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“ONE INDIAN GIRL”: A WOMAN’S JOURNEY TOWARDS TRUE SELF-DEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a feminist reading of Chetan Bhagat’s latest novel – “One Indian Girl”. The novel revolves around a female protagonist, Radhika Mehta, an IIMA product with a job at Goldman Sachs’ New York branch first, next at Hong Kong and last at U.K. Always branded a nerd, she begins to explore her sexuality once she lands in alien territory in a vain search for positive external valuation. She finally succumbs to parental pressure for undergoing an arranged marriage. However, just before the wedding, she realises that she must live life on her own terms and refuses to marry. She takes time off to understand her true self more deeply and at the end of the novel realises that the ideal husband for her is one who will accommodate a woman’s conflicting demands for the freedom to soar high in her career while being a supportive wife and doting mother at home. While the narration traces a woman’s journey towards confidence and self-respect, it also exposes the hypocrisy of the Indian male and the sexist attitudes ingrained into cultures.

Keywords: feminism, equal rights, sexist attitudes, marriage, career

INTRODUCTION

“The fairer sex”, “the weaker sex”.....that’s how women have been perceived. But, with the rise of the feminist movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, the demand for equal rights on par of that of men rose. There have been different phases – the so-called ‘waves’ in the feminist movement. In India, the demand is now on for women’s empowerment. But, misconceptions regarding the modern woman’s disposition abound. Also, the modern Indian woman has newer challenges to face.

These are precisely the issues which Chetan Bhagat endeavours to highlight in his latest novel – “One Indian Girl”. His idea of ‘feminism’ is expressed through the words, thoughts, attitudes and actions of the protagonist, the female narrator, Radhika Mehta. She is curious about her future husband’s opinion about gender equality and asks him if he has heard of ‘feminism’. When Brijesh Gulati replies that it implies equal rights for women, she enunciates the definition of feminism for him – “....a movement which seeks to define, establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women. A feminist is someone who believes in this movement.” (135)

But, what actually is ‘feminism’? Is Bhagat’s protagonist truly one? Or, has he tried to present a new perspective on the concept? And, does his theory hold water? Plus, does he present any solution to the problems Radhika faces? This paper seeks to unravel the feminist threads that make up the fabric of this novel, thus examining Bhagat’s interpretation of the concept in the process. Radhika chooses “the road less travelled

by” and keeps ascending the steps of achievement in her career. In a bid to retain her freedom, she behaves in a manner which actually wrests her independent thinking from her! She discovers that career success and a married life are mutually exclusive concepts! How she finally balances both despite several challenges and in the process redefines herself as a truly self-dependent woman forms the core of the novel.

Discussion

The novel opens with the protagonist Radhika Mehta preparing for a destination wedding in Goa, but is jolted into her unpleasant past when both her ex-boyfriends turn up and propose to marry her, confessing that it was foolish of them to let go of her the first time. As she is conducted through the ceremonies during the week leading to the actual marriage rites, she realises she hasn't treated herself with the respect she deserves and decides not to be forced into marriage just because she has to marry someone. Therefrom commences her quest for comprehension of her inner self and on what terms she would like to lead her life.

According to Bhagat, Radhika is not the archetypal Indian woman, who is besotted with jewellery, finery and cosmetics and cosmetic procedures. Does this imply that Radhika is the only real feminist in the entire country? Anyway, Bhagat illustrates the contrast through Radhika's fair and pretty sister, Aditi, portrayed as the average Indian woman sans ambition and content with frills and parties. Aditi herself admits this when she raises the toast at Radhika's hen party – “If I had the boobs, she had the brains” (22).

Though Radhika excels at academics, (IIM, Ahmedabad) and bags a great job offer from Goldman Sachs on 'Day Zero' of campus recruitment, she is made to feel inferior to her sister. Aditi earns the unofficial title of Miss Hotness when she barely passes Class Twelve. Radhika remarks – “In some way, oh well, in every way, that was a bigger achievement than topping CBSE” (which Radhika had) (8)

So, what makes Radhika different? She works at Goldman Sachs, an investment bank and shatters the 'glass ceiling' (first at New York, then at Hong Kong and later at U.K.). In such a workplace as the distressed debt section of an international investment bank, not many women have made inroads, not, of course, from lack of intellect but rather from want of a supportive environment at home.

