



Riya Somani: Chetan Bhagat's Half Girlfriend

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Abstract :- This paper examines the representation of Riya Somani, the female protagonist in Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*, through the lens of feminist literary criticism. As an emblem of the modern Indian woman, Riya's character embodies a complex intersection of privilege, silence, autonomy, and vulnerability. While positioned as urban, independent, and emotionally layered, her narrative agency remains limited and largely overshadowed by the male protagonist, Madhav. The novel reinforces traditional gender roles even as it attempts to depict female empowerment. This study critiques the gendered power dynamics within the text, focusing on Riya's portrayal, her moments of resistance and silence, and the implications of her "half" identity. Drawing upon feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Indian scholars like Nivedita Menon, this paper questions whether Riya is truly a representation of modern Indian womanhood or a reconfigured object of male desire within a neoliberal romantic framework. The representation of women in contemporary Indian popular fiction is a subject of increasing scholarly interest, particularly in the context of evolving cultural and gender norms in post-liberalization India. Chetan Bhagat, a bestselling author whose works are both commercially successful and socially reflective, offers fertile ground for such inquiries. In *Half Girlfriend* (2014), Bhagat introduces Riya Somani, a character ostensibly positioned as an emblem of modern Indian womanhood - urban, educated, and assertive. However, a critical feminist reading reveals that her narrative agency is consistently undermined by the structural and ideological priorities of the text. This thesis contends that Riya Somani's portrayal, while superficially progressive, reinforces traditional gender roles and patriarchal constructs. Although Riya is presented as an autonomous figure who challenges certain cultural expectations, her role in the narrative is predominantly shaped by the emotional trajectory and developmental arc of the male protagonist, Madhav Jha. Her identity as a "half girlfriend" serves not as an articulation of her independence, but rather as a metaphor for her incomplete subjectivity and subordinated status within the male-dominated narrative structure. Drawing upon feminist theoretical frameworks, including Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other," Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Laura Mulvey's articulation of male gaze," this study interrogates the extent to which Riya's character embodies agency or merely functions as a catalyst for male transformation. Further, the analysis incorporates insights from Indian feminist scholars such as Nivedita Menon to contextualize Riya's representation within the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Indian womanhood. This introduction establishes the premise for a feminist critique of *Half Girlfriend*, focusing on the ideological implications of Riya Somani's construction as a literary figure. The analysis seeks to demonstrate that despite her outward markers of modernity, Riya's character is emblematic of the enduring tension between perceived female empowerment and entrenched patriarchal narrative forms in Indian popular literature.

Keywords - Riya Somani, Half Girlfriend, feminist critique, gender role, etc.

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend* holds a prominent place within modern Indian popular fiction, particularly during the period following the early 2000s, which saw a surge in English-language readers across urban and semi-urban India. Released in 2014, the novel reflects the hallmarks of mass-market Indian English fiction - straightforward language, emotionally engaging plots, and socially relevant themes designed for widespread appeal. Bhagat's narrative style, marked by its simplicity and relatability, resonates with readers seeking accessible stories that explore contemporary concerns such as social inequality, language barriers, and personal ambition. *Half Girlfriend* specifically addresses the challenges of linguistic identity and class mobility through the romance between Madhav, a Hindi-speaking student from rural Bihar, and Riya, a wealthy English-speaking woman from Delhi. While the book's literary depth is often questioned by critics, its immense popularity and subsequent Bollywood adaptation confirm its cultural reach and relevance. As such, *Half Girlfriend* functions not merely as a romantic tale but as a reflection of the evolving social dynamics of India's aspiring middle class, particularly in relation to language, love, and gender.

In *Half Girlfriend*, language functions as a powerful marker of class, identity, and access, framing the interpersonal dynamics between Madhav Jha and Riya Somani. Riya's fluency in English symbolizes her elite upbringing and urban privilege, while Madhav's struggle with the language positions him as socially and culturally marginalized. Early in the novel, Madhav reflects, "*My English was garbage. I couldn't even speak a full sentence properly*" (Bhagat 9). This self-deprecating admission highlights not just his insecurity, but how linguistic competence is equated with worth in the urban Indian context. When Madhav attempts to speak English in front of others, he often feels exposed and ridiculed, noting, "*People here looked down on those who didn't speak English well. Especially girls like Riya*" (Bhagat 15). English, in this sense, is more than a tool of communication - it is a gatekeeper of social belonging. Bhagat uses this language divide to dramatize broader socio-economic and cultural hierarchies. Madhav's "broken English" is not merely a linguistic barrier; it is emblematic of his outsider status in a world where English fluency equates to modernity, desirability, and success. Even in matters of love, language becomes a boundary—Madhav admits, "*I couldn't woo a girl like her. Not in English. Not even in Hindi*" (Bhagat 16). Thus, in *Half Girlfriend*, English is a site of struggle and shame for Madhav, while for Riya, it is a tool of effortless dominance, illustrating how language reinforces structural inequalities under the guise of meritocracy.

