

Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-07

Two-Day National seminar on

"Artificial Intelligence, Multimedia and ICT in Teaching,
Learning and Acquisition"

sponsored by

Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi
on 23rd and 24th September 2019 at Department of English,
SRI S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur, Tamilnadu, India



The Quester Heroines In The Novels Of Chetan Bhagat: A Feminist Reading

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CHRIST (DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY)

Abstract

Man for the field and woman for the hearth,

Man for the sword and for needle she,

Man to command and woman to obey,

All else confusion.

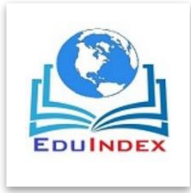
(A .L. Tennyson, *The Princess*)

This depiction of subordinate status of woman in family and society, rendered by Lord Tennyson in *The Princess* (1847) might have suited the Victorian Age of compromise but the modern time of woman's emancipation has pervaded across the world in all spheres of life-social, political, economic, and familial, etc. Further, the women novelists between 1890 and 1960 evinced the fact that a woman is an equal partner of man with her equal rights, and not a man's subordinate to carry on the load of tradition under his command. In the recent past and in the present, many Indian women and men novelists in English have raised the question of a woman's place and her identity in Indian patriarchal society. Among them ChetanBhagat is a leading Indian novelist in English, who has drawn great critical attention and acclaim by projecting a realistic and sensitive picture of the modern educated Indian woman who, although financially independent, still faces the problem of adjustment between tradition and modernity.

Key words:ChetanBhagat, Feminism, individual integrity and sexual exploitation.

Introduction

ChetanBhagat has also portrayed many women characters in his novels. Neha in *Five Points Someone*, Radhika, Isha and Priyanka in *One Night @ The Call Centre*, Vidya in *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, Ananya in *Two States*, Aarti in *Revolution 2020*, Riya in *Half-Girl Friend*, Radhika in *One Indian Girl* and Zara in *The Girl in Room105* are some wonderful women character portrayed by ChetanBhagat. He has become the voice of Indian women with his frank and candid opinion on contemporary issues related to social, cultural, political economic, global and intellectual world. His logical protest against the ills and odds existed



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in Indian way of life, his mission and vision for better India and above all, the problems faced by the younger generation are visible in his narratives.

History of Indian Writing

Indian English Writing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century has witnessed a number of new emerging writers who are completely Indian, both in terms of nationality and sensibility. Especially in the field of novel writing, the writers like Raj Kamal Jha, Pankaj Mishra, Kiran Desai, ChetanBhagat, Amish Tripathi, etc., have shown to the world their power of intellectuality in depicting some of the challenges of Indian people in the context of fast growing and fast changing social, economic, political and cultural scenario. They have further extended the claim of Indian English writing as a separate mode of writing in the vast domain of English Literature.

After 1980s, some serious have been made to make Indian English writing more authentic and more vibrant. The contribution of Salman Rushdie, AmitvaGhosh and some other writers belonging to same generation is quite remarkable, but one thing seems to be lacking in their efforts. They wrote more for pleasing Western readership and they showed less interest in authenticizing Indian English Writing as an independent stream. They did so because they would like to please those who provide shelter to them. They did not hesitate to criticize Indian tradition and convention, myths and legends just for the sake of criticism. In their writing, there is less content of diaspora concern because they have devoted themselves in discovering their imaginary homelands, either in the remote corner of the universe like AmitavGhosh or in the hue and cry of the cosmopolitan milieu like Salman Rushdie.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, ChetanBhagat along with other contemporary writers has shown his strong sensibility to discover various shades and colours of Indian life. Among the contemporary writers, ChetanBhagat with his eight novels within ten or twelve years has shown more and more concern about the fast changing social and cultural melieu of India. The beauty of his writing lies in his presentation of middle class hopes and aspirations of younger generation. He dives deep into human emotions and passions of younger generation with his realistic approach towards creativity.

This article is a humble attempt to throw light on feministic perceptions evident in the novels of ChetanBhagat with more textual extracts and it may assist the readers to understand different shades and colours of life as spent by younger generation in India in the era of globalization. Bhagat has shown is remarkable ability to present hues and cries of Indian life without any twist and paradox. All his novels are well directed towards the presentation of social issues. He believes in the view that literature should be the vehicle of spreading messages among the society. All his novels have different thematic perceptions loaded with



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his social zeal. His social protest is always visible in his novels. He dares to highlight the problems of younger generation.

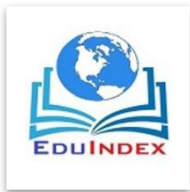
Feminist Perspectives

Five Point Someone, What not to Do at IIT deals with the concept of false vanity, *One Night at the Call Centre* projects the depression and bewilderment of the youth having caught in the cobweb of modern disease, *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is somewhat more purposeful and unique in highlighting some of the contemporary problems of our country (deals with tale of ambition, obsession admission), *Two states* is more charming and more authentic in the presentation of the concept of love and life, *Revolution 2020* candidly attacks the various types of corruption existed in our society and country. Ambition is extremely important in bringing success in life. But when ambition turns into passion, it is dangerous, *Half-Girl Friend* seems to be the realistic presentation of the intermingling of two different worlds- the metro and the village, *One Indian Girl* presents the hopes and aspirations, ambition and passion, failure and frustration, agony and anxiety of Radhika Mehta in unique manner.

