

Portrayal Of Female Characters In Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*

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Abstract

*Women are an important part of human society but they have been subjugated and discriminated against from the very early of human civilisation. These differentiations between men and women are defined based on physiological, psychological, economic, and sociological grounds. We find that women endure oppression in most countries. We can observe woman's exploited conditions in the house, society, and workplace. Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend* (2014) highlights the problems of women in the modern age depicting the hopes and problems of youth today. It portrays the marginalised experience of female characters as well as their strength to face challenges and risks. The women like Madhav's mother Kanta and Riya's mother are epitomes of traditional women who naturalise their exploitation. On the other hand, Riya Somani, the heroine of the novel, is the most oppressed girl who tries to resist her oppression and exploitation through her versatility. She speaks her mind and believes in independence, confidence, and a clear vision.*

Keywords

female, gender discrimination, patriarchy, feminism, resistance.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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RJPP Dec.22, Vol. XX, Special Issue pp.21-28 Article No. 4

Similarity Check: 0%

Online available at :
<https://anubooks.com/journal/rjpp>

DOI:
<http://doi.org/10.31995/rjpp.2022v20iS.04>

Women face unfavourable and unequal treatment based on gender, class, age, sex, race, and so on. It is an obstacle in the way of liberty, equality, fraternity, development, and peace. Female suffering is recognised as a burning issue around the world. Discrimination against women is easily visible in many religions, countries, and communities. It affects women's capacity to participate freely in society and turn brings their decline. From the beginning of civilisation, women were not supposed to sit on the highest posts. They are not favoured to be the owner of the family, priest in temples, presidents, prime ministers, scientists, pilots, or have any superior place in society. The development of science and technology has worsened women's condition because it can predict the sex of a fetus before it turns into a baby. Innumerable fetuses are aborted every year. This oppression has been naturalised to such an extent that it has taken shape of a cultural tradition. Preference for the birth of a son is accepted and admired by women too. The different sets of behaviour for boys and girls are popularised to establish the hierarchical relationship between men and women in society. It restricts women's development in the private and public spheres. Scholars have reported different types of oppression against women such as child molestation, no or low education, restriction on free talk and walking, no professional opportunity, early age marriage, domestic violence, household chores, motherhood responsibility, no role in decision making for family, fewer property rights, less food and health care in comparison to boys and men, less political participation due to illiteracy and household responsibilities, etc.

Chetan Bhagat is a renowned writer in contemporary Indian literature in English. He is a multitalented personality who is well known as an author, columnist, screenwriter, television, and motivational speaker. Bhagat has revolutionized Indian English literature with his popular works like *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @the Call Centre* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of my Life* (2008), *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), *What Young India Wants* (2012), *Half Girlfriend* (2014), *Making India Awesome* (2015) and *One Indian Girl* (2016), *The Girl in Room 105* (2018), *One Arranger Murder* (2020) and *400 days* (2021). He is a very careful observer of contemporary issues emerging in the entire world. He has chosen the youth as his characters to reflect their quest for a job, identity, love, failure, and hope. He is not only a pragmatist but also a creator of a new society where women demand a free life. Her female characters display strength and clarity of thought despite living in a patriarchal society. They are ready to face challenges and disparity.

The present paper aims to portray female characters in Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*. In this novel, Bhagat has tried to document women's problems in

various aspects such as child molestation, less importance to education for girls in favour of good marriage proposal, abuses and attempts to sexual assault in a love affair, rape in marriage, illegitimate relationship of husband, domestic violence and discrimination with widows through the character of Riya Somani. Riya is the victim of gender oppression and disparity in the home and society. She silently suffers from her exploitation in childhood because she knows that her voice will not be valued in the family. When she becomes an adult, she begins to resist and take action against the unbearable condition. She leaves her home, her boyfriend, and her husband too for living a free life. She shows her intellectual versatility in coping with the bitter experience of her life and following her mind. The novel prompts young women to lead their life according to their wishes and resist the injustice of a patriarchal society.

The story of this novel is based on a true story. The novel revolves around a troublesome love story of a Bihari boy Madhav Jha and a Delhi girl Riya Somani. The novel begins as Chetan Bhagat meets Madhav Jha in a room at Chanakya Hotel in Patna. Madhav tells him the story of his half-girlfriend who is assumed dead leaving her journal behind. It was Riya and her journal that reveals truths about her sufferings and causes the union between her and her lover Madhav. Although much of the story is narrated by Madhav Jha, Riya's journal helps both Madhav and the reader to realise their mistake in misunderstanding her reaction at various stages in her life. The expression of brutal experiences in her journal is a resistance against her oppression of the name gender and reputation of her family. She says, "I like writing this journal. I can say things I never can otherwise" (HG 197). She feels at peace speaking her mind because writing is the only way to liberation for her.

