

Chetan Bhagat – Expressing Generation Next

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It is said that utility defines aesthetics. Many eyebrows will be raised when this statement is associated with Chetan Bhagat. Many critics have posted him as 'incorrect' and many have shelved him in the like of a Sidney Sheldon. But what many have missed is that he has hit the first generation reader. He has a massive audience and this is momentous. In an age where life is being measured in 'micro-chips', the change in style, content and language is inevitable. Literature mirrors the time in which it exists.

Chetan Bhagat is the perfect picture of the twenty first century India. His simple and honest narration has caught the attention of an audience that is glued to the 'twenty-four into seven idiot box'. His fiction carries the universal theme of friendship and judgement and it helps him to connect with an audience ranging from Boston to Bhagalpur. He leaves little gap between 'the man who suffers and the man who creates'.

Indian English fiction has come a long way. It has experienced a notable change since the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980. For many Indians English is their first language. They use it with a native like proficiency. In an age of SMS and E-mail new words and new idioms are displacing the old ones. The like of Chetan Bhagat cannot be ignored.

Mulk Raj Anand had once very wisely commented that Indian English fiction had come to stay as a part of world literature. Indian English fiction cannot be wished away. It has become a 'hot house plant' as referred by Gokak and when Uma Parmeswaran declared it as immature and insignificant and 'destined to die young', little did she know of what was coming ahead. Fiction writing has always been a very popular and powerful genre with Indian writers writing in English. The 'Big Three' - Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao have cemented its ground and opened new vistas for invasion. As maturity has steeped in with the writers and the readers new variants have found space. In the later half of the twentieth century writers like Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, and Nayantara Sahgal busied themselves exploring the modern man's predicament. Measuring the psychological quotient of the characters was their new found hobby. The shift was from the external world to the internal psyche. Salman Rushdie changed the very complexion of Indian English fiction both in subject

matter and structure. The transmutation was in no way a debasement. Rushdie himself claimed in an interview that Indian English fiction was in a position to conquer English literature. There was a gradual change in the social ethos of the country. An experimentation and innovation was taking place. The change was obvious. "The essential pressure for experimentation," says Irving H. Buchen in his book *The Theory of the Novel*, "comes from the novelist's conviction that the demands of his vision are so new and urgent and the form available so inadequate or tired that a new form or hybrid must be created. (Buchen 104)

Chetan Bhagat forms a new fusion. Through his honest and simple narration he ushers a new hope to India. He wants to change the Indian society and to break it free from the traditions that have caused more harm than help. The cross cultural impact is very much present in all his four books. His protagonists are garbed with a cosmopolitan character - a mixture of Pink Floyd, Vodka, Grass and the Indian Chappal. All his four novels *Five Point Someone*, *One Night @ the Call Center*, *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and *Two States : the Story of My Marriage* are very contemporary in theme and move at a very fast pace. Bhagat convinces the readers and builds a relationship with them. Without being preachy he conveys a message in each of his book. He taps the young generation who hates sermonising and reading.

Five Point Someone, published in 2004 is the story of three friends – Alok, Ryan and Hari, whose measly five point something GPA comes in the way of everything – their friendship, their love and their future. It is Hari who is the spokesperson for Chetan Bhagat. As the three friends at IIT realise that it is not all that easy, they become distressed. All the assignments, making of notes, mugging up and surprise tests become too much for them. The three friends mess up their lives. Their grades are only five points which is bottom up and needs pushing. Alok is not well off and he has a paralyzed father. His mother is the only bread earner of the family and he also has a sister who is to be married off. Alok is sensitive and serious in temperament. When Ryan teases him by calling his parents 'responsibility', Alok declares, "I love my parents, Ryan, it is not a responsibility'. (Bhagat 38) Ryan has some issues with his parents which he refuses to open up. Alok and Ryan cannot stop bickering with each other. Hari, the narrator, is smitten by Neha, Professor Cherian's daughter. Soon the three friends realise that they have messed up everything. If things are not set right it is going to be disastrous. The impossible comes up. They decide to get an access to the question papers. But destiny has

something else in store for them. Alok, Ryan and Hari are caught red handed. The plot proceeds with thrill and mystery. Bhagat makes the book even more humorous by adding his typical punch lines dressed with a colloquial style. Alok is not all that well off and when Hari visits his house, he says, "It was the first time I'd seen Alok's home. I told you he was kind of poor, I mean not World Bank ads type starving poor or anything..." (33). One cannot help but smile at the subtle insinuations made by the author.

The book relates to the young and old equally. Bhagat declares that the book is an attitude that makes one feel that he or she will not be judged. In the last chapter of *Five Point Someone* Bhagat works as a psychologist and prescribes a therapy of life. He understands the apprehension of student life and their desperation and agony and says:

Let me tell you something about this boy
Hari and his friends Alok and Ryan. They
are the under performers. That is what I
used to call students with low GPAs. And
they do have a low GPA five point
something is low, right?" Cherian asked
in a jestful manner, "My daughter found
it easier to trust Hari with the letter. She
defied me, lied to me and ignored me...
Somewhere down the line, this perfect
ten - GPA professor standing in front of
you had gone wrong. Really wrong....
And that is when I realised that GPAs
make a good student, but not a good
person. We judge people here by their
GPA.... This is my message to all you
students as you find your future. One,
believe in yourself, and don't let a GPA
performance review or promotion in a
job define you. There is more in life than
these things - your family, your friends,
your internal desires and goals. And the
grades you in dealing with each of these
areas will define as a person" (Bhagat
Five Point Someone, 263-64).

