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Celebrating the Collapse of Class-Consciousness: A Study of Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat has been bestowed along with the gift of writing, the unique ability of peeping into the hearts of his readers and this makes him churn out best seller after best seller. His *Half Girlfriend* like his previous books centers on the campus life and has won critical acclaim from literary world. Weaving a story through different economic, cultural, social, educational background, the story underlines the theme of overcoming the varied types of class-consciousness that plagues all the humanity in general, and Indian society in particular. How the two youths belonging to two different worlds in their lineage as well as their individual perspective of life responds to the voice of their hearts to become one suggests the way ahead for humanity where the walls dividing men gets demolished. The paper aims to analyze the human relations in the backdrop of class-consciousness ridden Indian society, across

the generations where the conservatism gives way to a new liberated world, affirming the victory of human heart over the man-made barriers.

Keywords

Class Consciousness; Humanity; Obsession; Space; Emotional.



Introduction

The young Chetan Bhagat has assumed a pivotal position among the Indian authors writing in English, and once again he has proved his firm grip on the pulse of his readers by churning out another fascinating tale in his novel *Half Girlfriend*. His being young and the member of an elite IIT family places him in an advantageous position in comparison to other writers of his age in revealing the campus life from the perspective of a young student whose romantic life keeps on swinging like a pendulum between happiness and frustrations. Chetan's fascination for depicting the campus life becomes evident once again when he chooses, like his *Revolution 2020*, the journey of two under-graduates in his *Half Girlfriend*; even the title is very suggestive and strikes a chord with the young readers. Taking into account the varied contours of Indian society—the class consciousness and the corrupt politics, the rural-urban divide, differences in perspectives on the basis of generation, traditional versus new-formed morality—Bhagat explores and analyses a very complex matrix of human relations.

Bhagat's knack for understanding the issues of heart and head makes one reminisce about late Khushwant Singh, the columnist and fiction writer who till he breathed his last remained the most controversial as well as the most readable writer in India. Bhagat is very much like his towering predecessor Khushwant Singh so far as his popularity is concerned, yet he lacks the latter's no-hold-barred approach. His simple and easy to grasp prose, his eye for the minutest of detail, and more so his engaging skills speak of

Singh's influence on him. Like his other masterpieces *Five Point Someone*, *Three Mistakes of My Life*, *Revolution 2020*, *Half Girlfriend* has all the ingredients of a gripping story—student life, muddy politics, class consciousness, clash of values and above all pursuit for love, and this pursuit for love or possession underlines the theme of collapse of class-consciousness mentality, particularly the rural-urban, the rustic-refined, the elite-subaltern divide where the deep-rooted class-apartheid approach of Indian society gives way to a new generation awakening. All that social construct—historically or culturally—is brushed aside and the nobility of the human heart is celebrated. Bhagat comments about *Half Girlfriend*: “Here is a guy from rural India who can barely speak English but is head over heels in love with an urban English-speaking girl who has her own emotional baggage. I thought it would be an interesting story to tell” (Bhagat, Pioneer). During the course of the story, along with mapping of the gradual evolution and growth of the characters, the continuous loosening of the shackles of the social customs becomes obvious. The writer here subtly does what his predecessors like Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao did in attacking the deep-rooted social malaise of caste system in Indian society.

Discussion

The story covers various places, even across the Atlantic; the action shifts from a small, backward, agrarian city Dumraon in Bihar to the capital of the country Delhi, and then to New York, the land of plenty and dreams, and then further back to Dumraon in Bihar. In this way, it runs a complete circle and assumes significance when the action finally concludes with the happy communion of the two main characters. Madhav Jha, the son of the erstwhile late King (Raja) of Dumraon, after completing his school education in his native city, arrives in Delhi to seek admission in the most top-notch college of India - St. Stephens—a place where who's who of the elite class only can get into. But Madhav has pinned hopes only on the basis of his game—Basketball the game which brings

complete change in the life of the protagonist of the story—in which he represented his state. After much discomfort in the interview and due to the soft corner of the sports coach of the college on account of his geographical lineage with Madhav, the latter succeeds in winning over the favours of the selection committee and gets admission in the sports quota. Riya Somani, with whom Madhav later falls in love and becomes his heart throb as well as the motto of his life, also enters college from the sports quota. The rusticism and fear of English are Madhav's weak spots, and Bhagat willingly opts to highlight this English-phobia predicament faced by the youth in rural India: "The main challenge for me and my editor was to write an English novel from the perspective of a guy who does not know English." (Bhagat, Bangalore Literature Festival) Riya Somani has all that one can dream for under the sun—towering personality with beautiful looks, fair complexion, fluent English and above all the daughter of a multi-millionaire representing the elite of the capital. Her being a basketball player for fun and her sporty looks make her the cynosure of all the students in the college.

