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Portrayal of Cultural Contexts in Chetan Bhagat's Novels

ABSTRACT:

Every nation has its distinct culture and within it there are different cultural mores. The human world is bedecked with diversity of cultures. India is the secular country rich in varied cultures and traditions. It is given fact that India is a country with unity in diversity. This diversity – cultural, linguistic, religious- gives us distinctiveness in the rest of the world. The world looks at India as a good example of multiculturalism. The term multiculturalism represents acknowledgment and promotion of diverse cultures in a particular region. The variety of cultures and sub-cultures act as bridges among the people but sometimes they become the cause of concern. The diversity of cultures sometimes creates conflicts and is responsible for political skirmishes. When we look in our society we find diverse differences in individuals and groups of humanity. These differences occur despite the fact that all humans are 99% genetically akin to each other. The soci-cultural problems of multicultural India have been portrayed by Chetan Bhagat in a better way in his novels. He makes the reader to laugh at the follies and prejudices of orthodox Indians. Bhagat through his writings wants to break all the boundaries to create a global and universal culture that will absorb all the differences by spreading the fruits of love and brotherhood.

Key Words: Culture, Multiculturalism, Indian diversity and Global Culture.

The Indian culture has long history, diverse demography and unique geography. No doubt India has numerous languages, cultures, traditions and customs but they have some commonality with each other. There are various sub cultures that form the Indian culture representing whole India. As per the government of India's Census the population of India is

1.27 billion. The population of India comprises multiple religious groups. The majority of the population is represented by Hindus. The statistics shows that Hindus' have 80.5% of population, Muslims have 13.4% and 6.91% of population is represented by Sikhs, Christians, Budhists, Parsi and jews. There are 1652 indigenou languages in the country as per the Census of 2010. Indo-Aryan and Dravidian are the two main language families of India. In the northeastern regions of India people use Sino-Tibetan group of languages such as Manipuri. In India three-language policy has been followed. Hindi is the federal official language, English has the status of subsidiary official language and each state has its own state official language. The boundaries of Indian states are based on linguistic groups. Each state has its own languages spoken in different regions of the state. The common language of the state is given the official status. The states of India differ in language, culture, architecture, music and festivities. They try to promote and preserve their own cultures and traditions.

Chetan Bhagat novels' setting is clear evidence to educate his readers about the cultural richness and variety of India. The variation of cultures makes India a multicultural society and this diversity of cultures is sometimes responsible for political skirmishes. As a result the multicultural society of India comes across many social and cultural problems. Bhagat through his writings has portrayed such problems thoroughly.

Bhagat's *2 States* concentrates on matters of culture and society. The novel portrays cross cultural encounters and experiences imbibing from them. The title of novel reflects stories of characters from two states. Through these characters the novelist has given detailed information of life in Northern and Southern India. There is vast difference among the people of both regions and the novel presents a real picture of that. The main characters of the novels want to come out of this umbilical cord to lead their lives with freedom and ease. They don't want these variations to be hurdles in their lives. They live their lives as per their dreams and aspirations and strive hard to overcome such restraints.

2 States is the novel with numerous examples that show dogmas and idiosyncrasies followed by two states. Through this novel Chetan Bhagat exposes the mean mentality of Indians who are very rigid not allow their kids to try something new and follow life as per their aspirations. They maintain the border line not allowing them to go ahead of that. Inter-caste marriage is still considered as social stigma. Indian love marriages are so complex that it needs a lot of exercise to make it happen. In most of the countries it is seen if a boy loves a girl and girl

loves the boy they don't need any one's permission to go for marriage but the situation in India is completely different as is seen in the novel:

Love marriages around the world are simple:

Boy loves girl. Girl loves boy. They get married.

In India there are few more steps:

Girl's family has to love boy. Boy's family has to love girl.

Girl's family has to love boy's family.

Boy's family has to love girl's family.

Girl and Boy still love each other. They get married. (*2 States: back cover*)

The contrast between North Indian and South Indian culture is highlighted by the writer in the funny way. As Malshette Yogesh writes about the novel, "You get involved with the characters, their despair, confusion and joy. As a South Indian who has lived all her life in Delhi, I found myself relating to both the characters and their families at some level. Be it the mom who brings biscuits to her son's graduation or the one who loves to sing Carnatic music but is intimidated by her more qualified peers. It is narrated in a first person point of view in a humorous tone, often taking digs at both Tamil and Punjabi cultures. The novel ends with Ananya giving birth to twin boys. They say that the babies belong to a state called 'India'."

Both Punjabi and Tamils differentiate because of their culture, convention, lifestyle etc.,. The Punjabis because of their language and background are known by the name of Aryans whereas South Indian as Dravidians. The North Indian people are taller and fair in reflection as compared to the South Indian people. Their dressing style is completely different. The North Indian women use shalwar Kamiz and large dress while the South Indian women use saris. Men of the North India wear Salwar but men in the South India use Dhoti. The luxurious life style of Punjabis and the mellowed down South Indian style have been portrayed with great sincerity by Chetan Bhagat who believes that both the communities have extremes in their cultures. Punjabis are more attracted and impressed by wealth while as South Indians are more impressed by education and race. Punjabis are more habitual of heavy and strong dishes but South Indians are very simple in matters of food. They always like simple food and use leaves in place of plates.

