

FEMININE SENSIBILITIES IN POSTMODERN INDIAN SOCIETY; A STUDY OF CHETAN BHAGAT’S LEAD FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

Vikram Patel

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities

Ganpat University,

Ganpat Vidyanagar,

Kherva, Dist: Mehsana,

Gujarat, India

Abstract

Chetan Bhagat (1974) is one of the most read contemporary popular fiction writers in Indian English Literature. He has written six fictions and one non-fiction in all. His books are sold in millions. Postmodern subjects like youth aspirations, love, sex, marriage, urban middle class sensibilities, issues related to corruption, politics, education and their impact on the contemporary Indian society are major thematic concerns of his fictions. All of Bhagat’s chief protagonists are modern youth with their modern sensibilities and predicaments. The present paper has been prepared focusing on the female protagonists of Bhagat’s fictions. The presenter perceives postmodern sensibilities in thinking and behavior pattern of all the chief female characters like Neha, Priyanka, Vidya, Ananya, Aarti and Riya in various fictions of Bhagat who are observed more advanced, more pragmatic, more rebellious and of course more challenging to the conventional Indian ideals of Womanhood.

Key Words: Feminine, Sensibilities, Post-modern, Society, Female, Protagonists

Introduction:

Chetan Bhagat (1974) is now not an unknown name in the postmodern popular fiction writing in Indian English Literature. At the very young age, he has earned a lot of popularity through his creative fictional writings in recent India. He has written six fictions in all like *Five Point Someone* (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) and *Half Girlfriend* (2014). *What Young India Wants* (2012) is his non-fiction which is a collection of his news articles and columns, he writes in various leading newspapers and the speeches he delivers as a motivational speaker.

Postmodern subjects like youth aspirations, love, sex, marriage, urban middle class sensibilities, issues related to corruption, politics, education and their impact on the contemporary Indian society are major thematic concerns of his fictions. All of Bhagat's chief protagonists are modern young boys and girls from their teens to twenties. He has echoed the voice of contemporary youth of India with their modern sensibilities and sentiments. All the chief characters in his various fictions are shown modernized or say westernized in their thinking and behavior pattern. They practice postmodern sensibilities in their thinking and behavior pattern. They drink vodka and smoke cigarettes frequently. They wear jeans and t-shirts. They eat pizza, burger, and sandwich. They gulp soft drinks and cold drinks. They use internet and smart phones. They are much in advance in compare to the previous generation in many ways. They ask for democratic rights and equally they understand their responsibilities to the society and the nation. They also respect other people democratic rights and responsibilities. They are modernized in their thinking so they do not accept the traditional castism, racism, and communalism in any form. In spite of all the modernized ways of life, they are discontented with the current situations in which they live. They are shown rebel or revolutionary to an obsolete ways of life. They do not easily accept the present adverse situations around them. They react, revolt or try to reform the unyielding situations around them.

The paper presenter intends to highlight the postmodern sensibilities in thinking and behavior pattern of all the chief female characters like Neha, Priyanka, Vidya, Ananya, Aarti and Riya in various fictions of Bhagat who are observed more advanced, more pragmatic and more rebellious to the conventional Indian mentality of Womanhood. Bhagat has depicted all of the chief female protagonists with one or the other kind of postmodern sensibilities in their thinking and behavior pattern which, in many ways, differ from the ideal concept of Indian womanhood. Before actual analysis of Bhagat's heroines with the special reference to the prevailing postmodern sensibilities, the paper presenter proposes to briefly overview the traditional ideal concept of womanhood, modern concept of India womanhood and defines the concept of postmodern Indian feminine sensibilities prevalent in the society.

Ideal Concept of India Womanhood: A Glance

Ideally speaking, a woman in Indian culture is supposed to be chest, benevolent, peaceful and loving-natured in every walk of her life. Even chastity or say virginity is supposed to be her real virtue as a woman and loss of virginity before marriage is supposed to be an ultimate loss of her lifelong asset. Such a thing is not strictly supposed to have in the case of manhood. From her cradle to cremation, the role and responsibilities of women have been very highly defined and determined in Indian culture. The determined role and responsibilities require more sacrifices from women, and offer less comforts in their life even women do it as a part of their lifelong duties. Ever since the childhood, woman is supposed to be ideal in her thinking and behavior pattern. From the very birth, the girl child is restricted and restrained in her dressing, her walking, her talking, her eating, and her behaving in a particular manner. From the early stage of her life, she is taught and trained to let go her personal concerns for the good of a male-child. From the early stage, she is supposed to be shy, feeble, delicate, gentle, and peaceful in her life. She has all the responsibility to maintain the family reputation and social reputation by following all the ideals of womanhood from the very childhood. When she grows as a woman, she has a list of ideals to be practiced as a wife, as a mother, as a daughter-in-law, and even as a mother-in-law with full commitment and capacity. As a wife, she is supposed to be very much faithful to her husband. She is expected to take her husband equivalent to God. She is expected to behave as a