By introducing his main characters in the campus of St. Stephens College, Delhi, Bhagat has already set the tone of the story to unfold. The readers' curiosity intensifies to see the roller-coaster relationship between the protagonists Madhav Jha and Riya Somani. But as it happens in the love course, the follies between the two shifts Riya towards her family friend Rohan, a rich owner of the chain of hotels in England, and marries him, leaving behind a devastated Madhav. With the passage of time, Madhav, though every moment obsessed with the thought of Riya, resigns to his fate, and returns to Dumraon (Bihar) and starts taking interest in the administration of the school run by her mother Rani Sahiba Durga Jha. But the destiny plays its part and once again both Madhav and Riya come cross each-other in Bihar, and their love rekindles again. This time also Madhav's incompetency in English helps him in regaining the company of his lady-love. In order to impress upon the Microsoft CEO Bill

Gates for some help for her mother's school, Madhav joins an institute in Patna to improve his spoken English and during one of his visits, he chances upon Riya who after divorce from Rohan has joined a company in Patna.

Finally, the action shifts to New York in America where Madhav has arrived in search of Riya who mysteriously left Dumraon, leaving behind a letter in which she reveals being afflicted with a lung cancer disease, and of her impending death within a month, and thus moves away from Patna as well as Madhav. In fact, after getting a piece of Durga Jha's mind about her cozying up to Madhav, Riya takes a heart-ranching decision, at least for Madhav. She cooks a story about her life-threatening disease which can convince Madhav keeping in view her recent bout of illness, so that he can move on in his life, and leaves Dumraon with all this development in a letter. But Madhav who cannot think of a life without Riya searches for her in every hospital or place she can be expected of, and finally when he comes across her journals in her rented accommodation at Patna, he comes to know about the real reason of her going away from his life. His hopes of re-uniting with Riya once again gets aroused and he finds himself in the streets of New York searching every place of night-music, and finally his chase is rewarded when he finds Riya in a music-bar. Towards the end, they are happily married, blessed with a son while Rani Sahiba accepts the westernized divorcee as his daughter-in-law in Dumraon and enjoys her blissful moments with her grandson while Madhav and Riya take care of the school. This way the story takes the reader from dusty Dumraon to the elite Delhi to Patna to swanky New York and finally the journey concludes at Dumraon the place from where the journey began, metaphorically if seen from the perspective of Madhav and Riya's life.

The story appears emotionally a very draining out process for the protagonists Madhav and Riya. Madhav is a simple, country-side chap who never in his life has the opportunity of enjoying the company of a beautiful girl. He is low in self- confidence on account of his rural background and his

inadequacy in English, but the very thought of Riya is like a fresh puff of air for him. He becomes so infatuated with Riya that he does not want to lose her at any cost. Initially he is enamoured by her beauty and wants to be physical with her, and here he does not stop with kiss, but stretches further to a point where she is not ready to go. From the very beginning the author makes it clear that Riya will occupy the mental space of her lover, because when one is passionately in love with somebody, one develops a softer corner for everything associated with the person one is in love with: Riya. I loved her short little name. Or maybe when you start liking people, you start liking everything about them—from their sweaty eyebrows to their little names” (19). It was a case of love at first sight for Madhav:

I had little control over my feelings. So from my first day in college, I was in love. Riya Somani, ace basketball player, English literature student, most beautiful girl on the planet, owner of extraordinary eyebrows and speaker of wonderful lines, had yanked my heart out of its hiding place. (23)

Madhav’s persistent efforts to woo Riya are rewarded with her proximity and her soothing love words, but her rebuffs to his advances and her non-committal dampen his spirits. One gets reminisced about the state of lover in Robert Browning’s *The Last Ride Together* where the desperate lover urges his beloved for one last ride with her:

Take back the hope you gave,--I claim
Only a memory of the same,
--And this beside, if you will not blame;
Your leave for one more last ride with me. (Browning)

And in another poem by the same poet *The Lost Mistress* the lover wants to be a little more than a friend:

Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
Or only a thought stronger;

I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
Or so very little longer! (Browning)

When Madhav visits Riya's home on her birthday, in his best costumes, he feels uncomfortable in the elite class, and becomes jealous of the presence of Rohan Chandak, the big hospitality businessman in London and other cities in the world. He is a family friend of Somanis and a school friend of Riya. Madhav does not relish his proximity with and Riya and seethes with anger when Rohan takes liberty with Riya, and lifts her off the ground in the party. Riya is aware of what is passing through the mind of Madhav, and like a caring friend, joins Madhav privately for some time, just to sooth his jealous thoughts. Madhav's obsession about Riya is so much that at every step he wants a commitment from her but the latter's dilly-dallying approach disappoints him:

'I hope it doesn't affect us. I'm still the same Riya who plays with you on the dusty court,' she laughed.

'What is "us", Riya?'

'Us. You and me. Our friendship.'

'Riya, we are more than friends.'

'Are we?' She looked at me as if genuinely confused.

'I've never kissed anyone before,' I said. (57)

Madhav's pursuit for Riya does not have platonic interpretations only; rather it has physical, sexual overtones also. His one crash, dirty sentence changes the life for Madhav forever when in the hostel room Riya gets repulsive about his nasty proposal. Short after in their last meeting in the campus where Madhav hopes for reconciliation, he gets the most heart breaking news when Riya gives him the invitation card of her marriage with Rohan. Pain and pathos take refuge in the lonely heart of Madhav. He cannot come to terms with separation from Riya and the very purpose of his life is lost.

Riya belongs to a rich family, dealing in real estate and infrastructure, but she is a misfit who does not feel herself part of the riches. She never finds

herself in the same boat with regard to her family's opinions about life. That's why, she calls them wealthy, not rich, further bolstering up Madhav's thoughts about winning the heart of Riya. She does not speak out her mind, even to her 'friend' Madhav, nor does she share anything personal about her beyond a point. This way she controls the discourse between her and Madhav, and eventually keeps him on tenterhooks as the latter is head over heel in love with her. She is very calculative in measuring Madhav's desperation for her, and allows him to proceed step by step in their relationship. From a stranger to an acquaintance to a basketball friend to a like-friend to a college friend to a lover and finally her wife—Riya dictates the term throughout the journey. Madhav wants to occupy special place in Riya's life: "Am I just like every other friend of yours? Is there nothing special about me" (31)? But she always takes the baffling route and this further compounds his situation. She just stops short of equating him with her other friends, but neither does she accept in uncertain terms, and this fills his heart with insecurity about Riya. Madhav thinks he has a right over her and so she should share everything about her life with him, thinking that this can be a proof of his being in her life. He is on the verge of his nervous break-down: "We walked together. At least our shadows appeared to hold hands" (32). This speaks of his nervousness. Like a desperate lover, whenever Madhav happens to listen to some cozy words from Riya, his hopes brighten up. A sad but optimist lover Madhav interprets every word or move of Riya as per his liking, even though the words spoken were a casual utterance or move just customary, he feels high in his spirits. When he feels uncomfortable in communicating in English with Riya and asks her if he can speak in Hindi, the response, "What you say matters, not the language," (23) makes him simply ecstatic. In her company he feels on the cloud nine because of the most precious possession in the college, and this feeling of possession further compounds his problem. While the former fails to hide his

vulnerability in his love for his lady-love, Riya appears calling the shots in controlling the course of the relationship between the two.