This novel highlights the predicament of women who refuse to get slotted into traditional stereotypes (despite the glaring “One” in the title, which rules out generalisations about the two types of Indian women) and hence aren't appreciated. Instead, they are contemptuously categorised into other stereotypes – ambitious, self-centred, and arrogant, of loose character and unsuitable wife-material or 'not the maternal type'. Even trivial transgressions from the beaten path evoke a rebuke, whether it is from her mother, sister or boyfriend. All through the days preceding the wedding, Radhika's mother is nettled by her roaming around in casuals or simple attire and finally calling her 'a defective piece' on her wedding day, when Radhika conveys her decision to cancel the marriage to the groom and his clan. (265)

As Radhika introduces herself to her readers, she is not likeable because she earns enormously, has an opinion about everything and has had two boyfriends – attributes acceptable in a male but never in a female.

It is precisely this Indian obsession with fair-complexioned women who don't display sharp acumen professionally and are considered 'well-settled' only when they have angled a successful man for a husband that Bhagat brings out through his novel, “One Indian Girl”. The protagonist excels at academics all through her student life, secures a high-paying job at a reputed investment bank, overtakes her male co-workers by dint of sheer intelligence and earns a whopping salary and bonus in the first year of her employment itself. Yet, all these fail to instil confidence in her simply because this is a country where a girl is valued on the basis of her ability to attract and please a male as Radhika finds out during her schooldays itself. A classmate's presenting of a red rose to her turns out to be a mere prank and she is subjected to much mockery and jeering! Even when she is a highly successful professional in a line where few women have excelled, insecurity and a sense of inferiority refuse to desert her just because men don't flirt with her as they do with other women!

Bhagat traces her progression from a woman with a high IQ to one with a high EQ in addition. She first evolves from being desperate to do what her boyfriend wants her to do to not doing what her next boyfriend expects of her. The next step consists of not doing what her family expects of her – an arranged marriage. She had agreed to it believing that “.....all the women's empowerment and feminism bullshit didn't really take me anywhere, right? Maybe Kamlu bua and mom's way was the right way.”(6). She reaches the final stage in her

journey towards true self-dependence when she chooses a man to marry not when he is foisted upon her but when she realises his true worth – his ability to truly let a woman do what she wants to when she chooses to and not insisting that she choose only one out of two conflicting aspirations – fly and nest. It is at the culmination of the novel that she evolves into a true feminist – a woman who lives life on her own terms.

It is to Bhagat's credit that he delineates the dilemma of the modern Indian woman in a delectable manner. Most Indian women would like to be both – successful at both their career and at home, especially in the role of a mother. Radhika contends that she can shoulder both responsibilities simultaneously – those of the home and the workplace: "My job will have nothing to do with my commitment as a mother" when her first boyfriend, Debu, lays down the condition for marriage that she leave her job. (96). It is precisely when her boyfriend's criticise her ability to be a doting mother that she realises their claims about being supporters of feminism are shallow.

While Debashish Sen (Debu), her first boyfriend and live-in partner, feels she can't fit into the role of a mother, Neel Gupta, her 'boss's boss' can't understand why she would forsake career success for legitimacy in the man-woman relationship which becomes the prerequisite for fulfilling the responsibility of a mother – providing legitimate paternity to her child in society that he may not be humiliated for the transgression of norms that his parents committed.

Her unbridled exploration of a woman's sexuality benefits not her in the ultimate analysis, but the man she sleeps with. The latter has no commitment and can easily slip out of the relationship at will (Debu) or gratify himself out of home when he is not sexually satiated at home (Neel) without being trapped in the cumbersome rules and responsibilities that the bond of marriage brings with it. In both cases, she realises that she is only being 'used' by her man rather than her manipulating him to quench her thirst. She finds it difficult to overcome her memories and the aspirations that both relations brought with them.

In Debu's case, not only is she first caught unawares by his hypocrisy and his ego's barricading him from a happy, married life with a higher-paid and more successful career-woman but is also shocked to find him in bed with a white girl just when she has brought a red-rose-bouquet and a platinum ring with a firm resolve to give up work altogether to woo him back.