subordinate to him all through her life. She is supposed to take care of each and every expectation of her husband like his food, cloths, physical pleasure, housekeeping, childcare, family and social relations and what not. Along with that, she is expected to do a vermilion auspicious mark at the parting of her hair and hold a *Bindi* on her forehead, wear a *Mangalsutra* around her neck, wear bangles on her wrists, and wear clothes which cover heels of her feet. She is expected to get up first and go to sleep last. She is expected to take her lunch or dinner after serving her family members to their consummation. She has a list of fasts to be kept for wishing long life to her husband and children so and also for maintaining prosperity of her family. As an ideal mother, she is supposed to take all most all care of a child even before its birth. As soon as she gives good news to her family for her being pregnant, she is supposed to eat, drink, think and behave ideally. She is sometimes expected to listen to or read stories of great heroes of Indian culture so that some of the great ideals of the great people may transmit in her child. The role and responsibility of a mother for a child never end till her death. A mother plays vital role in a child's life till her last breath. The ideals of widow life of woman in Indian culture are worse. She has to wear plain white clothes till the end of her life. She can't wear any ornaments or novelties all through her life. Mostly she has to live inside the house. She can't publically participate in social or religious celebrations. In compare to woman, there are very few restrictions for man. Womanhood in Indian culture is never a curse in spite of all the restrictions and restrains. In Indian culture woman is respected as goddess. Womanhood is recommended to be worshipped by great saints and sages of our ancient culture. Despite all its greatness and significance, womanhood in India is respected only if the determined ideals are practiced with all the commitment and capacity. Any violation in practicing any determined ideals, and she would be criticized a lot in society. The great Indian social system and family system is still alive and all the credit for it obviously goes to the practice of ideal concept of womanhood by Indian women for centuries together. The life and deeds of Sita and Savitri are role models for the standards of ideal Indian womanhood to be followed by women in Indian society. One has to accept it that all the ideals of Indian womanhood seem to have fixed for making the masculine life more comfortable at the cost of feminine individual liberty of living life.

Modern Concept of Indian Womanhood and Post-modern Sensibilities: An Overview

In the modern time, the traditional ideals of Indian womanhood have undergone many changes and modifications promising better life to women in society. The rigidity of the conventional ideals of Indian womanhood has considerably diminished. That way, women experience quite considerable space and comforts for living life in contemporary India. In the modern time, the already established norms and ideals of womanhood like wearing traditional clothes, jewelry and other ornamental novelty have undergone many changes. The thinking and behavior pattern in a particular manner have gone through many variations. The traditional attires are almost obsolete replaced with modern garments which provide them enough convenience and comforts. They are considered equal to men in all walks of life. Women in present India walk shoulder to shoulder in every walk of life, may it be a field like education, job environment, business, media, politics, society, army or any other public forum. Earlier, they were supposed to take care of family responsibilities and they were not allowed to participate actively in any such public platforms except those women who were from powerful families or belonged to royal linages. In the modern time, on an average, women are given considerable space for doing their individual development and contributing to the growth of the nation. The man-woman discrimination is diminishing very speedily and equal opportunities are provided to them in the modern Indian

society. The household responsibilities of working wives are shared with working husbands in many ways like in childcare, shopping, cooking etc. The traditional masculine mindset is diminishing respecting opinions and individuality of women in modern society. Many women in modern India learn many modern skills like driving skills, computing skills, managerial skills, and other life skills. In spite of all modernity, modern women feel proud to follow certain traditional values voluntarily. They like to wear *Mangalsutra*, while dressed in jeans and tops. Even educated women prefer to keep fast for the wishing long life of their husbands and their children. They while cooking and managing house, forget that they are teachers, doctors, engineers, ECOs or politicians. Modernity may have changed their looks but not their thinking and behavior pattern completely. Women have all the space and convenience for all round development of their individuality in modern society however a fact cannot be under estimated that still the condition of women in many communities has not noticeably changed because of the lack of education and modernity in those communities.