In *Half Girlfriend*, Riya Somani's character primarily serves as a catalyst for Madhav Jha's emotional and social development, rather than as an autonomous subject with her own narrative arc. Her presence in the novel repeatedly marks turning points in Madhav's journey, suggesting that her primary narrative function is to facilitate his transformation from an insecure small-town youth to a confident, English-speaking philanthropist. Early in the novel, Madhav's obsession with Riya motivates him to attempt self-improvement: "*I had to learn English. For her. For the speech. For my college. For myself*" (Bhagat 45). This moment underscores how Riya becomes the driving force behind his linguistic and personal ambition, even though her own internal journey is rendered secondary.

When Riya disappears from Madhav's life, her absence is instrumental in intensifying his emotional struggle and, eventually, his resilience. Her apparent death - revealed later to be staged becomes a plot device that deepens Madhav's pain, which in turn earns the reader's sympathy and positions him as a morally upright character. Madhav reflects, "*I felt betrayed, broken. But I also felt I had to move on. For*

my mother. For my school" (Bhagat 164). Here, the narrative focuses not on Riya's trauma or reasons for withdrawal, but on Madhav's ability to grow from the loss. Even when Riya re-enters the story, she does so in a manner that enables Madhav's redemption and ultimate success. Her diary, conveniently left behind, allows him to understand her suffering - "I had to disappear, Madhav. I didn't know how else to be free" (Bhagat 189) - but it also gives him closure and motivation. Riya's transformation into a self-effacing, almost saintly figure in the final act of the novel reinstates the patriarchal trope of the woman as a redemptive force. As feminist theorist Laura Mulvey suggests, women in narrative often exist to "support the hero's progress, providing emotional texture rather than independent storylines" (Mulvey 13). Bhagat's portrayal of Riya follows this logic her trauma, healing, and eventual reunion with Madhav revolve not around her own growth.

In *Half Girlfriend*, Riya Somani's diary emerges as the sole narrative space where her voice is fully realized, marking a stark contrast to the rest of the novel where she remains largely silent or spoken for. Throughout the story, Riya is often seen but not heard her character is filtered through Madhav Jha's first-person narration, which limits her subjectivity and emotional depth. It is only when Madhav discovers her diary

believed to be left behind after her supposed death - that readers are granted access to Riya's internal world. She writes, "I wanted to disappear. I didn't know how else to be free. Writing this is the only way I could ever tell you the truth" (Bhagat 188). This confession reveals that Riya's diary functions not merely as a plot device but as a space of resistance, where she reclaims the narrative on her own terms. The diary becomes a private, unmediated medium through which she articulates her trauma, pain, and aspirations experiences that were previously buried under the male gaze.

In *Half Girlfriend*, Riya Somani's trauma is central to her character arc, yet it is represented in a muted and indirect way. Her emotional pain stems from multiple sources her troubled family background, a toxic and abusive marriage, and the societal pressures placed on her as a woman in a patriarchal setting. However, instead of allowing Riya to openly express her trauma, the novel often renders her silent or distant, and her suffering is primarily revealed through the lens of the male protagonist, Madhav Jha. One of the key ways the novel represents Riya's trauma is through her silence. Rather than speaking out about her pain, Riya withdraws - first from her family, then from her marriage, and finally from Madhav. Her statement in the diary, "I wanted to disappear. I didn't know how else to be free" (Bhagat 188), powerfully captures her sense of helplessness and lack of agency. The representation of female trauma in *Half Girlfriend* highlights a broader issue in Indian popular fiction: women's suffering is often depicted through male perspectives and used to further male character development. Riya's trauma is real, complex, and deeply human, but her voice remains secondary. Her diary allows her a brief moment of expression, yet even that is absorbed into the male-driven storyline. As a result, while the novel acknowledges trauma, it does not give it the depth or autonomy it deserves.

The title *Half Girlfriend* functions as more than a catchy phrase, it serves as a loaded metaphor for incomplete identity, particularly when applied to Riya Somani's position in both the narrative and society. Riya is not fully recognized as Madhav's girlfriend, nor does she assert herself as a friend in any consistent or empowered way. This liminal status neither here nor there mirrors the larger identity crisis she experiences throughout the novel. Caught between social expectations and personal desires, between privilege and vulnerability, Riya is written as a fragmented figure. She tells Madhav, "Let's be half-girlfriend and half-boyfriend. That's all I can manage" (Bhagat 57). On the surface, this seems like a witty compromise, but it exposes a deeper emotional ambivalence and the pressure she feels to conform to roles that never fully represent her. The "half" in the title also reflects how women are often denied full

agency in patriarchal narratives. Riya is emotionally complex dealing with family trauma, an abusive marriage, and a search for personal freedom but the story reduces her to someone who exists in reference to Madhav's love story. She is not given the space to fully articulate her choices or be seen as a complete person independent of romantic or relational labels. Her voice is suppressed, her emotions mediated through a diary, and her identity constructed through others' perceptions.

