

## Half Girlfriend: A Novel of Helplessness, Hardships and Success

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### Abstract

Chetan Bhagat is the novelist whose area of concern is the length and breadth of the entire country especially of the urban areas. He uses different techniques in his writings to write about the India. He writes to free India from the conservative attitudes of the people and false myths. He hopes through his writings to dissolve boundaries between people of different backgrounds, cultures, communities and different spaces. The writers of the country tried their best to explore the struggles and the challenges of new generation but Chetan Bhagat is chiefly one of the writers whose novels are the representation of such issues. The novel, *Half Girlfriend* portrays the true picture of Indian society in contemporary times. The paper explores the struggles of the characters and how they pass through such hardships to get success.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, New generation, Inferiority complex, Individuality

Chetan Bhagat is such a novelist who expresses his profound love for his country through his writing. He portrays such issues in his writing that are very close to modern generation. He comments on faulty education system, communal and racial society, problems of Indian youth and so on. Therefore, it is necessary to *Indian Today's* comments regarding him, "Bhagat is a symbol of new India. A torch bearer for an unafraid generation."<sup>1</sup>

Chetan Bhagat was born on 22 April 1974 in Delhi, the capital of India, in a middle class Punjabi family. His father was in army and his mother was an employee in a government department. He got his early education in Delhi. First he joined an Army Public School at Dhaula Kuan from 1978 to 1991. His early childhood memories reflect his middle class family. As this is known through one of his articles written by him in his prose collection, *What Young India Wants*.

Throughout my childhood, I remember the shortage of money being a constant theme in the house. We had enough to run the kitchen and pay for utilities but little to build assets on or make expenses. For instance, we couldn't repair a broken sofa for years. When guest came to our house, we find it expensive to serve the coke and served lemonade instead. We rarely ate out in restaurants and when we did, we did so with caution, figuring out the cheapest and the most filling (sic) items on the menu.<sup>2</sup>

It was these experiences that made him to work hard to get rid of his financial crises. Bhagat keen interest in science helped him to go for IIT exams. He cracked the IIT examination by securing a good rank to get into Indian Institute of Technology (IIT Delhi) for Mechanical Engineering in 1991. It was turning point in his life. As is remarked by him, "IIT did for me what liberalisation did for India- created opportunities and changed my life forever."<sup>3</sup>

Chetan Bhagat was humorous from his childhood. He used to entertain people in parties using his jokes and no one took him seriously. Once he was advised by one of his relatives to take life and career seriously. It is humorous feature in his personality that made him a great entertainer of the contemporary times. Bhagat's novels are filled many funny characters representing his funny nature.

Bhagat's latest novel, *Half Girlfriend* published in 2014 portrays young adult romance. Set in the rural Bihar, Delhi, Patna and New York, the novel represents the struggle of a Bihari boy, Madhav, who joins a college in Delhi where he comes in contact with a girl, Riya, from Delhi, falls in love with her. The novel reflects his struggle, helplessness and success to get the goals of his life.

The novel starts with the interaction between Chetan Bhagat and Madhav Jha in a hotel. The interaction between them inspires the author to convert the story into a novel which is known by the name of *Half Girlfriend*. The title of the novel suggests that most of the story of the novel revolves around the romantic relationship between the two.

Madhav Jha tells the author how he comes to Delhi where he gets admission at Saint Stephens College under sports quota. After the interview he goes out for trial in basket ball lawn and has his look on pretty girl playing in the lawn. Being himself from the same field he gives some suggestions to the pretty girl. Through this way he comes in a contact with Riya.

Riya was from Delhi whereas Madhav Jha was from Bihar. Their life was completely different as one was from rural India and another one from urban India. Their friendship was strange combination as their life,

background and thinking was completely antithesis of each other.

In this way their friendship starts that was surprise for everyone in the college. The reason for that was that a beautiful urban Indian girl with a Bihari boy was beyond the reason of the people. The novel portrays beautifully how they spend time in the college and after that outside the college.

In the beginning it is seen that how Madhav just feel helplessness before everyone whether in the interview before the selection committee or outside facing other boys in the college. As Madhav was from rural India he was not comfortable with English at the time of interview before the professors. It shows his helplessness with English as is known from his own words:

‘I am from rural India.’

‘I am from a rural area,’ Gupta said, emphasising the ‘a’ as if omitting it was a criminal offence.

‘Hindi, sir? Can I explain in Hindi?’ (Bhagat 20)

At another place when he meets Riya he could not feel comfortable to speak to her after watching Riya speaking fluent English. As we see in the text that portrays beautifully helplessness of Madhav with English language:

‘English,’ she said, ‘Here, see, that’s my name.’ Riya Somani, English(Hons), it said. My heart sank. A girl doing an English degree would never befriend a country bumpkin like me.(Bhagat 22)

Madhav after meeting Riya develops friendship with her. His behaviour towards her was common as it is thought in Indian culture. He believes that his friendship with her is just boyfriend and girlfriend type but Riya with modern outlook towards life does not agree with his attitude towards each other. She often admonishes him to be casual and be like common friends. As once they go for a date and this date has dual meaning for both of them. Madhav takes it that his love has been accepted by her but she does not look at it like him.