Ideals of modernity have improved the previous disgraceful condition of women but chasing western values by the third generation in the name of modernity have challenged many pragmatic ideals of Indian society. The paper presenter proposes to call such excessive ideals of modernity as postmodern sensibilities. One can observe free-at-will behavior of the third generation of women in many walks of their life. The so-called modern girls do not tolerate a word of their parents which violate their individual liberty. They wear the clothes they like. They take food of their choice. Late night parties and other outdoor trips are becoming very common in the urban milieus of the country. The habits of eating fast food and wearing shorts are becoming very common. The friendship and boyfriend culture attracts them a lot. Loss of virginity is not that level a serious offense to them. Pre-marital relationships and elopements are not surprising incidents in the contemporary Indian society. The high-profile post-modern generation of women is definitely career oriented, ambitious and individualistic in nature but they sometimes do not hesitate to compromise with ideal value system to reach their ambitions and aspirations. Smoking and drinking just for fun is becoming fashion for young girls in the in rave parties. Vulgar dances in closed door DJ parties are becoming very common in many metropolitan cities. Modernity is good and a welcome step for the overall growth of womanhood in a masculine dominated country like India but overdose of modernity may disrupt the ideal value system which may prove a fatal for the social value system. Women have great responsibility on them to give birth to strong and intelligent generation to the society but changing food and drinking habits, thinking and behavior pattern may cause a great damage to it. The fast food and soft drink generation cannot give birth to the powerful generation like Shivaji, Subhash, Aazad or Bhagatsingh. The chief female characters of Chetan Bhagat's fictions are a realistic representation of postmodern sensibilities. All the leading heroines are modern young girls who have their own philosophy of living life. They do not completely fit into the Indian structure of female value system.

Bhagat's Lead Heroines with an Overdose of Postmodern Sensibilities

Bhagat's chief female characters in his fictions like Neha, Priyanka, Vidya, Ananya, Aarti and Riya are depicted as the realistic representation of postmodern Indian female sensibilities. They are educated, advanced, and modernized but in their thinking and behavior pattern they are suffering from overdose of modernity. They are very practical in their life but their practicality is self-centered and it challenges many ideals of Indian womanhood. Bhagat has depicted all the lead heroines with common mentality of postmodern sensibilities with all possible variations.

Bhagat's heroines are individualistic, pragmatic and free-at-will in their temperaments. The paper presenter observes the postmodern sensibilities in them as follow.

Neha in *Five Point Someone*

Neha is the lead female protagonist of Bhagat's debut novel *Five Point Someone*. Her father Prof. Cherian is very strict and principled professor. She keeps herself away from him as she does not agree to the ways of life he has designed. She is modern in her thinking. She mostly avoids coming near or talking to her father. She is like a passive rebel to the over domination of her father in her family. She does not like even to talk with her father and every time she does, they have reciprocal scorching arguments and it brings more tension in their family. She dates with a loafer kind of young boy Hari, who studies in the department which is headed by her father. She supports him to steal a question paper from her father's office. Neha is a very free minded sort of modern girl. She is in relation with Hari who smokes and drinks frequently. Hari is not anyway serious in his life. She enjoys physical relationship with him but she is not seriously in love with him as she has never spoken or expected Ryan to speak the three magic words to express love. When her parents have gone for giving tribute to her dead brother Samir, at the railway tracks, she enjoys physical pleasure with his boyfriend and also asks for a cigarette as she believes a cigarette is good after sexual intercourse. Physical pleasure with a boy, who is not very serious in his studies or life, and when the parents are hardly one kilometer away, she cheats her parents for her pleasure. She breaks trust of her parents. The character of Neha has been represented as the modern female character that is independent and individualistic in nature which has different opinions and understanding of life than the traditional concept of the past generation.

Priyanka in *One Night @the Call Center*

Priyanka is the chief female protagonist in Bhagat's second novel *One Night @the Call Center*. She belongs to a middle class family but she is a modern type of girl. She is a graduate. She does not allow anybody to intervene in her personal life. She has grown her individualistic likes and dislikes. She has a boyfriend of her choice. Her mother does not like him still she dates with him. She wears what she likes. She does not care about what other people think or comment. She does a job in a call center in night shift. She wears cloths with suits her modern looks. She prefers to eat fast food in expensive restaurants so that she can experience her modernity. She does not like golden jewellery as she thinks that it is old fashioned and only aunties prefer to wear it. She has a mother with traditional mind set. She wants her daughter Priyanka to be obedient to what she thinks of her daughter. Priyanka is very individualistic in nature. She, in the beginning, follows what her mother instructs but gradually when she grows young, she thinks that she has grown up and her mother is trying to dominate her without meaning she rebels against her mother's domination. Her mother wants Priyanka to marry a well settled boy most preferably NRI and she wants Priyanka to be away from her boyfriend Shyam who is her colleague in the call center; a loser of some kind. Earlier Priyanka was in relationship with Shyam. Priyanka, while on her third date with Shyam, seems a very irresponsible girl who approaches Shyam for love making. Her expression: when was the last time we made love? (Bhagat One 102) clearly exposes the fact that she has enjoyed love making with him earlier many a times. She does so out of enjoyment. In her third date with Shyam she plans to make enjoy confined sex in a company Qualis car and she asks if Shyam has a condom and for that she never had any sense of guilt. Later on Priyanka comes to know that Shyam does not show any sign of being well-settled in life and her life might

