

Novels of Chetan Bhagat: A Seismic Shift in Indian Writing in English

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ABSTRACT

*Indian fiction in English has come a long way from the triumvirates of the thirties to the modern recent English fiction writers. The language which was once treated as a language of the foreigner or the language of elite class is viewed differently. As the number of readers of Indian English fiction has increased considerably, so the quality of writing has also improved. The writers are now no longer active users of English but they have English as their first language (Lingua franca). They express themselves with native proficiency. They are the writers who think and write in one language which is English. They have travelled in various continents and they have something substantial to tell their readers. Indian English fiction is now the part of world literature. It has struggled, endured indifferences of the West and now finally emerged as a clear winner among the recent fiction writers across the globe. Among the new young writers the most talented and impressive is Chetan Bhagat. With his novels, *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), *Half Girlfriend* (2014), and *One Indian Girl* (2016) Chetan Bhagat has single handedly reshaped the Indian English novel. The influence of Bhagat's writings has been so full of impact, that even Hindi films are adapting his novel on the big screen.*

Key Words: *Indian English Fiction, Younger Generation, Contemporary Societal Issue, Reading Hobby, Popular Writer*

Very few authors have managed to reach out to such a wide audience as Chetan Bhagat. There is originality of content in his writings and when he writes people feel as if it is their story. He is a phenomenon that has affected everybody, touched everybody's life. Chetan Bhagat projects his readers' viewpoints in his writings. He has always tried to touch upon something new in his writings. His writings have always been close to reality and presented a true picture of life in India. He has always expressed himself in a way that is understood by all and every generation can connect itself to it. His thoughts are worded in such a skillful way that they are understood by readers instantly. It has been one of the major reasons why his writings have captured the minds of the younger generation. Though he has written a handful of books, he has touched upon a variety of subjects from life at a call center, secularism, pressure in today's education system, inter-community marriages, campus life, corruption and many more. He has a large number of admirers all over the world. His novels have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages. He deals with the religious, cultural and educational issues of India. He portrays various religious communities with their clashes, cultures with their different ways of conduct and ever changing educational system. We find view of Chetan Bhagat on religion, culture and education in his novels which are thought-provoking.

Chetan Bhagat gives more value to life than anything else. To him life is for enjoyment not for repression. He feels that since human life is limited, seeking pleasure is not a sin. We cannot see this with other writers. They focus the suffering and helplessness of the people. Bhagat manifests the untiring efforts of his characters to come out of the slough of melancholy. He portrays his men and women as the true revelers of human life.

Adversity does not stay with them for long. It does not subdue their will to enjoy life. They very soon emerge out of it and start delighting in life. Unlike his predecessors, Bhagat has glorified sex in his works. He uses it to unite two families and two states. He hits on the hypocrisy of the people and turns them towards the Vedic interpretation of this creative energy, viz. 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. He has served it as the unifying force. His men and women perform it and break virginity know without social rituals. At last, they either get married

or determined to live together. Bhagat has introduced some unique trends in Indian English literature. He has focused on the interest of the youth. He has written about their aspiration and for them. He has attempted to guide their ripe energies into proper direction. This is no surprise if they acclaim him as the youth writer. His novels touch an emotional chord of the younger generation.

Bhagat's writings display the ambition of the youth, mixed with fears and tinged with tears. His men and women observe morality in warm heartedness of human relations. They are epicureans in nature. They believe in success comes to those who crave for practicability not for mugginess in life. Bhagat puts stress on liberty of women. His women characters believe in absolute, perfect, pure and noble freedom. Hence Bhagat has purposefully employed youth calling approach in his novels. For Chetan, life is more valuable than anything else. Chetan Bhagat discusses a variety of social issues in his fictional discourse. His thematic concerns are undoubtedly multi-dimensional. This research work reflects multidimensional aspects of Chetan Bhagat's novels.