With Neel, it is different. All through, she feels guilty of ruining his relationship with his wife Kusum. She is the one to end the relationship when she feels that it holds no future for her and that she is akin to a mistress. "This whole thing is wrong. And now if I have any self-respect left, I need to end it." (210-211). Here, Radhika has risen a notch higher in her journey of self-discovery.

She rises even higher when Neel has arranged to divorce Kusum and plans to marry Radhika instead. Radhika spurns him because she realises that she'll only be a trophy-wife – "You want a party girl. Someone young, who allows you to cling on to your youth.....Well, I won't be this young girl forever. I don't know what Neel Gupta will do then. He likes Radhika, his young vice-president, but will he like Radhika, the diaper-changing wife and mom?" (260).

At this stage, she maturely concludes that neither Debu nor Neel are worthy of her. She understands that "..... There are fundamental things about you that don't change." (260). Debu's inability to cope with her salary raise is an intrinsic part of him that won't change. Neel, on the other hand, loves "..... only one half of me. My other half is Kusum, the woman you left." In essence, she understands that Neel will discard her once she assumes Kusum's attributes - matronly and immersed in domesticity, which is of course, inevitable with the passage of time.

Thus, emotional intelligence on the personal front is added on to her high intelligence quotient (IQ) and high Emotional intelligence quotient (EQ) on the professional front. Applying the parameters of the "Emotional Competence Framework" developed by Daniel Goleman to Radhika, we discover that she scores exceptionally high initially only on the Social Competence parameters. These consist of factors like – Empathy (especially, service orientation and leveraging diversity) and Social skills (especially collaboration and cooperation and team capabilities). But, it is on the night before her wedding when she sits pondering on the sofa facing the window and more deeply when she embarks on her long sabbatical that she truly develops her dormant potential for personal competence. These consist of primarily self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation.

It is then that she summons the courage to contact Brijesh and ensure that her quest for balance culminates in success, harmony and happiness.

The explicit narrations of Radhika's sexual intercourse with first Debu and next Neel serve to highlight how sex, though intensely craved for by even an intellectual woman, fails to be the be-all and end-all of her life. Stability and supportiveness are what she truly seeks in a partner who lets her be both - a successful career-woman and a loving mother rather than magnanimously consent to her choosing either one after marriage. It is precisely when she cancels her arranged marriage with the seemingly dull and boring Brijesh Gulati that these sterling attributes manifest themselves through his demeanour. At that moment, all she senses is gratitude. But, it is only when she has the time to mull over them during her long vacation that she realises that though Brijesh only purportedly supports 'humanism', he, in his own quiet way, shields her from the wrath of his clan and respects her decision to speak her mind. This time, when she chooses a man to be her partner for life, it isn't one who only seeks to employ her thirst for sex for his own sexual gratification but rather one who won't clip her wings when she tries to soar high in the sky. She, in turn, respects his work and helps him with the financial modelling of his proposed start-up.

Their symbiotic relationship is an illustration of what Brijesh defines as 'humanism' and is representative of Bhagat's prescription for the success of feminism. Mere rebellion is grossly inadequate for a female to achieve personal goals in life as Radhika discovers to her chagrin. Her mother who is the voice of tradition-bound Indian society steeped in patriarchal norms and values makes her realise over and over again as to how difficult it is for a successful career-woman to live life on her own terms. Radhika comprehends that she is perceived as an awkwardly-shaped bit subject to clipping and pruning if she has to find a place and fit into Indian society's jigsaw puzzle. The tendency of her classmates to find studious types undesirable and of adult men to be drawn towards females with a sensuously-crafted appearance makes her resort to waxing of her legs, (Brazilian waxing even!), cutting of her hair to shoulder-length, sexy lingerie, short and alluring dresses. The struggling actor Amanda whose appearance and demeanour attracts all men in the Goldman Sachs' bonus party (85) imparts an inferiority complex to Radhika despite the former's financial instability and lack of business acumen unlike her own capability in these matters. Through all these, Bhagat accentuates the fact that society squeezes females into stereotypes. Conformity to the existing norms and values in Indian society only fulfil men's ends admirably well.

Her transgression of the norms of abstinence prescribed for women ends in dismal failure not merely through exploration of her sexuality but also through consumption of alcohol (with both men, it helps her loosen her control and subdue her conscience – her 'mini-me' as she calls it) and drugs (she ends up in the police station with Brijesh with the prospect of imprisonment looming large!). It would have helped if Bhagat had chosen to enunciate congruence in adherence to norms for both men and women. An elucidation of equal rights in terms of equal proscription would certainly have laid the path towards a less anarchic society.

