurtured and practiced since ages, across generations which became deep rooted, forming a prejudiced gender identity. And through this gender identity and the gender roles expected from/ by the society it is seen that, men are considered superior or dominant while women are looked down upon as inferior or subjugated.

The same has been identified by R.W.Connel, an Australian sociologist, who proposed the concept of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity’ in her book ‘*Masculinities*’ (1995). It is a practice that legitimizes male dominance over women. In this process of stereotyping, women are mostly marginalized. This kind of oversimplified idea or image of women is not only seen in the interpersonal dynamics of a family but also in the bureaucracies, work places, institutions etc. It is also spread through media and literature. Many writers, from the past to the contemporary times, attempted to address the same through their works. Women, gender roles, patriarchal family system and stereotyping has been one of the major themes in the works of these writers.

In the contemporary times, Chetan Bhagat is one of the popular writers of the country, who rose to fame with his best-selling novels. His books like, ‘*Five Point Someone*’ (2004), ‘*2States*’ (2009), ‘*Half Girlfriend*’ (2014) etc., are also made into Bollywood films. He is regarded as one of the world’s 100 most influential people, by Times Magazine, 2010. The challenges faced by the young generation of the country are of prime focus in some of his works. On the contrary, it is observed that some of his bestselling works portray women in a low light or falling under the ‘stereotypical notions’ that they are categorized by the society. It could be seen that the notion of an ‘ideal woman’ (who should be slim, fair and beautiful, fragile and damsel in distress) is evoked as the female characters in some of Bhagat’s works are being introduced.

In his book ‘*Half Girlfriend*’ (2014), Bhagat introduces his female character Riya Somani, describing about her physical appearance and beauty, about her dress, legs and complexion while on the other hand, the male protagonist Madhav Jha is described through his goal and his career-mindedness.

“Her long neck, long arms and long legs held every guy’s attention. She was a part of the sports-quota applicants’ team. She wore black fitted shorts and sleeveless sports vest with ‘R’ printed in yellow at the back. She collected the ball within seconds. She wore expensive Nike ankle-length sneakers, the kind I had seen NBA players wear on

TV. Her diamond ear rings twinkled in the sun. She dribbled the ball with her right hand. I noticed she had long beautiful fingers.”

This description of a woman through her appearance rather than her aims or goal in life (which she is very clear about) by the author himself, could be viewed as a stereotypical idea that a female protagonist or an ‘ideal woman’ is supposed to be thin, fair and beautiful, even when she is sick with fever, as depicted in the novel.

“She was in bed, leaning against the backrest with her legs stretched out. She wore a night-suit with pink dots all over it. She looked like a candy, more cute than ill. Viral fever suited her.”

There are several other instances where the author depicts his female protagonist as stoic or determined towards her goal...

“Okay, so, I have this dream. I want to play music and sing ... in a bar in New York.” She says about her dream.

“Yes. That’s it. I don’t want to be a famous singer or a rock star. I don’t want to marry a billionaire. I just want to sing in peace, surrounded by passionate people. I want to own a house in Manhattan, my house, filled with books and music CDs. I want to play basketball on weekends. I don’t want to check out a dozen lehengas for my engagement.”

Hailing from a patriarchal male dominated family, as depicted by the author about his character, in which women are the home makers or an asset transferred from father to husband, the character of Riya having a strong dream and planning to pursue her dream is a positive gender identity/ role of a woman that the author tried to show through his character.

“I don’t know. Also, I don’t matter. My brothers do, because they will take over the business one day. I’m supposed to shut up, get married and leave. The high point of my life is to have kids and shop.”

The gender discrimination and distinction of gender roles can be seen through Riya’s family. But on the contrary, the author also portrays her as someone who wants to have some ‘drama’ in her life.

“Okay, I get it. I’m a girl. I’m allowed some drama sometimes.”

This depiction by the author seems to fuel the stereotypical idea or prejudiced gender identity that girls are attention seekers. Though the character Riya is made to drop out from college to get married to a guy in London (which is the ultimate purpose of her according to her family), Riya's marriage is broken and she returns to India, gets a job and stays independent, not depending in anyway on her parents or family.