be disturbed with him, she breaks-up her relation with Shyam and agrees to her mother's wish of her marriage with an NRI boy Ganesh who is doing well in life. She is happy with her engagement to an NRI but she does not let her mother interfere much in her decision. She wants to marry him for a safe and comfortable life but she needs time to understand her fiancé before she marries him. She neglects her mother's hastiness for her marriage.

Along with an individualistic in nature, Priyanka is very intolerant towards the social evils like dowry and domestic violence of any kind. She dares to raise her voice in public against such evils. In chapter #10 titled *My Past Dates with Priyanka-II*, Shyam and Priyanka were on their second date at *Havmore* restaurant. It was like a family place. They had a very good time there. They ate good food. They talked about their colleagues. As they got ready to go, they heard an old woman bitterly scolding a young woman who was her daughter-in-law. She was torturing her with her bitter words because she had not brought enough dowries. Priyanka could not tolerate the situation and she jumped into a family matter of others to defend a helpless daughter-in-law who was being tortured by her husband and her mother-in-law. Here, one can easily understand complexities of modern sensibilities among the young generation of contemporary India.

Vidya in *Three Mistakes of My Life*

Vidya, in *Three Mistakes of My Life* is an eye-catching illustration of the modernized mind-set of the young generation. Still in her school years, she does not like to be controlled by any parental pressure. She is a girl who is not happy with her present life. She wants to live her life as per her wish. She does not want an outer dominance of any kind in her life. She does not like to be called an indigenous type of town girl. She wants to build her career as per her choice and not the way her parents force her to do. Her parents want to make her a doctor, but she is interested in doing a PR course and settling in a big city like Bombay. Though she is hardly eighteen, she believes in unrestricted relationships. She approaches her Maths tuition teacher Govind who happens to be her brother Ishaan's best friend. She, in her over consciousness of modernity, develops physical relationship with him. On her eighteenth birthday, in the evening time, they enjoy physical relationship on the terrace of her house. The student-teacher relationship is no more sacred here. Vidya cheats her parents who are present there at the ground floor having no idea of what is going on, on the terrace in the name of Maths tuition. Their sexual relationship does not end here. It is mentioned in the fiction that they have enjoyed sexual pleasure for eight times (Bhagat Three 206).

Vidya is a character who has been presented as a girl with obsessive modernity. She at the very young age has much attraction towards modernity. She lives in a lower middle class locality but she has higher and higher aspirations in life. Bhagat has represented the complete replica of lower middle class mentality of female young generation of contemporary India through the character of Vidya in this novel.

Ananya in *2 States; The Story of My Marriage*

Ananya is in her post-graduation years. She belongs to a Tamil Iyer family where non-veg food and drinking wine or vodka is strictly forbidden. In spite of all these, she eats non-veg food and drinks vodka with his classmate Krish. She likes to live modern life. She likes to wear short clothes and smoke a cigarette with nicotine. She tells Krish that she was born in a purest of pure upper class community but she prefers to smoke a cigarette with tobacco in it. She also freely uses certain abusing words. Ananya has no hesitation in calling her boyfriend Krish in her hostel

room for reading. She also becomes physical with him in the hostel room. She is a girl with modern ways of life. She is economically independent. She is doing a job in a multinational company. She does not tolerate needless pressure from her to-be mother-in-law. She answers to all the taunts of Kavita who is her boyfriend Krish's mother. She is against the system of dowry. She openly reacts on the humiliation of Rajji mama from the bridegroom family. The bridegroom family asks for a difference in cash as Rajji mama is not in a position to gift a promised big car. Ananya being a modern youth does not tolerate this incident and she skillfully handles the situation and settles the matter. She does not prefer arranged marriage. She wants to marry a boy of her choice but that is with the consent of her parents. Preservation of virginity for her husband is a foolish idea for her and she laugh at such a tendency of highly educated Harish who has come to see her for marriage. She freely invites her boyfriend to her house for meals against the will of traditional Tamil family. She misses non-vegetarian food with wine in her locality so she plans to have it with her boyfriend Krish at his tenanted apartment. She likes to sit on the sea-shore and kiss her boyfriend and she likes to walk in the market hands in hands with her boyfriend without bothering about the so-called family reputation determined by her traditional family. She is very independent character. In spite of her differences with her parents on her life-partner's choice, she cannot tolerate any insult of her parents. Even she breaks up with Krish because of the insulting incident on her parents and she never tries to contact Krish. The character of Ananya seems more mature and advanced as compared to all the other lead female characters of Bhagat.