The character of Riya is presented as a mysterious girl whose silent behavior is not accepted by Madhav Jha and his friends. From the very beginning, Madhav criticises her for not disclosing much about herself and her family. At his objection, she accepts, "I don't open up to people. At most I keep a journal, and even that is rare. You know I'm a quiet person" (HG 32). When we read her journal, we come across a tragic secret of her life. She was molested by her father at a very teenage. The life of Riya presents the story of those little girls who become victims of family rape but do not disclose due to the fear of rumour and loss of socio-economic support of the family. It is tragic to speak against the father who rapes his daughter. It was her journal that reveals the horrifying truth of her life:

They say people write secrets in journals. Should I write one down? They say I am so quiet. Silent Riya. Mysterious Riya. Shy Riya. I don't answer them. All

I want to say is if you crush a flower before it blooms, will it ever bloom as bright later? I was not quiet as a child. I became this way. Dad knows I changed. Dad knows I remember everything. Still, he pretends nothing happened. I do the same. He hasn't touched me for the last three years. He dare not. I don't know why I did not tell Mom. Maybe I didn't even know if it was right or wrong at that time. What could she have done anyway? (HG 197)

Madhav Jha tells Chetan Bhagat about how he met Riya. Madhav belongs to Dumraon in Bihar. He manages to score a seat in the prestigious St. Stephens College, New Delhi due to sports quota. He has to give trials on the basketball court to get admission. Waiting for their turn, He has the glance of tall and good-looking Riya Somani to whom he gives some suggestions with an intention of improvement of her game. Bhagat writes that it was Riya's beauty and height that attracted Madhav first, "Her face was grimy, dust sticking to her left cheek and forehead. Yet, it was one of the most beautiful faces I had seen in my entire life" (HG 15).

When Riya and Madhav become friends, she shares the gender biases of her family. Her condition is not much better than other Indian girls who are differentiated from their brothers because they are not supposed to enhance family business. She says, "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 highest point of my life is to have kids and shop" (HG 32). The famous feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir writes that the most oppressive nature of gender discrimination is the necessity of marriage for women. Women's personal and professional desires are either neglected or put in second place:

A girl's free choice was always highly restricted, and celibacy—except in rare cases where it bears a sacred connotation—ranked her as a parasite and pariah; marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification for her existence. (Beauvoir 452)

We find that women are neglected in the field of education. The percentage of girls' education is still low in India. People prefer to invest money in boys' education while women's education is ignored on the basis that they are 'paraya dhan' and have to go husbands' houses one day. Riya belongs to a rich Marvadi family who is obsessed with money. They too do not like Riya's aspiration to study and learn music. She tells Madhav, "I told them I want to study music after college. They want me to marry into some rich Marwari family and live like a queen. I don't want to live like a queen...I just want to sing in peace, surrounded by passionate people" (HG 32-33). All her desires are crushed under patriarchal pressure and she has to drop out of college at the early age of nineteen to marry Rohan.

Bhagat has portrayed female harassment in Madhav's physical attraction towards Riya to the extent of abuse and attempt to sexual assault. Madhav does not consider her a human being and tries to force himself upon her. He puts his hand on her hand while watching a movie and excuses it accidentally on her objection. He is too much obsessed with kissing her again and again even after her refusal. She describes his first kiss as not fair but he feels happy. She says, "Madhav, please understand, I'm not comfortable with all this' ... 'What do we have? What am I to you?' 'If we kiss, we have something; if we don't, then nothing?' she said. I kept quiet" (HG 37-38). He even does not respect her idea to be a half-girlfriend. He demands her to be his girlfriend which means getting physical according to his definition. She repeatedly warns him to behave and control himself but Madhav was guided by his friend more than his conscience. When Riya agrees to be his 'half girlfriend', he calls an expert panel of his friends Ashu, Raman, and Shailesh, who persuade him to make her full girlfriend by raping her in the hostel and making "Bihar proud..." (HG 70). Her refusal for being physical hurts his phallic power and he ends up abusing her in typical Bihari Hindi, "Deti hai to de, varna kat le' ... 'fuck me, or fuck off" (HG 75). Such narrations of Bhagat are the true portrayal of a society where a girl's true love and faith are rewarded with the prize of forced physical contact and an attempt to rape. Riya writes in her journal about Madhav's behavior, "But, all he wanted was to fuck me. it sounds disgusting, but that is what he wanted" (HG 198). The result was that Madhav gets breakup with Riya. His guilt cannot save him because soon Riya gets married to Rohan, a handsome young man. Liberal feminist Ann Ferguson worries that it is the association of masculine with "active, independent, aggressive, rational, emotionally controlled" and feminine with "passive, dependent, nonassertive, non-rational, and emotional" that force genders to play certain roles. (Ferguson 189). He believes that "the elimination of sex roles and the development of androgynous human beings is the most rational way" to develop true love and social relationships between men and women (Ferguson 189).