Riya's side is best revealed through her journal only where she shares her own viewpoint on the most important aspects of her life and this journal assumes the central position to analyze the chemistry between Madhav and Riya. She was fed up with phoniness surrounding her life, at home with her parents, siblings and cousins all engrossed in amassing more and more, and afflicted with crash materialism. A lady of substance, she was searching for real, genuine things in life, and in Madhav, she admits, found her one and that was the reason she felt attracted towards him and cherished his company: "*He was not fake*" (198). But his libido disappoints her, not with Madhav only but with her own life also, and in this phase she reluctantly agrees to be Rohan's wife. Her journal confirms her love for her individuality, for the finer things in life related to love and longings and their fulfilment where there is no place for nasty things and baser things related to physical touch or crude sex. Her sense of her 'identity' puts her off first outward Madhav and later toward Rohan, resulting in her divorce with the latter, because both of them wanted to possess her physically, and once when she is conquered by Rohan, she loses importance for the conqueror: "*Rohan liked to conquer. Whether it is a hotel property or his wife, he liked the thrill of chasing more than what he chased*" (202). Free-spirited Riya cannot accept this and realizes her mistake: "*I made a mistake marrying Rohan*" (200). Thus, her sense of independence becomes instrumental in her breaking-up her relations with Madhav as well as with Rohan.

Riya has been presented as a very noble hearted but confident girl. She cares for the feelings of Madhav but at the same time without letting herself to be dictated. She stands by Madshav when he needs her support in campus as well as in Patna and later on in her school function in Dumraon in honour of Bill Gates. But the novelist constructs a baffling person in her who refuses to

divulge anything about herself, or her life. Throughout the story the readers fail to know many aspects or factors which play an important factor in the development of action in the story. Her being a private person, even with her closest friend or love interest makes her a mysterious character. Her opinion about her marriage prospects with Madhav remains unknown—whether it was as a result of Madhav’s boorish behaviour with sexual innuendos or something else that affected her decision in accepting the proposal of Rohan. Even in her last meeting with Madhav in campus, Riya does not give any insinuation whether she preferred Madhav or Rohan as her partner. She rather appears going through mechanical motions, devoid of any excitement or enthusiasm about her future life, nor does she express her pain on her separation from Madhav. This baffles all and Riya’s this characteristic becomes visible time and again in the fiction.

When Riya appears second time in the story after a gap of few years, she is a divorcee. But once again, the cause of divorce is not revealed. When the chance once again brings Madhav and Riya close in Patna and despite Madhav’s reignited love urgings, he fails to bring out the real reason behind her separation from Rohan. Finally, her decision to leave Patna and go away from the life of Madhav just at a petty objection of Madhav’s mother to her proximity with her son confuses the readers further. She cooks a story about her life-threatening disease which can convince Madhav keeping in view her recent bout of illness, so that he can move on in his life, and leaves Dumraon with all this development in a letter. The chase completes when she finally surrenders herself, for once and all, in the arms of Madhav in New York. How she reaches New York to fulfill her long cherished dream of being a singer in a music bar, even when family members are not in the know of it, further confound her personality. Her love for music getting preference over Madhav rather sounds irrational.

Madhav appears fishing in troubled waters when he feels elated at the apparently sad news of Riya's divorce from Rohan, and this underlines his crazy obsession about Riya, though he hides his happiness behind his somber exterior: "*Oh my God, that is the best news I have heard in years, a cheerful voice spoke inside my head. Even my soul jumped about in excitement*" (140). Riya's arrival in his life once again revives his sagging spirits in her absence. But there is hardly any change in Riya's behaviour. She sounds as reserve and private as she was in St Stephens:

'Great. I would like us to be good friend, too,' she said. 'However, I have one condition.'

I rolled my eyes. There is always a catch with Riya. *What is it going to be this time? Have no expectations?*

'Say it,' I said.

'Don't ask me the same question twice.'

'What?'

'Ask me things. I will reply if and when I can. If I don't, please don't ask me again.' (142)

But her philosophical reply about the content regarding Madhav's preparation for the Bill Gates Foundation speech leaves the latter pondering and interpreting her words from the perspective of his own relationship with her:

'He is Bill Gates. People ask him for things wherever he goes. The idea is to not ask for anything and yet earn a grant.'

'Not ask?'

'Yes. Never ask. It comes across as needy.'

I looked at her. Did she leave me because of the same reason? 'I do that sometimes. I come across as needy,' I said in a small voice.' (151)

Madhav visualizes both himself and Riya as a couple, and this thought had affected his thought processes, making him a split personality, as his mental

space always remains occupied with the thoughts of Riya: “Don’t fall in love with her again, a voice within me warned. You never fell out of love with her, another voice countered with an evil laugh” (150). Riya’s statement to Madhav about her status assumes significance and characterizes her personae: “I look forward to being alone” (155).