Hari and Neha relationship is the most entertaining part of the novel. Hari's meeting with Neha is dramatic and in the tradition of Indian films, and it is also full of imaginative and romantic touch. This incident seems unreal but easy flow of presentation makes this incident composite and sharpening. Hari's sudden meeting with Neha gives an ample opportunity to the novelists to give this novel a romantic touch which rather seems to be filmy and fanciful. He exploits this opportunity beautifully and describes the bare foot of the girl on the metal with extra care.

In *Five Point Someone*, Hari's relationship with Neha adds charm to the novel. The writer fails to provide any substantial flow in their relationship. Their first meeting surprises readers because of its filmy pattern. Their relation grows gradually. Hari was in need of a friend belonging to opposite sex, Neha's imposed alienation is minimized. Since they live in metropolitan city, people generally do not care about the gravity of such relationships. Anyhow, Hari wins the confidence of Neha. Neha tells him the reality of her brother's death which she did not disclose to her parent's. Neha's emotional inclination towards Hari quite evident in the novel when she establishes physical relationships with Hari. Their relation is well responded by the activeness of both.

ChetanBhagat has discarded the fact the modern novels cannot be successful without sex and violence. The novel is immensely successful without any description of sex and violence. In this novel, there is only one chapter in which there is sexual relationship between Hari and Neha. But the presentation is full of coyness and shyness. The writer does not give any graphic description as the modern writers take interest to do so. His description of sexual



relation between Hari and Neha is without any detailed description as we find in the case of Khushwant Singh's *The Company of Women* or Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread*. ChetanBhagat retains his innocence in doing so. He does not want to sell his soul for the selling of the books. In this regard, this novel is a wonderful achievement and it may mark the beginning of new ethos in writing. Straight-forwardness is the key feature of this novel.

In *One Night at the Call Centre*, Esha is the most fashionable girl working in the Connexions Call Centre in the night shift. She is bld and beautiful and very careful about her dress and ornaments. Shyam is highly influenced by Esha's dress and her way of fashion. Shyam graphically views the dress of Esha: "Her dress sense is impeccable. Esha dresses beter on an average day than I ever did in my whole life" (45). She is quite different in her ambition, mindset, attitude and opinion. Her beauty is enhanced by her boldness and appropriate fashion. She wants to be a famous model of the country. She has passion for modelling. She is also hot and sexy in comparison to other female characters of the novel. She is more sensitive and more emotional in the Connexions.

In *One Indian Girl*, Radhika is facing all sorts of problems in finding proper accommodation along with her mother-in-laws, while Anuj enjoys with some other girl-friend at the place of his settlement. She becomes totally stunned by the attitude of her husband Anuj. She broke into tears. Her sacrifice is not compensated by cheating of Anuj. She loses her way of life. She is nowhere. She is now in the havoc of many questions but she does not find any answer.

Esha's story is something similar to the life of the modern girl in Indian traditional and conventional society. Her ambition to become a fashion icon puts her in the cobweb of the different type of world. Her story is the story of thousands of girls who are ready to stoop even their everything to realize their dream. Without understanding the real face of the society, girls' life Esha bends before the corrupt society every day and their stories are presented and highlighted on television channels and in print-media with great interest in order to prosper their market and financial empire. The presentation of the character of Esha is a blow on the real nature of the society.

Esha pathetically narrates the story of her fate without any shyness. She feels strong kind of shame over her past lot. Now, her dream of becoming a model has been ruined although she loses her chastity in this process. Her story tells the destination of the so-called modern girls who are facing such kind of problems in civilized society. Esha's life, her failure and frustration, her unfulfilled gleams and her loss of faith in life raise many questions before so called civilized and cultures society.



Priyanka is very frank and candid in her expression and attitude. She is not shy even in establishing sexual relationship with Shyam. Her frankness and open-mindedness are quite obvious in her actions.

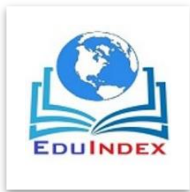
We are reaching the climax of scientific and technological development in the twenty-first century, but we are still in the stone age of our human psychology. On the one hand, great importance has been attached to modern society, and on the other hand, there is great degradation in morality and ethics which are the fundamental tools of secured life in this world. Esha gets the cash in the form of compensation for sleeping with someone.

When Kamat suggests a woman should spew out of her anger in her writing and asks why she cannot do it, she replies, "Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated (147)". These lines clearly reveal the inner struggle of Aarti (*Revolution 2020*) to secure self-respect through self-criticism. As a girl she wishes to maintain her separate identity. Regarding the liberation of woman through an understanding of self-identity.

In *One Night at the Call Centre*, Vidya is extremely remarkable as well as fascinating in making the story more interesting, thrilling and at the same time compassionate. She shows her boldness to invite Govind on her birthday despite the presence of her parents and brother Ishann. In *Two States* Ananya, being a well-educated girl, presents her bold stand before Duke. It does not mean that she is persuading Duke rather she wants to compel him to do something right to change the attitude of his parents. She plays an important role in compromising the situations. Life will have many setbacks. The magic of the story lies in its presentation of real happenings of everyday life.