Chetan Bhagat is a personality who expresses the present scenario experience as he realised. He is highly appreciated in the field of English literature. The main aspect of his presentation is youth and their struggle as they have to face. The social milieu as depicted in the novels of Chetan Bhagat is predominantly of the society in the post-globalised era. He stresses the importance of re-defining the social values. He writes about each aspect of India like its culture, its language, its problems and the life of young generation. Chetan Bhagat discusses the mentality of people about riches. He considers that becoming rich by unfair means is bad but we can also create wealth by hard work, innovation by creativity that should be celebrates that is my ethos and I think young India wants that kind of message. The youth want to first fulfill their own needs and only after that are they willing to support a certain cause. Today's youth wants a good well-paying job and a nice girlfriend in a decent urban city. I don't think there is anything wrong with that but what is important is to earn that living honestly, with integrity and excellence and without compromising the core values that build our society.

Chetan Bhagat's novels have the theme of present day's outgoings. He writes on the present issues of modern society. His novels are not political or sociological in character but are engaged in exploring the labyrinth of the human mind and indicating the ways to psychological fulfilment. He has endowed the genre with healthy humour and sanguine approach to life. He writes about the youth and only the youth. However, the people of all age groups love to read him. His writing is so simple that everyone likes him. Chetan Bhagat has touched a nerve with young Indian readers and acquired almost cult status."¹

Chetan Bhagat listens to the voice of his soul. He is straightforward in his approach to life. His novels are bold attempts to discover the meaning of life. They try to devise ways and means for determining the discrepancy between the personal pursuit and its fulfilment. His characters just want to enjoy life to its fullest. Though they are not religious yet they are humble enough to learn lessons taught to them by life's problems. The most important secret issue 'sex' is against openly in Indian culture. But Chetan Bhagat openly includes it in his novels. He considers that it is shameful to ignore sex in the country where people adore Kamdeva, the God of love and sex. It is a bizarre idea for the nation where the great sage, Vatsyayan was born. Bhagat believes in sanctity of sex. He says, "Our ancient texts such as the Upanishads discuss sex in an explicit manner. The Mahabharat refers to Draupadi's polyandry. The temples in Khajuraho leave little to the imagination."² No other writer of the past but Chetan Bhagat has sanctified sex. In all his novels Bhagat nicely portrays sex as physical bonding. Like George Bernard Shaw, he has perceived the force working in women. He has frankly discussed woman's dynamism in all his novels. His men and women sincerely serve the ultimate purpose of the life force. The purpose goes here: "Women must marry because the race must perish without her travail."³ In his novels, the feelings of youths for friend, love, nuptials and sex is not at all emotional; it is quite sporty.

All the novels of Chetan Bhagat depict a metropolitan reality that the young generation is more in favour of love marriages than in arranged ones. The attitude of this generation towards sex is not laden with guilt. They look at sex as a way of expressing their love for their partner. They break the social protocol –man ever chases a woman. They are the chasers and woman the chased. Chetan Bhagat is the first novelist among his contemporaries who has delineated woman as the hunter and man as the quarry under her blind fury.

As we see in Chetan Bhagat's novels there are love proposals and rejections of them but everything is taken as quite healthy. His novels depict an urban culture that the youngsters are more in favour of love marriage than arranged ones. Bhagat depicts life for enjoyment not for repression. He suggests to stop looking at pleasure and enjoyment as sin. Human life is limited and if we do not enjoy our time here, what is the point of it. While depicting this acceptable reality he shows us nonsense sometimes committed by fickle minded youth.

Today people are so much fancied by the word love that they sometimes get started love even calling and receiving wrong mobile numbers. With growing urbanization and globalization many opportunities have occurred all around. Now men as well as women are no more seen through the old spectacles which marked men as superior and women as inferior. In this modern atmosphere women are seen to be working shoulder to shoulder with men. Even in case of marriages, now girls assert their own opinions and choices. Women are not considered weak and they work even in defence and in night shifts. They earn their living and make career choices. Women empowerment is seen today in all sectors. Chetan Bhagat considers that corruption has engrossed our country. It has weakened our system. It is very dangerous for our country. He has presented the changing urban realities in globalizing India. His novels have provided a new direction to the stream of Indian English writing.