The present education system needs a revamping and Bhagat offers a scientific and logical solution. What we need today is human beings and not robots.

One Night @ the Call Center has a very contemporary theme of the hopes, aspirations, anxieties of the middle class young India. India has changed after the open door economic policy of the nineties. The call centers have provided big job opportunities to the young middle class. The plot of the book moves around a group of six call center employees working at Connexion Call Center in Gurgaon. The story runs for a span of one night and Bhagat successfully observes the unity of time. All the leading characters confront some aspect of themselves or their lives they would like to change. The story takes dramatic and decisive turn when all the characters get a phone call from God. The major part of the book relates to what happens at night at the call center. Shyam Mehra, alias Sam Mercy, the protagonist, relates the story of almost lost love, thwarted ambition, absence of family, pressure of the patriarchal set up and the work environment of globalised office. Shyam loves Priyanka, who plans for an arranged marriage. Vroom loves Esha and Esha wants to become a model. Radhika is unhappy with her demanding mother-in-law. Bakshi, their current boss is hated by all of them. The entire book reflects a catch 22 situation. Each character identifies an aspect of his or her life which raises the temperature. The voice of God is the motivating force that the author puts very sagaciously. The young hate to be sermonized, therefore, the voice of God is a very innovative and captivative way getting their attention. It would be very apt to quote Shashi Tharoor in his comment for the book *Two States : The Story of My Marriage*:

....pitch perfect, his observer's I keenly focused on nuances and details... *One Night at the Call Centre* has struck a cord with India's young and it clearly has -it is more for its depiction than its politics, its diagnosis rather than its prescription.
(*Two States* 43)

Business, cricket and religion are the three topics which the Indians love to talk about. There can be incessant conversations which sometimes lead to a lot of heat and brick batting *The Three Mistakes of My Life* by Bhagat is based upon these three issues. It is a witty tale about modern India. Bhagat tries to explore the ethos and the isolation of an entire generation to the fore. The book begins in the backdrop of Ahmedabad. It is the story of three friends – Govind, Ish and Omi. Govind wants to make money and he thinks that the best way for him is to start his own business. He accommodates his friends- Ish and Omi and a cricket shop is opened. In order to make some more money the boys begin to give

lessons in mathematics and cricket. However, nothing comes easy in a turbulent city. Politics of religion, calamities, passions and above all the mistake made by each of them weaves the entire plot of the novel. The climax is excellent and the book is interwoven with emotions - both of joy and sorrow.

There is a radical change in the style and language of the book. The prologue of the book begins with an Email:

From: And_business@gmail.com
Sent: 12-28-2005 11.40 pm.
To: info@chetanbhagat.com (*The Three Mistakes of My Life* 1).

The ex prologue and the Epilogue are in italics. Perhaps the writer wants to place an extra weight on the reader's sensibility. The first chapter heads with a crucial One Day International cricket match between India and South Africa written in a catalogue style. The first person simple narration is very infectious and draws immediate attention of the readers. Bhagat loads his expression with weird similes and metaphors. He puts trigonometry and the Gujarati 'Khakhra' as one. A metaphysical wit indeed! His idioms are technical giving an Iltian flavour. The suicidal note on the social networking site 'Orkut' is yet another example of the changing times. India is changing and the speed at which things have changed in the last decade is amazing. It is breaking away from the tradition and one cannot dismiss Bhagat as 'incorrect' because he is contemporary in his approach and his appeal is enormous. This is a new trend in literature after the eighties and it is displacing the old ones. It cannot be ignored or set aside. SMS and Emails are the new modes of expression and communication. In fact, the 'Facebook', belonging and tweeting are much sought after modes of expression today.

Two States : The Story of My Marriage, published in 2009 is Chetan Bhagat's recently published book. It is biographical yet it constitutes all the elements of a good fiction. The plot moves around the contemporary evergreen theme of intercommunity marriage between Krish, a North Indian Punjabi, and Ananya, Tamilian Brahmin. Both the protagonists neither want to elope or be estranged with their families. They take the difficult and painstaking step. To bridge this gap Krish and Ananya have to face many tests and prove themselves. There are a host of ideas entertained by the author. The book questions racism, the North-South divide and the differences in culture and sensibility. Bhagat successfully

passes down his conviction and message at the end of the Epilogue of the book, When Ananya delivers her twins the nurse questions:

You are from two different states,
right? So what will be their state? The
nurse said and chuckled. They'll be
from a state called India, I said. (*Two
States* 269)

Chetan Bhagat is a pragmatic and passionate writer who weaves a saga which is very close to the heart of the common man - the man who relates and understands his lexis. He caters to a generation that 'hip hops' between an Ayan Rand and an Archie Comic. His patterns are smooth and gripping. Raja Rao had very wisely once warned the Indian writers not to write like the English and to free their tongue from the 'English Chains'. Salman Rushdie further strengthened it by calling it the 'chuntification' of the English language. In his article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" he remembers G.V. Desai for, "... forging English into new shapes ... and how English could be bent and kneaded until it spoke in an authentically Indian voice" (Rushdie, 25). Bhagat is the new voice of this decade which is changing at an uncontrolled speed.

Works Cited

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