The main focus of the novel, *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* is about the challenges of people in multicultural society. The title of the novel does not represent life of people in two states but it reflects diverse nature of people in different cultures. The cultural differences of

north Indian families and southern Indian families are portrayed in a funny way. The story of the novel shows what are the ways to follow in convincing ones parents for inter cultural marriages. The people of India are conservative and they don't accept changes easily. So it is not easy for people to intermingle with the people of other cultures.

Both the protagonists- Krish and Ananya- of the novel, *2 States* come into contact with each other at IIM Ahmadabad. They develop friendship and that is converted into love. Being modern in their approach they do not want their cultural barriers to stop them from taking decisions regarding their future life. But the real test of life comes when their parents come to know each other at the time of convocation of the university. Krish intimates his mother to meet Anaya that makes her to respond with surprise. In the morning students gather to get degrees in convocation ceremony Krish introduces his mother with Ananya and her parents. The meeting takes place in strange manner. No one speaks with calm and composure. The behavior and words of Krish's mother reflect her belief regarding south Indian people. She expresses her feelings loudly before Ananya's parents:

I whispered, 'Get up. Let us introduce ourselves.'

'They are Madrasi?'' my mother asked, shocked.

'Shsh, Tamilian,' I said.

'Tamilian?'' my mother echoed even as Ananya continued the introductions.

'Mom, this is Krish, and this is Krish's mother.'

'Hello,' Ananya's mother said, looking just as stunned as my mother.

'Isn't this cool? Our families meeting for the first time,' Ananya cooed even as everyone ignored her.

'Krish's father has not come?'' Ananya's father asked.

'He is not well,' my mother said, her voice butter-soft. 'He is a heart patient. Advised not to travel.'

My mother faked it so well, even I felt like sympathizing with her.

Ananya's parents gave understanding nods. They whispered to each other in Tamil as they took their places.

'I better go, I'm one of the first ones.' Ananya giggled and ran up to join the line of students.

I sat sandwiched between my mother on one side and Ananya's mother on the other.

'You want to sit next to Ananya's mother?' I asked my mother.

'Why? Who are these people?' she frowned.

'Don't panic, mom. I said it because I have to join that line soon.'

'Then go. I have come to see you, not sit next to Madrasis. Now let me watch.' (2 States: 46)

It looks very hard for both the families to feel comfortable with each other. Having different culture they look at each other with suspicion. Both of them- Ananya and Krish- try very hard to convince their parents not to follow traditional thinking against each other. The reason behind the reluctance of their parents is that inter-caste marriage is still a taboo in Indian. The people of India don't find it suitable or comfortable to marry their children outside their culture. The cultural and linguistic barriers create insurmountable hurdles between their parents. After the placement the mother of Krish wishes him to take up a job in Delhi and marry with one of Punjabi girls because of culture. Despite to follow the choice of mother Krishe prefers Chennai for the job to be close to his love and remove hurdles in their way. Here, at Chennai he suffers a lot working in new and strange environment.

When Krish comes to Chennai he faces a lot of hurdles in that strange culture. He is caught in strange language of Tamil. The drivers of cabbies talk in Tamil and try to extract more money from him but he doesn't know how to carry out business with them in such strange atmosphere. Fortunately Sardarjee comes to his rescue when he is caught in a hostile situation:

"No five hundred. Fifty,' I said.

'Ai, another driver yelled. The four of them surrounded me like baddies from low-spending arrangement Kollywood film.

'What? Just give me my luggage and let me go,' I said.

'Illa luggage. Payment...make... you, ' the Shakespeare among them spoke to me.

They started moving around slowly. I wondered why on earth didn't I choose to work in an air conditioned office in Delhi when I had chance.

...

I looked down the street, for anybody, anyone who would get me out of this mess.

One man came out of the next building. I saw him and couldn't believe it. He had a turban- a Sardar- ji in Chennai was akin to spotting a polar bear in Delhi. He had come out to place a cover on his car. Tingles of relief ran down my spine. Krishna had come to save Draupadi. (*2 States:79*)

The culture of South India is quite different and Krish gets the first hand experience through his brief stay in Chennai. He has already heard a lot about the peculiarity of the South Indian culture and now he witnesses all through his eyes:

I saw the city...first the sign in every shop was in Tamil. The Tamil font resembles those optical illusion puzzles that give you a headache if you stare at them long enough. Tamil women, all of them, wear flowers in their hair. Tamil men don't believe in pants and wear lungis even in shopping districts. The city is filled with film posters. The heroes' pictures make you feel even your uncles can be movie stars. The heroes are fat, balding, have thick moustaches and the heroine next to them is a ravishing beauty. Maybe my mother has a point in saying that Tamil women have a thing for North Indian men. (*2 States: 77-78*)

Ananya faces same issues in North Indian Culture. She stays in the house of Krish in Delhi but the treatment of Krish's mother is very cold forced her not to stay in his house. But with the passages of time she overcomes all the challenges coming in new culture. Her vigilantism and wittiness in one of the marriages of Krish's relatives led her to win the hearts Krish's mother and relatives.