The name 'commercial fiction' for our country is to be credited to Chetan Bhagat's account. Chetan Bhagat is considered as the new face of our country. Before him, Anurag Mathur's commercial fiction *The Inscrutable Americans* was published in 1991. Still it could not meet the success of Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004). Ever since his first novel became the best seller, he has become the youth icon. This success of his has given rise to a new era. In 2008, *New York Times* called him "the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history."⁴ In 2010, *Time magazine* named him "one of the 100 most influential people in the world."⁵ The reason behind Chetan Bhagat's huge success is that he had clicked with the nerves of Indian youth who are undergoing a drastic change. Simplicity is considered the ornament of commercial fiction. When Chetan Bhagat writes he follows the rules of commercial fiction. His language is simple, lucid and easily comprehensible even to the reader with non-literary background. Any critic with literary bent of mind calls his language unliterary, almost bad instead of simple. But he uses such language and style that takes his readers on easy and comfortable. One does not need a dictionary while reading his books. He uses very simple, short and familiar words to develop his story. Though his English is not considered Hinglish yet he uses a mix of slang and Indianised English which is very simple to his readers. His works make the readers reject and neglect the use of grammar and classics. He makes his novels speak for the Indian youth., their inabilities of achievement and helplessness against the system. A young reader goes through his novels and admires him as he himself finds the protagonist of the novel. The novel becomes his own story when he reads it.

Today we have more Chetan Bhagat with no literary background. Almost all the young graduates of IIT and IIM are now looking forward to become a new Chetan Bhagat. His success, his name and fame have mesmerized them so much that they are fanatically following his footprints. We have Tushar Raheja, a fourth year student of IIT, Delhi in 2005 published *Anything for You Ma'am*, a romantic story of an IITian; Amitabha Bagchi, author of *Above Average* (2006, Harper Collins) that is a book about a student's life in IIT; and Ravi Subramaniam's *If God was a Banker*. Chetan Bhagat's commendable success is the reason behind such a large number of budding authors. It is Chetan Bhagat who has made English fiction reading and writing both much affordable and accessible task for everyone in our country. Though it has increased confidence of budding writers yet it has again confused the mind of young generation in which every IIT or IIM graduate with a love story of his own or a friend and some knowledge of English tends to find another Chetan Bhagat in himself. This is of course going to destroy the Indian literary image globally because in race of publishing more books and make more money the publishers are publishing even unedited and poorly structured books.

Chetan Bhagat has developed young generations in India that they can read and write English. He has developed a flashy taste of reading among them. His readers feel comfortable with Bhagatised fiction and want to read more of that. The authors of their style may defend themselves that they are preparing the readers for literary fiction. Chetan Bhagat is a name in the world of fiction with the success of *Three Idiots* –a well-known Bollywood picture. This picture was an adaptation of Chetan Bhagat's first novel *Five Point Someone* (2004). There is no denial to the fact that his works sell and he is the hero of the new revolution in the publication industry. He has to be applauded for the Bhagatian effect on the youth and his success in reaching the mind. He made possible for the young small towns, high school going students to buy and read and know what is going to be inside the IITs, to work in a call center, to have a love marriage, to start business and how to make it big despite not getting into IITs. It seems the days are not far away when Chetan Bhagat will be accused of damaging the intellect of the young generation in India if the process of publishing such love stories by IITians continued like this with the passion of becoming another Chetan Bhagat. At that circumstance Chetan Bhagat will ever be remembered in the history of IITs and literature, as he will not be a hero for any of them. Since in order to write and get published IITians or IIMians will not be able to become good engineers or managers and the faulty and tawdry writing is going to reach a stagnating point soon. Thus the industry will go to look back at literature and books not merely as a product to be sold. As far as critics are concerned, they may prove a valid point while talking about corruption of language.