‘So, do I get a date?’ I said.

‘It’s not a date. We just go for a movie. Like friends.’

‘Isn’t that what high class people call a date?’

‘No’

‘What’s date then?’

‘You want to see the movie with me or not?’ she had said, her hands on her hips.

The hands- on-hips pose meant no further question. In the three months I had known her, I knew she hated being pushed. I thought maybe that was how rich people were- somewhat private. We overdid the familiarity in our villages anyway. (Bhagat 29-30)

Here again it is evident the helplessness of Madhav before Riya. He tries to convince her to accept him as her lover and be with him the way he wishes her to be but Riya chides him to be in his limit and stops him not to cross the boundaries beyond friendship.

Madhav is perplexed by her behaviour and he doesn’t know what to do and how to take his relationship with her. He realises his time with her at different places and what people think about them. There are a number of questions in his mind which he seeks to answer.

Am I special to her? I kept asking myself. Sometimes I saw her chatting with other guys and felt insanely jealous. My insistence on seeing a movie together was to find out what Riya Somani really thought of Madhav Jha. I had held her hand to figure out where I stood. Given her reaction, nowhere. (Bhagat 30)

Seeing activities from Madhav Riya doesn’t allow him to behave like that. She tells him to behave in the proper manner. Although Madhav tries to seduce her in the cinema yet she doesn’t feel angry by his behaviour. She takes things lightly having no intention towards his feelings and activities.

In fact, she removed her arm from the armrest for the rest of the movie. She seems upset, even though she never said a word. She keeps watching the film.

Is everything okay? I said. She sipped her drink in silence. We had walked from Odeon to Keventers, famous for its milkshakes sold in glass bottles.

‘Uh huh,’ she said, indicating a yes. I hated this response of hers. (Bhagat 30)

The novel also portrays the helplessness of Riya before her family. She wants to be free in her life and no one should come in her way to stop her fulfilling her dreams. This doesn’t prove successful in her life as she faces a lot of hurdles from her family that makes her to feel sad about her life. Besides study she wants to take classes in music as singing was her dream of life. Once she discloses first time before Madhav how her family acts as a hurdle in the fulfilment of her dreams.

‘I don’t open up to people. At most I keep a journal, and even that is rare. You know I am a quiet person,’ Riya said.

‘I understand.’

‘Thanks. The problem is my family. They are obsessed with money. I’m not.’

‘I don’t know. Also I don’t matter. My brothers do, because they will take over business one day. I’m supposed to shut up, get married and leave. The high point of my life is to have kids and shop.’

‘And that is not what you want to do?’

‘No!’ she almost shouted. ‘You know me better than that. Don’t you?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Sucks being a girl in this country, I tell you. Sucks.’

‘You seem upset. Did something happen today?’

‘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.

That is not what I dream of.’ (Bhagat 32)

Madhav tries to encourage her not to feel so as her dreams are so simple that they are attainable. He tells her that they are not unreal type of dreams which are hard to attain. Riya believes that even simple dreams in her family cannot be fulfilled.

She smiled. ‘Nothing is simple for a girl in a family like mine.’ She said.

(Bhagat 34)

Madhav takes his relationship with Riya seriously and he tries very hard to convince Riya to accept his love and be his girlfriend but all goes nowhere as Riya was in no mood to make him her boyfriend. Riya looks different type of girl in the novel and looks at things in casual manner. She wants to have friendship with Madhav and does not want to move ahead beyond that. At one point of time when both of them are out of the classroom their thinking about each other comes to the fore.

‘Yes, why? Why did you do it, Mr Jha?’

‘Because I... I love you.’

Riya burst out laughing. I didn’t like her laughing this time.

‘Can you please be serious? Your casual behaviour hurts me,’ I said.

She composed herself and sat cross legged under the tree.

‘Okay, fine, Madhav, I will be serious. I laughed because I don’t think you are in love with me.’

‘Oh, really? How do you know that?’

‘Have you been in love before?’

‘No.’

‘So how do you know it’s love?’

Her confusing words left me tongue-tied.

‘How do you know it’s not? I said after half a minute.

‘I know it’s not. We are both too young, inexperienced but curious. Sure, we like each other. But love, please.’ (Bhagat 62-63)

Madhav remains adamant in his position and tries to make her acknowledge to be his girlfriend. When Riya falls sick and invites him to her home, he again tells her to accept his proposal. On his insistence she discovers a new term and proposes him to be his halfgirlfriend.

‘You don’t want to be with me?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Well, are you my girlfriend?’

‘No.’

‘What are we then?’

‘Friends.’

‘You allow friends to hold you like this.’

I had not let her go. She gently moved away.