He also exposes the hypocrisy of men through Debu who, in one of his early encounters with Radhika had played down her fears of excelling at the distressed debt section. (49). When she had pointed out that there were hardly any women in her team and it was a man's job, Debu had called it a nonsensical notion and asked, "Why can't a woman do it? They are better negotiators.....It's all this bullshit that men spread. To scare a woman out of a role or position. Fact is, men are shit-scared of talented women like you". At this point, Radhika really falls for Debu believing his views about women's freedom to be real.

But, it is the same Debu who justifies his jilting of Radhika by saying he wants a housewife. During the course of her final conversation with Debu (with Neel present), Radhika reminds Debu of how he had quoted feminist texts and had in essence, stated that "women could and should fly" . . (258). ".....but when I flew high, you wanted to clip my wings. Fly, as long as you fly beneath me, is it?"

So, what does the modern Indian woman want? It's not merely career success all the way. Radhika tries to explain this to Neel (207) – "Eventually..... I want marriage, kids, family..... I want to wipe my kids' messy faces when I feed them. I want to bake cookies for them. Yes, I do". This desire for domesticity appears as unholy to him as her joining the ISIS! During their last night together, Radhika feels it's the ultimate insult

when Neel expresses his surprise at her so-called incompatible desires and blurts out – “.....I never thought of you as the maternal type. I don’t know if you were even meant to be a mother”. (209).

As Radhika elucidates to Neel at their final parting (with Debu too present) – “ Perhaps equal rights means giving women the same rights, not the same things? Equal rights to get what *they* want, rather than equal rights to the same things *men* want”. (258)

“What do you want? Choose whatever you like, Radhika.’ Neel said.

‘Ah, choose,’ she says and sneers. ‘Choice. The benchmark word of feminism, right? I become a great feminist if I give women the choice of home or career’.

When both Neel and Debu argue it is fair, she contends it isn’t. “Because here’s the deal. You know what women really want? We don’t want to choose. We want to fly and we *also* want a beautiful nest. We want both. Do male birds tell female birds to choose? “Hey honey, choose. Either fly or sit in the nest.” (259)

To drive home her point more clearly, she gives another illustration – “Let’s say, in the name of male rights, men are given a choice. Come on guys, choose. You want a career? Go for it, just give up sex. Oh, you want sex? Just worship women all day and give up your career dreams..... Choose now, sex or career?”

When both Debu and Neel feel nesting and flying simultaneously are impractical for the woman, Radhika offers the reason too –“Because men designed this world. They decided office timings, 9 to 6, five days a week. Women weren’t in the workforce then. They are now....(these office timings) don’t work for mothers.”

In an interview, when pointed out that childcare isn’t just a woman’s job, Bhagat has clarified that it is not the ideal set-up for “*parenting*.” (livemint.com). In another interview (“The Mid-day”), the author reveals that his reference point for this book was Indra Nooyi, CEO PepsiCo, who once declared that women can’t have it all. He felt that when one of the most successful executives in the world said so, it meant that once women get empowered, society doesn’t know what to do with them and it was precisely this issue that he aimed at highlighting through this story.

It is here that Bhagat describes clearly the feminine dilemma of dual desires – success at the workplace and harmony at home through Radhika’s words – “....let’s rejig this to ensure it works for women? Forget rejig, when will we even acknowledge the issue?” (259).

But, eventually, she does find a perfect life-partner – Brijesh! The very same man with whom her family had fixed her marriage and she had apologetically rejected on the day of the marriage! When she meets him at San Francisco during the last leg of her vacation which has provided her ample time to delve deep into herself and understand herself and her past better, he says unassumingly – “you, or for that matter any girl, doesn’t need a man to define her. You need a man to support, inspire understand you. Help you be the best person you can be, banker, mother, both, whatever. And, until you find a man you trust enough to do that, why settle?”