Of course, this is not justification for poorly written works or grammatically incorrect usage. Grammar streamlines the wilderness of abstract ideas into understandable framework and helps communicate unambiguously. But literary merit at the least, is very subjective. Chetan Bhagat writes for the masses. He has explicitly stated this many times and it's for the masses to decide if his works are worth their time and money. If critics do not find them even review-worthy, it is their prerogative not to buy his works in future. In this age of mass education and specialization, those writing on general matters are required to water down the jargon and write in a more generic manner. This process needs greater intellectual exertion as it involves seasoning of specialized subject matter for public consumption. Every writer is faced with the problem of balancing between expressing and communicating. A writer usually writes because he feels his thoughts are unique or different and worth communicating. But to communicate, he needs to express his thoughts in a format that people understand. Excessive focus on communication alone is detrimental too, for one's thoughts are straitjacketed to please others. Chetan Bhagat, since he comes from elite institutions is probably more intelligent and sophisticated than his critics and may have consciously adopted a more free-going style to reach the masses. The topics he chooses are invariably the ones that a typical Indian middle class youth would associate with. Hindi novelist Premchand became popular because of his departure from abstract ideas and ornamental language to focus on realistic and contemporary societal issues.

The genus and genre of writing has changed in every generation. In the initial 19th century, Raja-Rani stories were the mainstream writing genre. But with the birth of iconic writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sharat Chandra Chatterjee and Munshi Premchand the focus shifted from the stories of upper class elite to human emotions, to the oppressed, to the contemporary women, to life. Premchand touched the chords of human heart with his realistic stories of Indians, especially peasants. The pathetic penury of the poor was aptly captured by him. It is said, to know India read a Premchand. Tagore's "Postmaster" still remains an incomparable thought. Then came the blow of India-Pakistan partition. Hindu-Muslim separation, which saw Amrita Pritam's memorable *Aj Askhaan Waris Shah Nu, Pinjar*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. Pre-independence in the early twentieth century, R.K. Narayan and M.R. Anand gave readers an Indian that existed but was unimportant. Anand's *Untouchable* referred to the caste system in India, and R.K. Narayan's stories on common man in an imaginary place, *Malgudi*, portrayed lives so common and so unglamorous.

In the last few decades, books are written in miscellaneous genre. Amitav Ghosh's fiction, Salman Rushdie's magic realism stories, Shashi Tharoor's analysis on Indian civilization, Nehru, India of past and India of future marked unbound thoughts of a writer. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Siddharth Dhanvant Shangvi's *The last Song of Dusk* read stories of new age Indian life –love, sex and tragedy. The two books deal with stories of happiness and unhappiness, of people wanting to live in virtue but how they eventually succumb to violation.

Tagore and Rushdie have given the world unparalleled stories but today's Indian writers have brought about a revolution in the field of reading. Chetan Bhagat, the engineer, the investment banker, and now a writer gave sanction to sex during study classes with his three books, *Five Point Someone, One Night @ the Call center* and *The Three Mistakes of My Life*. He has made book reading a hobby for all. It is undoubtedly a good sight to see every youngster reading his books, though it is quite obvious why they read only Chetan Bhagat. The language is simple, the characters are young and the acts are juvenile. The writing style, the theme of the story and the art of story-telling have all been changing with time. And with the new age writers gaining popularity, interest to pick up a pen and writing has become more widespread than ever. May be a decade later, we will have a set of new writers with new writing art altogether. "Chetan Bhagat is, of course, not a literary writer. But more importantly he is a successful and popular writer."⁶

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⁴ *The New York Times*, 26 March, 2008.

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⁶ Ayushi Uberoi. <http://the.newspaper.net/wp-content/themes>. The New York Times. 26 March, 2008.