Aarti in Revolution 2020

Aarti is the chief female protagonist in *Revolution 2020*. She is a high school girl when the story of the fiction actually starts. She is a daughter of the district magistrate and a granddaughter of the former MLA of the constituency. In spite of her stronger family background, she prefers to live an independent life. She wants to join a course in aviation and wants to be an air hostess. Since school life, she is advanced and modern in her thinking and behavior though she is an average student. She dates with Gopal-the chief protagonist. She freely goes for boating with Gopal in the river Ganga. When she grows up, she is much impressed by modern thinking of Raghav-a lead character-who is against the corruption of every kind in the country. Like modern youth of India, she has a clear mindset that there should be no corruption of any kind in the country. Gopal-now a corrupt from top to bottom-approaches her but she keeps safe distance from him as she does not like him being corrupt. The character of Aarti has been twisted as more pragmatic and opportunist like modern youth who easily turn to compromise on the fear of loss of any kind in life. When Aarti does not see her secure future with Raghav while fighting against the corrupt system, she bends towards Gopal who is enjoying all luxuries of life. Before marriage, she is having a sex with Gopal and she only has a slighter fear that she is betraying Raghav for the same. Despite all the modernity and advanced thinking the character of Aarti does not dominates the situations in the novel. The writer has depicted the characters of Aarti with different perspectives of modernity. The modern female sensibility of remaining unconcerned to public issues and exploitation of any kind, and only thinking for the personal concerned have been well displayed through the character of Aarti. Aarti could have been shown supporting Raghav for his noble deed of fighting against corruption with all dedication but the actions of Aarti are shown as her personal moves which do not lead her for the cause of public interest at all.

Riya in *Half Girlfriend*

Riya is the chief female protagonist in *Half Girlfriend*. She has studied in an English Medium school and she is very fluent in English. Along with that, she is a good basketball player. She is modern in her language, her dress sense, her thinking and her ways of life. The hypothesis of the researcher that Bhagat's heroines suffer from an overdose of modernity proves null hypothesis in the case of Riya. Compared all five chief female protagonists, the character of Riya seems to have formed with different perspectives. Riya is modern in her thinking and behavior but she does not suffer from an overdose of modernity. The character of Riya seems very close to concept of ideal Indian modernity. She has a friend Madhav but one cannot take him as her boyfriend in the current sense of the term. Madhav's approaches to be physical with Riya are not liked by her. She permits occasional kissing and hugging but she cleverly denies any further advancement in their friendship. There is no question of drinking vodka, smoking cigarettes, partying, enjoying sexual pleasures with boyfriend in the case of Riya for the enjoyment purpose. She seems very tolerant as she does not at once quit her in-law's house because of the unbearable torture due to the fear of social or family infamy but she is bold enough to quit the in-law's house immediately when the torture is unbearable. She is not that much rebel like Priyanka and Aarti who are intolerant towards any injustice or exploitation in their life.

Final Comments:

All the female characters of Bhagat are shown more modern, more advanced, more pragmatic and of course more individualistic in nature. They represent the post-modern female generation of India. The writer seems to have manifested the multi-angled modern sensibilities of female generation of contemporary India in his fictions. The female characters have been shown violating the so-called ideal traditional concept of Indian womanhood. All most all female characters are depicted as more advanced and irresponsible in their thinking and behavior. The modernity in all the female characters of Bhagat seems to have crossed determined limits of idealism in their lives. They drink vodka, smoke cigarettes, go for parties, disobey their parents and have frequent sexual pleasure with their boyfriends. Along with advanced or say westernized behavior, the female characters of Bhagat's fictions are shown more rebel and revolutionary in various fictions. They cannot easily accept the adverse situations in their lives. They are free-at-will sort of characters. They immediately react on any injustice or exploitation of any kind by others. Except Aarti and Riya who are shown slighter weaker in their attitude and behavior and victims of circumstances, Neha, Priyanka, Vidya and Ananya seem rebel and revolutionary in their actions and reactions.

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