‘Okay, I’m your half-girlfriend.’ (Bhagat 67)

The novel depicts the obsession of Madhav to get his love at any cost. He always tries to cross the limits of his friendship and wants to make Riya to yield what he demands. He looks to have no control over his feelings and emotions in the novel. Whenever he finds Riya close to her he loses control over himself and wishes her to respond as per his wishes. Riya in the novel seems fully a girl of control. She knows how to carry her friendship and how to control her emotions. She doesn’t want Madhav to cross his limit. This makes her a girl to have control over herself.

‘So why can’t you just stick to what we discussed? Nothing physical. Just close friends.’

‘That doesn’t work.’

‘Fine, maybe we can’t even be friends.’

I couldn’t answer her. I had run out of strategies and clever responses. She stepped

off the bed, straitened her clothes and picked up her rucksack to leave.

Anger mixed with desire. I grabbed her hand.

'You can't play with me. I'm not a toy.' (Bhagat 74-75)

Madhav's behaviour doesn't suit well to Riya and she admonishes him to be in good manner. His behaviour in the hostel room becomes the cause of break up in their friendship. This was bolt from blue from the blue for Madhav. He remains alienated in the college and most of the time remains silent in the college. Since then he encounters a number of times to Riya but she pretends not to know him.

Sometimes I lurked in the college corridors, waiting for her class to end. I stood far away and avoided eye contact. I would watch her come out of class, only to disappear into a crowd of friends. Once she did see me. She didn't smile or turn away. She didn't even look angry. She didn't react at all. It killed me. If she had come forward and slapped me or yelled, I would have been okay. However, she looked right through me, as if I didn't exist. (Bhagat 79)

The dreams of Madhav are shattered when he comes to know about the marriage of Riya to Rohan. He doesn't believe that she will go for marriage so quickly. This shocks him even more when he comes to know that it is her own decision to marry.

I remained quiet. Shock waves ran through me. Numb, I traced the golden embroidery on the pouch.

'A part of me can not believe it is happening,' she said, to fill the awkward silence.

'You are getting married?' I whispered, my tone usually calm, my gaze still averted. (Bhagat 87)

After education Madhav works for some time in a bank in Delhi. He doesn't find good to work there as memories of Riya pich him very badly and he decides to leave Delhi and work in the school of his mother in Bihar. The hopes of Madhav are revived when he meets Riya at Chanakya Hotel in Patna.

'Oh my God,' Riya said. 'Madhav Jha.'

'Riya... Riya Somani, right?' I said. (Bhagat 137)

Life gives him second chance to come in contact with Riya. He enjoys now Riya's company very much. Being the resident of Bihar he accompanies Riya to enjoy the locale of Bihar. He doesn't look for her past and tries to win her company again.

'I love you, Riya Somani,' I whispered before I drifted off to sleep. (Bhagat 169)

Madhav again loses the company of Riya after the programme in his school in which he delivers an impressive speech with Riya's help to justify the need of funds in his school through an NGO headed by Bill Gates. The novels take a shift after he gets a letter from Riya in which she declares her love for him. This is the moment of joy and sorrow of his life. But due to helplessness he doesn't know what to do at this situation.

It is shown in the novel that Riya is lady who takes her life in her own way. She does not like to share the secrets of her with others. Even Madhav, her best, tries hard to hear from the secrets of her heart but she likes to keep them with her. This makes things more hard for Madhav to understand her and win her hand for ever. From her activities in the novel she does not to be burden on others. She wants to fight the battle of her on her own. This is known that after her divorce from Rohan she comes Bihar to work there for sometimes without the interference and restriction of anyone. Madhav on the other hand looks dedicated in his life. He does not allow himself to lose the company of Riya. His love for her is incredible and incessant. He seems to be ready to do everything for Riya and wants to go on any extent to win her hand.

'You really are going to look for her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Even though you may never find her and end up in more pain?'

He nodded.

'I can't quit, sir. It's not in genes to do so.' (Bhagat 208)

Madhav hardship and dedication bears fruits when he see Riya in one of the bars of New York as it was her dream to sing in the bars of New York. To reach here he undergoes a lot of hardship and with the help of his friends he gets what he was looking for, the dream of his life. The novel shows how his tiredness evaporated when his eyes fall on Riya. She was one of his dream that looks to be fulfilled at this time.

I'm sorry, her eyes said to me. A tear ran down her cheek. Mine too. (Bhagat 255)

In the end Madhav Jha, a simple Bihari boy, overcomes all the hurdles of his life to win his love. Throughout the novel he looks helpless before Riya but with passage of time with his hardships and perseverance he gets success to convince Riya to become his complete girlfriend and then wife. The novel has a good message in the end.

'Careful,' Rani Sahiba said.

'He is your daredevil grandson,' Riya said.

Shyam took the ball in his hand.

'Shoot,' Riya said.

Shyam took a shot. His little hands couldn't throw the ball high enough to reach anywhere near the

basket. He tried two more times and failed.  
He looked at his father.  
'It's not happening,' he said.  
'So what? Don't quit. It will happen one day,' Madhav said. (Bhagat 260)

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