'Dad's and Uncle's wealth', 'My Dad's and Uncle's house'she addresses her parental wealth as. There are two contrary views observed, about the character, that the author presents here.

1. Depicting -a girl who submits herself to male domination after some drama ,who gets intimate when she wants to but sets boundary to other, someone who drops out of college for the sake of getting married on one hand and

2. The same girl who is about to achieve her dreams by giving up her rich life, who has a strong dream and determined about it, who wants to be independent with her own identity and almost proved her identity as a strong woman or, someone, yet again falling back into the line of patriarchy, desperate for love and male attention.

In the novel '*One Indian Girl*' (2016), the female protagonist Radhika Mehta, who is depicted working in Goldman Sachs, holding a very high portfolio in the company and earning a huge salary, characterized as determined, focussed and well-established woman, is later on portrayed as someone involving in an extra marital affair with a married man, knowing that he is happily married with kids, that further leads to his marriage falling apart. She is previously in a broken relationship with Debashish who leaves her heartbroken.

The mother characters in both the novels, '*Half Girlfriend*' and '*One Indian Girl*', are worried about their daughters not fitting into the patriarchal family scene. In '*Half Girlfriend*', the mother is worried about Riya returning from her husband and seeking to live independent. "*What will people say?*" is what she thinks about the society, rather than her daughter's happiness or safety. In '*One Indian Girl*' it is the income that Radhika earns which makes her mother worried that who will marry a girl who earns in millions.

Radhika realizes her mistake what she did, when everything gets turned down in vain, for their lives, not to reunite with Debashish or Neel (who left his wife and kids), but to go on a world tour. The writer, in a way portrays that woman are bad decision makers through his

character Radhika. It also indirectly hints to the idea that financial independence of a women leaves her destroyed.

In another novel '*The Girl in room 105*', (2018) in which the female character Zara, pursuing her PhD, is been murdered, because of her involvement into multiple affairs. It is noted that women are also depicted in an objectified manner.

In the novel '*One Arranged Murder*' (2020), through the character Prerna, who is a successful entrepreneur, and Anjali, her unsuccessful cousin sister who commits her murder, invokes the stereotypical idea that women are envious about the achievement of other women or women are the causers of their own downfall.

The latest novel '*400 days*' (2021) is a sequel to the above said book where again the patriarchal domination prevalent in the upper class of the society is depicted, which in a way leads to the abduction of Siya Arora, based on which the whole novel revolves, including extra marital affairs of the parents of Siya. Alia Arora, the mother of Siya, an ex-model who strives to get her daughter back is also depicted describing about her beauty despite of her situation she is in.

'I noticed her striking looks first. She had a fair complexion, smooth skin and a cascade of brown curls. Her high cheek bones and full lips were visible even from a distance.'

The novel also highlights the impact of social media on adolescents in the contemporary times. But in the same novel, adultery; an immoral act is also shown as a consequence between married and mother of Siya, Mrs. Alia Arora and Keshav, the detective who solves the case of Siya's abduction.

It is observed that women are portrayed in a negative light in most of the works Chetan Bhagat, either depicted as stereotypical or as immoral. Though initially they seem to be strong and determined, later with the progress of the plot, their characters are either depicted involving in immoral acts or being stereotypical with a negative gender identity, falling in line with the patriarchy. The struggle that they initially are depicted going through, to reach an aim or goal, is portrayed in vain by the end of the work as the female characters, by the end retire to their expected gender roles of woman, confining to home and family or doing something that are not what they depicted as dreamt of.

Since the beginning of literature, the problems and issues faced by women are of considerable concern to the writers. It could be seen that these issues related to gender roles, gender identity, prejudice and stereotyping etc., are brought to focus through their writings. With the changing times and the changing new set of challenges that women faced, the depiction of women and their issues have also changed. But it is observed that the reason behind the issues remained the same since the beginning.

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