

Subverting the patriarchy: A feministic reading of Chetan Bhagat's Novels

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Abstract

Feminism as a movement gained political importance in the twentieth century, making the culmination of two centuries struggle for cultural roles and socio-political rights. Historian and activist Cheris Kramarae once remarked that, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings" (Kramarae, 35). Feminism as a movement is about women living on equal terms with men and not pushed down, by law or by culture, into a subservient role. Post-independence Indian society has witnessed massive mobilization in work field. The constitutional provision of equal rights and privileges for women with men, the five-year plans stressing the vocational and occupational bias in women's education and the modern technological innovations helped in a big way for the professional development of women. Empowering the woman within this context, goes to subvert the western notion of the third world woman. What I think however is that if the women were to live in close collaboration with men rather than the other wanting to be superior to the other, productivity will be high and so the world will be a better place to live in. What should be rather celebrated and encouraged, should be collaborative feminism.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Suppression, Subjugation, Identity

Introduction

Feminism has now become a recognized genre and in literary criticism, a recognized discipline. As literature traps women in their contemporary position in the form of writings, the glimpse at the emergence of new woman in modern English fiction is inevitable. The modern period in Indian English fiction was a period when remarkable changes occurred not only in the Indian society but also in women's priorities and choices, their approach to cultures, traditions, customs and social norms. The submissive and docile woman of the 1940's and 1950's and the educated and assertive woman of the 1960's and 1970's have been substituted by the bold and rebellious one of the 1980's and 1990's. The accomplished woman in the 21st century is strong and independent. However it is understood that the last two decades of century witnessed the emergence of the new woman who is not in constant conflict with the man, but yearns to be one with him walking hand in hand. At the same time she realizes her strength, asserts herself and rejects choicelessness. She exercises great control over herself and her circumstances seeking to bring transformation not only in her surroundings but also in her male partner. She may not have tried to bring earth shaking changes, yet her attempts to bring social change show that she has commitment and conviction.

This new trend in fiction is reflected in Chetan Bhagat's novels. Along with the same pattern of discontent and retaliation, the desire and demand for freedom, space and identity by women, a new awakening is evident in Bhagat's novels. So Chetan Bhagat's novels are read here through the prism of collaborative feminism. Neha of *Five Point Someone* and Vidya of *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* are young girls who resist the patriarchal hegemony. The women characters in *One Night at the Call Center* are in perfect congruence with the postcolonial feminism. We see Priyanka having her own identity, views, likes and dislikes. She is a woman of substance who strongly opposes whatever she feels irrational and wrong. She is a pure form of feminist. This argument has

been aptly illustrated by Priyanka when she during one of the dates with Shyam reprimands an old lady who curses her daughter-in-law by saying, "You call this a family? Doesn't look like a family to me I just see an old shrew and a loser wimp who are troubling these girls. Don't you have any shame? Is this you married her for?" Priyanka poses herself to be a C.B.I. officer and warns the husband and the old lady not to bother that woman any more. This occasion shows Priyanka's protest against the marginalization of women. In another such incident, Priyanka slaps Vroom for abusing Esha. Though Vroom's remark is not meant for Priyanka, she reacts very sharply and very strongly. She takes Esha's insult as insult of the whole womankind. Like a real feminist she says addressing Vroom, "Just because we don't make noise doesn't mean it is easy." This reminds us of Alka Saxena's remark, "These days more and more women are becoming conscious of their rights. They have risen in revolt and are raising their voice against their exploitation."

Priyanka doesn't tolerate women being given marginal treatment. She advocates equal right and equal place for women in modern society. This is the reason why she has differences with her mother's partial treatment to her when she says, "She had different rules for me and my brother. And that began to bother me. She would comment on everything I wore, everywhere I went, whereas my brother...., she would never say anything to him. I tried to explain it to her, but she becomes more irritating and by the time I reached college, I couldn't wait to get away from her." Priyanka shows her revolt against her mother's partial treatment in her own style. She further says, "all through college I ignored her and did what I wanted. In fact, this whole doesn't care phase was born out of that...." Her protest against this marginalization goes to such an extent that she continues to love her boyfriend Shyam, despite her mother's disapproval of him. Thus Priyanka's mother, though a woman, emblemizes patriarchy by operating all the restrictive forces on her daughter. But throughout the novel Priyanka is seen as the woman of

substance who strongly resists the patriarchal hegemony. Radhika, another female character in *One Night at the Call Center* represents the problems of career woman. She is seen trying to keep a very delicate balance between her professional and familial life. She is married woman living with her husband Anuj and ever whining mother-in-law. She tries hard to keep things together at home. Radhika's main aim is to earn money and settle down on one hand and manage her mother-in-law on the other hand. She had a love marriage with Anuj and she loves him very sincerely and deeply. Anuj is often out of station since he works in a marketing company and hence Radhika alone has to take care of her whining mother-in-law on the days and during nights she has to work in the office. The black circles around her eyes indicate the hard work that she puts in to keep things together. Although this gets too demanding, she never complains as she loves her husband very much. It is this sincere and deep love for husband, which gives her strength and zeal. It is for the sake of this love that she makes a lot of adjustments and sacrifices. But, it is the irony of Radhika's fate that the person for whom she makes a lot of adjustments and big sacrifices turns out to be treacherous to her. When Anuj is found to be in love with Payal, a modern type of girl, Radhika is shocked. This tragic and humiliating reality turns out to be a great jolt to Radhika's mental world. As long as Radhika submits meekly to the oppression she represents a subalternity who cannot speak since the bind of patriarchy silences her. But the moment she decides to divorce Anuj she emerges as a postcolonial woman who resists all exploitation that results from comparative poverty or powerlessness.