Bhagat has raised a voice against the exploitation of women in the Indian marriage system. Riya's subjugation takes a new form of domestic violence when she gets married to Rohan Chandak, the son of his father's friend. The Somanis and the Chandaks were family friends for three generations. The Chandaks had business in London. They were very rich. Rohan had taken over the hotel business after his father's death and was performing extremely well. Riya's parents prefer his wealth and not his character. Rohan behaves in a very good manner before marriage and gifts a giant diamond ring to Riya kneeling on his knees but his real

nature is disclosed when she spends some time with him after marriage. He remains busy with his business and always comes late at night. He even does not respond in a good manner. He drinks a lot and beats her very often. When she inquires about the midnight meeting, she is abused, "Shut the fuck up, bitch. What do you know about work?" (HG 199). His mother even objects to her western dress and prompts her son to beat her:

Wear only Indian clothes. Can you believe this? This is what Rohan's Mom said to me today... He slapped me in front of his mother thrice. She didn't stop him. She liked it. He even pulled my hair... Drunk husband, mother-in-law finding something to be pissed off about. (HG 201)

Bhagat has brought the female agonies and plight in front of the society that is continuously suffered by every woman in this or that way. Men are provided a lot of freedom while women are considered just an object of ornament, entertainment, sexual gratification, and domestic slaves. Riya sacrifices herself to Rohan and remains true to him but he deceives her in the name of work. It was a WhatsApp message on his mobile that discloses his hypocrisy and dishonesty towards his wife.

A Whatsapp message flashed in the notifications. It was from someone called Kristin: Miss ur body honey. Wish I had u with me tonight. Kristin had sent pictures of her body too. I came back to bed. I didn't feel bad. I felt light. I had to make a tough decision and that decision had just been made for me. (HG 202)

Riya, who refused Madhav's wrong approach, has to suffer at the hands of Rohan. Her sacrifice of study and music could not bring happiness to her life. The husband's torture and mother-in-law's taunting are naturalized to save the shade of a 'sheltering tree' as in the words of Shashi Deshpande. All the dreams Riya had for travel, adventure, and excitement with Rohan came to a horrifying end. She confesses her mistake in marrying Rohan in her journal, "I made a mistake. A big, big mistake. I can't be in denial any more. I made a mistake marrying Rohan" (HG 201). She decides for herself. She leaves London, returns to Delhi, and informs her mother about the injustice against her. Her mother is a traditional woman who does not mind her daughter's suffering in favour of maintaining the social structure of yoking two bulls together. When her mother teaches her to adjust, she becomes angry:

'Women have to learn to adjust, beta,' my mother said. 'Adjust? How does one adjust to violence?' I lifted my left hand to show her the swelling. Rohan had pushed me and I had broken my wrist. 'What will people say?' Mom blurted out. (HG 202)

Riya is a modern woman who rejects money and status to enliven her desire to live an independent life. She was helpless yet she does not take help from her rich

father and started working in Nestle Company yogurt brand. On the other hand, Madhav feels aghast at the rejection of Riya. He even doesn't accept the offer of an 'HSBC' job and returns home to help her mother in school administration. The condition of the school was very bad due to the inefficiency of funds. They get a chance from the local MLA to gain the lucky visit of Bill Gates. It may bring a bright chance to whitewash the walls of the school. Madhav accepts the offer from the US Delegation to deliver a speech in English. Accidently, Madhav discovers Riya Somani in a restaurant in Patna but Riya cannot notice Madhav. He confirms her room in the hotel and waits for her. Thus, once again Riya comes into his life. She also visits his home and helps him in preparing his speech in honour of Bill Gates. Everything goes well but to utter surprise, Riya disappears leaving a letter to Madhav that she is caught with lung cancer. Madhav becomes angry and helpless. It was in Riya's journal that he comes to know about his mother's objection towards Riya and his relationship based on Riya's gender identity mixed with her racial and divorcee status. Judith Butler writes:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a gendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. (Butler 6)

Madhav's mother has misbehaved with Riya by raising several questions about her dress, race, education, marriage, divorce, kids, and staying in her house with Madhav in the presence of Madhav. She cannot imagine a Marwari divorcee daughter-in-law for her. She is unresponsive to the delight of her son. Riya narrates the warning of Madhav's mother:

'Stay out of his life,' she said shortly. 'Aunty, but...,' She stared at me. 'You are divorced. You must be desperate for another man. My son is handsome and a prince here. Of course, I can sense your plans.' 'Plans?' 'It is so easy for your type. One man didn't work out, so get another ...However, the Prince of Dumraon won't be with a Marwari divorcee. Respect in society is also worth something. (HG 203-204)

With the help of her father's left money for her, she leaves Patna to fulfill her desire of owning a house in Manhattan, sing in a bar in New York, and play basketball at weekends. Her escape from the surrounding world is an escape from patriarchy, gender, and racial discrimination, forced relationships, abuse, and violence in the real sense. Over time, Madhav's fondness has turned into true love. He tries

his best to search for Riya in New York and finds her at the last performing as Ray at the night bar. Riya too has realised their love for each other and turns from half-girlfriend to full-girlfriend. The novel comes to an end with a rosy picture of Riya's conjugal life with Madhav, her son Shyam and her mother-in-law at Dumraon.

To conclude, we can say that Chetan Bhagat's novel *Half Girlfriend* has raised many issues but his portrayal of female characters is marvelous. This thriller love story provides various layers of misery in the life of women. Riya Somani is no other than the representative of modern Indian girls who suffer a lot but can change their lot by firm decision. She presents the character of a determined woman who lives her life on her terms and conditions and does not commit to the oppression of a patriarchal society.

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