The novel portrays beautifully the typical Indian mentality of not accepting inter-caste marriages. It also reflects people with traditional and impractical beliefs. They believe themselves to be the caretakers of their culture from cultural perspective. The rigidity of people doesn't allow people them to go for marriages between different cultures, castes, religion or geographies. The couple in the novel faces a lot of problems in convincing their parents. The follies and prejudices of people against the people of other cultures can be fully witnessed

throughout the novel. Through this novel the writer tries to make them realize their faults and provides them a chance to rectify their mistakes in their real life.

In *One Night at the Call Centre* the novelist talks about life of people in metropolitan culture. The main characters of the novel belong to different cultures and backgrounds. The story of the novel mainly revolves around a group of six characters- three males and three females- working in a call centre located in Haryana. The novel mainly highlights their shared pains, ambitions, personal trauma and happiness. The cultural variation among the characters in the novel gets light representation. It can be viewed in the case of Esha who belongs to Punjab and her culture is shown a little bit rigid not allowing her to fulfill her dreams and aspirations. As a result she is victimized in new culture when a man promises to recommend her for modeling. Shyam and Vroom can be viewed as the followers of modern culture. Radhika looks very obedient and honest in in-laws house doing everything that her traditional Indian culture expects her to do but her husband appears to be a modern cultured man and in such a culture infidelity becomes common conduct of people. Priyanka and her mother seem different in their approach of life. Her mother being follower of traditional culture tries to dominate in day to day activities of her daughter. Same is the case of Military Uncle who has contradictions with his son because culturally both of them look at life differently.

All the characters face extreme exploitation in Western culture at the hands of Westerners. They work in a call centre in night shifts to sustain their lives in metropolitan culture. Working in such environment becomes painful for them for most of the time they feel embarrassed at the hands of Americans. They have to use western names and are treated as 'Resources' in the call center. The Boss of the call center always disgraces the employees and never heeds to their complaints against the computer systems which always do not function well. He irrationally scolds all his employees without any reason. As a leader of the team he never motivates his team members instead he gets all the credit of the work done by his team. In one of the incidents of the novel when a website has been developed by Shyam and Vroom their boss uses it for his own promotion by hiding it from them. He threatens them to be removed from the job. Thus the novel portrays the problems, fears, insecurities of the call center employees in new culture.

Bhagat's latest novel, *Half Girlfriend* published in 2014 portrays life in different cultures. Set in the rural Bihar, Delhi, Patna and New York, the novel represents variation in different

cultures. Madhav Jha passes through different cultures faces a lot of hurdles and struggles to get the goals of his life. The novel mainly starts *in* the campus of Saint Stephan's college displaying struggle of a rural culture boy, Madhav in Metropolitan culture. As the college is a Christian missionary college western culture has fully dominated the atmosphere of campus. Bhagat here tries to portray the life and hardship of people from rural culture in modified and metropolitan culture. As Madhav feels helplessness 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, emphasizing the 'a' as if omitting it was a criminal offence.

'Hindi, sir? Can I explain in Hindi?'' (*Half Girlfriend: 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. (*Half Girlfriend: 22*)

Madhav gets admission in the college under sports quota that brings him close to Riya from Delhi. Both become close friends due to their association with basketball. Madhav always wants to make Riya his girlfriend but she being modern in thinking refuses to yield his wishes. He later decides to settle in his hometown and help his mother, Rani Sahiba with her school. To improve the infrastructure of the school Madhav tries his best to convince Bill Gates to fund his schools' development, but for that he has to prepare a speech, preferably in English. For that he goes to Patna to take lessons in English language and coincidentally meets Riya who helps him a lot. After the successful visit of Bill Gates Riya leaves him for New York to fulfill her last dream of life- her wish to sing in one of the bars of New York.

Madhav hardship and dedication bears fruits when he see Riya in one of 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 dreams that look to be fulfilled at this time. 'I'm sorry, her eyes said to me. A tear ran down her cheek. Mine too'. (*Half Girlfriend: 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.

Both of them belonging to two different cultures finally decide to marry and the story sets off. The book ends as the author visits the rural school in Dumraon three and a half years later; he discovers it is being run successfully by Madhav and Riya, who now had a son, Shyam.

'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. (*Half Girlfriend: 260*)

CONCLUSION

India is a multicultural country and this cultural diversity has been in the blood of Chetan Bhagat. He was born in the Punjab and did schooling in different states of India. His schooling in different cultures inspired him greatly to develop cultural harmony among the people. Bhagat tells his readers through his novels that cultural richness and variety of India should not act as an obstacle but it should follow the liberal policy of cultural amalgamation. He has put forward many prejudices and follies of traditional Indians with the aim to create a reformed society. Therefore, Bhagat intends to break all the barriers of diverse cultures and create a global and universal culture that will absorb all the differences by spreading the fruits of love and brotherhood.

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