Esha, the third female character of Chetan Bhagat in *One Night at the Call Center* is a modern and career conscious girl. She is a beautiful girl obsessed by the ambition to become a model. It is this ambition which makes her run away from her parents in Chandigarh and do the call center job in Delhi to realize her dreams. She works as a call center agent by night and meets the model coordinators in the days. She has trouble getting opportunity as a model, as she is considered not tall enough to be a good model. But her obsession to become a model goes to such an extent that she sleeps with a designer to get a modeling contract. But the designer turns out to be an opportunist. He betrays her by telling that she can't become a model due to her height. Esha is terribly upset and tries to suppress the mental pain by inflicting herself with physical pain by purposely cutting her skin. Thus Esha can be situated at the intersection of repressive structure of sexism at the hands of oppressive patriarchy. But Esha doesn't succumb to the circumstances, she doesn't lose hope. On the contrary she redefines herself, rediscovers herself, sets new goal and starts a fresh life with new vigour because she knows as Robert Young says, "For all feminists, the transfer of power at independence and achievement of sovereignty, though desirable, was not the end. It was simply a stage along the way. The struggle continued, now against the patriarchal sphere that no longer requires women's support." Aarti of *Revolution 2020* represents the type of women who have been shaped by materialistic greed of modern age. The feeling of love no longer entails commitment but is just a marriage of opportunistic tendency with stark practicability. So Aarti deviates between Gopal and Raghav as per her need. She is thus deprived of true love from any one of them. This depicts

the darker side of modern woman heading towards a frustrated lot.

The present study is focused on the collaborative feminism. Woman protagonist of the novel, 2 States 'Ananya' is inevitably the empowered woman of the twenty first century. Ananya is a south Indian girl born in a Tamil Brahmin family. She is a good looking brilliant student, a perfect kind of a child for a middle class family to pin hopes on. A child to be educated to realize the dreams of parents and placed by marriage in society so as to reward the parent's efforts taken for their upbringing and grooming. Ananya makes a brilliant academic career however does the audacity to get seriously involved with a north Indian boy which annoys her parents. Ananya and Krish however, as decided do not rebel but opt to convince their parents. Here in we get an insight into the traits of their personality. Ananya surely proves to be the accomplished woman of the 21st century.

Ananya exhibits power to clear thinking. Ananya has invited Krish to study in her dorm room in evenings. She has called him at eight O'clock and suggests, 'Cool, carry lots of books to make it clear what you are there for, 'Ananya advised (13). Thus she empowers herself by being fore sighted. Ananya has time and again showed her power to be a good strategist. She asserts Krish to consider his desire to become a writer seriously. Once as they are involved in a serious discussion about their future career plans. Krish says that he wants to be a writer. Krish expected her to flip out and laugh. But she didn't. She nodded and continued to walk," What kind of writer? She said (17). Hence she meant to give a serious contemplation to the thought. Instead of taking Krish's statement as a casual reply. She makes it clear that that he should be more serious about his strange desire.

At the time of placement Ananya involves in detailed discussion with Krish as to the performance expected at selection interviews. She suggests a proper response from Krish at the interview. Krish expressed his desire to be employed in Citibank. He said, 'I should have better answer than "I like the money."' 'Well, you should say this- I want Citibank as I want Indians to have access to world class financial services. And use words like, 'enormous growth "And "strategic potential." She said. "I have to say all that without throwing up?" 'And remember, the city never sleeps so say you will work hard, she said (33) Here Ananya shows her power to exercise her intellect to guide her partner in the right direction in life. Thus she empowers herself to walk hand in hand with man.

Ananya is a gifted woman, good looking with a brilliant academic record and a promising career but she shows her power to maintain and strengthen her filial ties and holds her family values in high esteem. She presents a perfect model of the women of twenty first century. Although armed with all the competencies they have their feet deeply rooted in Indian culture. Success does not make her heady on the contrary she retains her feminine quality of bonding family ties with her love. She explains to Krish that they cannot rush over their intention to marry soon. As her filial ties are important to her. She very coolly drives this point to Krish 'My parents came to Chennai with great enthusiasm but now dad lost his promotion. Pesky relatives visit us all the time - Amidst all this, their daughter wants to impose a non-brahmin, non-tamil and Punjabi boy on them. Of course, they will freak out. We

have to be patient. I love them too, Krish, “She said and paused for breath. (97)

Whether it is Ananya or Priyanka who are feminist to the core, one admirable quality about them is that they surely mark the journey towards collaborative feminism. Ananya by her words and deeds holds promise to shoulder the familial responsibilities in collaboration with their life partners. Economic empowerment for them doesn't mean an excuse to waive off their responsibilities or to pose as a constant competitor for their life partners, on the contrary, Ananya's commitment to seek placement or Priyanka's choice to get trained to be a teacher are actions clear enough of their motive to walk hand in hand with their male partners.

Conclusion

To sum up, achieving the national sovereignty is not a full stop to women's oppression, suppression and subjugation. Bhagat's female protagonists are still struggling against the patriarchal hegemony. Earlier woman struggled against the 'double bind' of colonialism and patriarchy, now it is against the patriarchal sphere in the same nation state. In the colonial structure woman silently submitted to the oppression where as in the postcolonial structure she started registering her protest. Her resistance is no doubt a combination of diverse factors like wide exposure to feminist movement and western sociological phenomenon. But what is remarkable about the plight of Bhagat's female protagonists is that they are seen inching steadily from silence to resilience, towards a collaborative feminism.

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