So, is “One Indian Girl” a feminist novel? In many ways, it is. Many ways, because there are several layers in a seemingly simple book. On one plane is the account of one Indian girl’s journey to achievement in an unusual avenue – distressed debt section of investment banking in the international arena. On the other is that Indian girl’s progression from a lovelorn girl willing to go to any lengths to win a man’s approval (to her, getting waxed is more painful than the lashes they punish Saudi Arabian women with, but she does it to avoid being a ‘frumpy nerd’! – 41) to a relationship with an older man (- an enviably fit, wealthy and attractive one, albeit a married one). In the final stage, she learns to respect herself for her own worth and doesn’t depend on external valuation, without turning into a man-hater. She has healed enough to give love, marriage and in essence, life, another chance.

Yet another layer in the book is the sexist attitudes ingrained into cultures. For instance, when Radhika communicates her mind-blowing salary to her mother after the first year, her mother’s first concern is about ever being able to find a suitable boy for her – one who can earn as much to avoid ego hassles. (9). Most parents wouldn’t like to risk being different and alienated from their clan and society for sheltering a spinster daughter for life and Radhika’s mother is no exception. If Radhika feels that her mother is always harping

about her marriage and asking her to hurry up with her decision, it simply reflects a mother's concern for making her daughter conform rather than become the target of humiliation and at worst, social ostracism.

When Brijesh's mother kisses her forehead at the wedding destination, the Hotel Marriot in Goa, Radhika reminds herself that this is an exceptionally good gesture in a country where "in-laws burn brides"! (12)

Radhika's mother, like a typical mother of an Indian girl, hesitates to accept money from a daughter though the latter earns handsomely. "With sons, it is different, it's like your right" (67). Whether it is Radhika's drunkenness at her hen party or her imbibing of marijuana along with Brijesh, her mother constantly reprimands her attempts to justify her actions as being on par with the groom's. All along, it is the prerogative of the groom's family to garner privileges. Finally, when Radhika reveals her unpreparedness and hence refusal for the wedding to Brijesh's family, her father has to grovel before the groom's clan.

Again, when she undergoes the waxing procedure in New York, she says that it was as if a woman were lashed in the Middle East for doing 'something awful like driving a car, offering men their opinions or something totally immoral like exposing their elbows in public'! (40)

The sexist attitudes of the Japanese towards women is brought out through the behaviour of the Japanese team that visits the Hong Kong unit of Goldman Sachs for a deal – treating Radhika as a Secretary, cracking silly sexist jokes and wondering aloud 'how lady can do distressed debt'! Incidentally, when Neel refuses to have any dealings with them, Radhika is understandably impressed.

And then, there are instances of how women strive to earn attention through their looks. Aditi dresses to garner attention though she doesn't acknowledge the fact. For instance, the red Western outfit exposing much cleavage that she wears for Radhika's hen party which she is proud she can carry off owing to her 'super-slim soup-and-salad-diet figure'. When Radhika feels that waxing her legs and her privates is tortuous, she wonders, ".....why do women do it?"..... However, eventually, she too falls into the same trap.

Bhagat also refers to the Indian preference for a male child with wry humour through Radhika's revelations – "My parents wanted a son for their firstborn. When Aditi came, they wanted to undo the damage as soon as possible..." and had a second child. That was Radhika, unfortunately for her parents, also a girl. "It is rumoured that they tried again twice; both times my mother had an abortion because it was a girl". (7)

Radhika is also incensed at the way the words in her profile at shaadi.com to look for a suitable groom are tweaked to satisfy the expectations of a prospective Indian groom and his family – 'quite fair' instead of wheatish, 'flexible to move with husband', 'don't mind joint family', 'parents have no liabilities' and 'we can do a high status wedding" (218). Each clause reeks of sexist attitudes.

To conclude, if feminism has various avatars, Chetan Bhagat's interpretation is one with which every intelligent, working Indian woman is certain to identify with even if she hasn't actually explored her sexuality in the way that Radhika has. Radhika truly embarks upon the 'road less travelled by' and finally discovers – "that has made all the difference." (Robert Frost)

He has presented a solution too – that a woman must discover her true worth and wait till a man worthy of her comes along rather than frittering away her emotions on men who mouth feminist opinions but aren't prepared to implement such principles in practice when it comes to seeking a life-partner for herself. In essence, he wants the famous adage to be rejigged as – "Behind every successful woman is a man"! How ingestible will this be to the Indian male psyche is another matter altogether!

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