Radhika would like to discuss about feminism with Brijesh. ChetanBhagat would like to give the message of feminism through Radhika. She defines feminism in this way: "Feminism is a movement that seeks to define, establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women. A feminist is someone who believes in this movement." (127)

She is discussing many traits of feminism but her mind was hovering around two gentlemen Debu and Brijesh. In order to lower the tension from her mind, she is smoking. She does smoking to show her equality with male counterparts. She is doing all these things just for the sake of feminism. She is of view that if boys do this on wedding occasions, why not girls. Critics, scholars, an intellectuals are very critical of ChetanBhagat's popularity. They acknowledge ChetanBhagat's novels written for film-making. But his popularity cannot be underestimated on account of this imposed blame.



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The Girl in Room 105, is not an ordinary love story like other novels of Bhagat. It is an unlove story. The character Zara, is murdered by Raghu, her fiancé. He decides to kill her because he feels that Zara has deceived him. No human has right to take the life of others though they are too worse. Raghu is not a God to punish Zara as if he is a perfectionist in all his ways. Raghu is a cowardice. Who is he to judge the character of a girl and to take out her life? He takes the power of dominance to justify himself which is not acceptable.

“Women pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history” (Woolf: 1979, 43). Women writers were successful in projecting female experiences despite the closed attitudes towards sexuality and passion of the nineteenth century. In Virginia Woolf’s view any woman who sets her pen to paper and adopts the writer’s profession, like her, has to undertake two enterprises: “Killing the ‘Angel in the House’ in her” and “telling the truth about (her) own experience as a body.” Her *Killing the Angel* is a revolt against male chauvinism, male domination and neglect of women. It is fight to restore self-respect and an effort to establish equality. In a sense it is “a manifesto declaring that women can no longer be held in subjection by men” (Surendran: 1996, 105).

It is full of love, roamce and sex. Vidya is no more different than Neha of *Five Point Someone* and Priyanka of *One Night at the Call Centre*. All these three girls, Neha, priyanka and Vidya have seemed to be only filmy roles of passing some time only. They fulfill the aspirations of their male counterparts even establishing sexual relationship before their marriage. The introduction of these girls marks the outcome of new stage in Indian society in which pre-marriage sex has become frequent and unstoppable.

The portrayal of women in the novels of ChetanBhagat has been a serious and problematic concern for the feminist critics. In fact, it is not possible to discuss Bhagat’s portrayal of women, particularly when they stand in a kind of relation to their men, without engaging with feminist criticism. A close study of the novels of Bhagat reveals that Bhagatian women, particularly those who are on their quest for a kind of individual identity are first of all self-responsible beings.

In society, women are given a back seat in all spheres of human life. Economic precariousness and lack of freedom in the male dominated world can be cited as strong reasons which undermine the entire women community. Given gender discrimination which is a social construct, women’s role is limited to the world of kitchen. Patriarchy rules the roost on the domestic front. Domestic violence is the order of the day in every society. But this assumes a terrible proportion in the women folks. Women are destined to undergo a never ending trauma through a triple oppression of gender, poverty and class which also includes sexual exploitation and other forms of atrocities. Innumerable life-stories of suffering sexual exploitation, gender discrimination and other social atrocities perpetrated by the male dominant privileged society.



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Conclusion

Thus 'give' and 'take' principle is followed carefully in the fictions of ChetanBhagat. But in fact, what redeems Bhagat's sex-ethic is that he never ignores the question of reciprocity in man and woman relationship. Not only that, he always takes his women seriously. Women are not merely examples to Bhagat. They are all alive with flesh and blood, passion and possessiveness, spirituality and individual integrity. Bhagat with his imagination and intuition probes the inner being of his women, and vividly records their tensions, complexities, joy and agonies, as they face life in all its beauty and ugliness. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to conclude that Bhagat understands and appreciates his women better than most of his contemporary male novelists.

Today, women are not shy but extremely candid in sharing their opinion publically. They demand equality in every sphere of life. They do not want to be the dolls in the hands of their male-counterparts. Radhika's rejection of both Debu and Neel is the clear evidence of her strong will and determination that marriage is not the matter of realizing only physical fulfilment. There must be sense of understanding and respect between a girl and a boy. Apart from the presentation of various shades and colours of Radhika's life, the novel seems to be discussing feminism in great detail.

In the twenty first century, Indian English writings seems to be flowering in the hands of new writers and among them, ChetanBhagat holds the supreme position. Even though he is not interested in the 'Magic realism' of Salman Rushdie and 'Cross Culturalism' of AmitavGhosh who have been universally acknowledged by the Western readership and the scholars, the Indian readership has responded in abundance with the texts of ChetanBhagat. His fictional and non-fictional works are wonderful in creating great space for him as a writer belonging to the twenty-first century India and depicting the various shades of Indian social, political, economic and cultural life in simple and straight forward manner.

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