Madhav’s obsession with Riya underlines the precarious situation faced by men in love affairs where they find themselves at the receiving end because of their vulnerability vis-à-vis women. Riya exploits this situation to her advantage and keeps Madhav’s fate hanging. In discussion as well as in her dealings and behavior, she takes the centre stage and Madhav appears the lesser mortal, as his advances are frequently rebuffed, gently or harshly; it is she who always draws the line as to what extent or level he can take liberty with her, even giving mixed signals—encouraging as well as discouraging. From the beginning to the end Madhav remains a chaser, a chaser of his dream or illusion while she appears running away from him for no ostensibly reasonable cause. But his helplessness is writ large on his every movement in life; his heart beats for Riya, he wants to possess her, mentally as well as physically, and this reduces him to the position of subservience in his relationship with Riya. Bhagat very subtly makes it clear that while Madhav feels devastated without Riya, the latter apparently does not feel so much distressed or overwhelmed with separation from the former.

Riya’s stubbornness in not permitting Madhav to peep into her personal life abounds misery on Madhav. Space between two individuals puts them as separate identity, and Madhav who wants Riya to share everything with him, to be a part of his life, cannot come to terms with her separate identity. Riya is aware of Madhav’s desperation for her; she appears very concerned and feels at home in his company, but still she does not allow anybody to trespass her personal and mental space. Her remaining non-committal and her not showing any signs of desperation for Madhav or initiation for him complicates his

position. Her guarded responses about her personal zone make her one of the most mysterious characters of Bhagat, though a resemblance can be traced between the protagonists of *Revolution 2020* and *Half Girlfriend*—Gopal and Riya—as both seem running away from fulfillment and completeness.

Riya's refined tastes for everything in life find expression in journal. Riya is inclined towards Madhav and is very much aware that every passing day he is going deeper and deeper in love for her—perhaps in her 'Mayajaal' (204): "Yes, he's nice. I know he loves me, and is falling for me more and more every day" (204). That's why, she accepts all the sarcasm of Madhav's mother about her status and or her 'designs' about Madhav. She is convinced of his purity of his heart, and this quality of Madhav brings Riya back to Patna with a purpose to run into him once again when she was feeling lonely after her separation from Rohan: "I like him, too. Is that why I said yes to a job in Patna? Did I do so in the hope of meeting him again? Perhaps" (204). Despite belonging to two different worlds, there is nothing malicious or selfish between the two; both accept each other as they are, and their union signifies the triumph of purity of soul and defeat of class consciousness.

Conclusion:

Half Girlfriend unleashes a new energy for those who find themselves at the receiving end on account of one reason or another in Indian social hierarchy; after some hiccups the book celebrates the triumph of human feelings where there is no place for malice or malevolence on account of one's antecedents or potentialities. The novel makes a classical example of Bernard Shaw's theory of Life Force where the poet-critic propounds that in man-woman relationship, in ninety-nine out of hundred cases women are pursued by the men while in one case the story is other way round meaning that in one out of hundred case men are pursued by women, and such men are considered genius. The Madhav-Riya relationship forms a part of the former one where the protagonist Madhav is in a constant chase of his heart throb and hence remains at the

mercy of his dream girl. Both Madhav and Riya belong to a new generation world where there is no space for historical baggage in coming closer to human hearts. Despite coming from entirely different cultural, economic, backgrounds, their commitment for each other, overt or covert, overcomes all the narrow boundaries of class-consciousness. The triumph of the sanctified sentiments of human hearts once again affirms the liberating force of love which finally even gets the approval of the forces inimical to them. In the ending of the story is embodied a new beginning where the human spirit prevails over all the man-made barriers or classes. Even the old-fashioned, conservative world also joins the bandwagon ushering man into a new conglomerate world.

Over-coming all sorts of odds and social taboos, Madhav and Riya and the latter in particular does not allow any conservative force or issue to come between their relationships. The acceptance of Madhav and Riya as a couple, even by the erstwhile elite but wedded to its old-fashioned mores generation, represented by Durga Jha, heralds a new beginning in the Indian social order, a point which the author wants to bring home to his readers.

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