The character of Riya Somani, central to both Chetan Bhagat's novel *Half Girlfriend* (2014) and its 2017 Bollywood adaptation directed by Mohit Suri, serves as a focal point for analyzing gender, trauma, and agency. While both versions center on her relationship with Madhav Jha, her portrayal in the novel offers more psychological complexity and subtle commentary on issues like trauma, class, and gender constraints. In contrast, the film simplifies her character, aligning her more closely with Bollywood tropes of the romantic heroine and reducing her inner turmoil to emotional beats that support the male protagonist's journey. The novel uses language and silence to represent Riya's emotional state her half-girlfriend status is symbolic of her incomplete identity. The film, on the other hand, relies on visual metaphors rain, songs, soft lighting to suggest her pain, making her trauma aesthetically beautiful but narratively shallow. This study analyzes the character of Riya Somani, the central female figure in Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*, through feminist literary frameworks. Positioned as a representative of the contemporary Indian woman - urban, articulate, and outwardly self-reliant - Riya's portrayal is nevertheless deeply rooted in patriarchal narrative structures. Despite her emotional complexity and moments of self-determination, her story is predominantly filtered through the perspective of the male protagonist, Madhav Jha, thereby limiting her narrative authority and independence. Engaging with feminist theories such as Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as the "Other," Judith Butler's performativity, and insights from Indian feminist scholar Nivedita Menon, this paper critiques how Riya's character is shaped and constrained by socio-cultural expectations. Her intentional silences, reliance on a private diary for emotional expression, and the ambiguous identity of being a "half-girlfriend" are examined as key indicators of restricted agency.

The analysis suggests that while the novel attempts to depict Riya as a liberated and modern individual, she ultimately functions more as a narrative tool facilitating the male character's growth. Rather than asserting her own subjectivity, she is framed within a neoliberal romance narrative that commodifies her emotions and choices. This paper contends that Riya's representation is less about female empowerment and more about serving the emotional and aspirational trajectory of the male lead, thereby reaffirming traditional gender roles within a contemporary setting.

The concept of the modern Indian woman is multifaceted, shaped by India's evolving socio-economic landscape. In the context of post-liberalization, significant shifts have occurred in how women's roles are perceived - both in urban spaces and within traditional family structures. *Half Girlfriend* by Chetan Bhagat attempts to portray the modern Indian woman through Riya Somani, a character who embodies both modern aspirations and traditional pressures. This chapter explores how the novel constructs Riya's identity, examining her agency, the conflicts she faces, and how she navigates the balance between personal desires and societal expectations. Through Riya, Bhagat illustrates the tension between traditional femininity and contemporary independence, positioning her as a figure of empowerment while also subjecting her to societal constraints. The 'half-girlfriend' status, in this sense, acts as a metaphor for her fragmented identity - neither fully independent nor fully engaged in a romantic relationship, Riya is trapped in an incomplete selfhood. A crucial aspect of *Half Girlfriend* is that despite Riya's apparent modernity, she is primarily positioned as a romantic object for the male protagonist. Madhav's emotional journey revolves around winning Riya's affection, and her role in the story is largely to validate his growth. Bhagat writes:

"I loved her, but I couldn't say it in English And she didn't seem to care either"

(Bhagat 45).

From a feminist perspective, Riya's character demonstrates incomplete empowerment. She embodies some aspects of the modern Indian woman, such as education, ambition, and professional aspirations, yet she remains ultimately constrained by traditional gender roles. In *Half Girlfriend*, Chetan Bhagat attempts to present the modern Indian woman through Riya Somani, a character who is independent and educated, yet constrained by the traditional gender roles of Indian society. Although Riya displays traits associated with modernity, her autonomy is consistently undermined by the demands of her relationship with Madhav. Bhagat's portrayal of Riya reflects the ongoing tension between traditional femininity and contemporary independence, showing how women, even in modern times, are often still defined by romantic relationships rather than their own self-empowerment. Riya's journey, ultimately, is not one of personal growth or empowerment, but of romantic reconciliation and male validation. Through her, Bhagat critiques the limitations placed on women in contemporary Indian fiction, particularly in how women's empowerment is often contingent on male emotional needs.

Conclusion:

Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend* introduces Riya Somani as a modern Indian woman -independent, well-educated, and confident. However, a deeper feminist analysis highlights the incomplete nature of her character. Despite appearing to have control over her life, Riya's autonomy is frequently overshadowed by the male-driven narrative, with her personal growth often sidelined for the emotional development of Madhav. Her identity is primarily defined through her relationship with him, particularly symbolized by her role as a "half-girlfriend," a metaphor for her incomplete selfhood and partial freedom.

While Riya strives for independence-by leaving an abusive marriage, chasing her passion for singing, and distancing herself from destructive relationships-these attempts at empowerment are never fully explored. Instead, they serve to advance Madhav's emotional journey. The trauma she experiences is acknowledged, but it remains superficial, with her diary acting more as a means for Madhav's reflection than as a space for her personal healing. Though Bhagat tries to depict a progressive female character, Riya ultimately becomes a secondary figure whose role is primarily to fuel the male protagonist's growth. The novel, thus, underscores the ongoing limitations in mainstream Indian fiction, where women's empowerment is often secondary to the male character's transformation, leaving them with only partial agency and significance.

Work cited

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