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## International Journal of Social Sciences Arts and Humanities

(ISSN: 2321-4147) (Scientific Journal Impact Factor: 6.002)

A Peer Reviewed UGC Approved Quarterly Journal



### Research Paper

## Class and Language Barriers and Importance of Free Spirit in Chetan Bhagat's 'Half Girlfriend'

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

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#### Key words:

Class, Language, Society, English, Free Spirit.

### ABSTRACT

Bhagat is considered as an icon of youth and true representative of contemporary India. The themes which he represents in his works are very close to the heart of modern generation. Youth can clearly comprehend the reality portrayed in his works. He is really a torch-bearer for this modern India. In the novel 'Half Girlfriend', he shows how class and language can become obstacles in love and make its path difficult. These attributes can really destroy a beautiful relationship. How society is so desperate to promote the ideals based on class and how English as a language plays an important role in judging a relationship is shown through this research paper. The research paper also deals with the role of freedom, being firm in taking one's decisions, importance of being independent and free spirited in one's life.

### 1. Introduction

Chetan Bhagat is one of the most influential poets in modern India and was listed in Time magazine's list of Worlds hundred most influential people in 2010. Many of his novels have been adopted into films and 'Half Girlfriend' is one of them. He is one such novelist who writes in a very plain English which can be read by all people even who speak English as the second language and he avoids using fancy, ornamental words and scholarly vocabulary. Though most of his works focus on youth and urban India, but this novel mainly focuses on the problems faced by the people of rural India and what all they face to overcome the challenges in their life. Also in dedication part, Bhagat has written 'For rural India/ For the non-English types. As he picks up themes which are quite related to the young generation, therefore he is very popular among them. Half Girlfriend' talks about a Bihari boy, Madhav Jha and his quest of winning the love of Riya Somani, a Delhi resident. But there journey is not easy and they go through many ups & downs and have to face many hardships. Madhav narrates the whole story that how he being from a 'lower class' struggles to get the love of his life Riya, who belongs to high class. Also, this is not it, Madhav has a poor English, and Riya, on the other hand is fluent in English. Both these aspects help working class people connect to the novel as if Madhav's story is their own.

Madhav goes to study in St. Stephens College, which is one of the best college in New Delhi. He gets admission through sports quota in the college. He wants to learn, explore and make a career so that he can help his mother who runs a school in Bihar. He wants to do something for the students of his school in Dumraon, Bihar who are unable to get proper education due to the lack of facilities and improper infrastructure in the school. In the college, he meets Riya and both fall in love with each other and even play basketball together, but somewhere Riya is not sure about their relationship as she is a high class English speaking rich girl and is afraid how society would react if she chooses Madhav, a low class rural boy. She does not openly accept the relationship but agrees to be his 'half girlfriend'. So story

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Received: 05-02-2025; Sent for Review on: 08-02-2024; Draft sent to Author for corrections: 15-02-2025; Accepted on: 289-02-2025; Online Available from 07-03-2025

DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.19370.53440](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.19370.53440)

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is one of how they overcome these abstract barriers of language and class and how they finally manage to consummate their love at the end.

## 2. Class as a barrier in the novel *Half Girlfriend*'

Despite being six feet tall, handsome-looking, simple, honest and state-level basketball player, Madhav, the protagonist struggles a lot in his life to get his love as he belongs to a low class, his mannerisms are different from high class people and he behaves like a typical rural person. There are many instances in the novel where class-system hits him badly and again & again he is made to feel that he is not of the type of rich, classy people and reminded of his lower class. Throughout the novel, Riya, being from rich and noble family has hard time accepting Madhav completely. Even Madhav also tries to behave like high class people to persuade and impress Riya. As soon as Madhav enters the college premises for his interview, the boys at the college behave rudely, take several jibes at him and make his fun when they come to know that he is from Bihar. Also, in the interview for the admission in the college, he is made to feel low by the interview committee. Even when Madhav goes to Riya's birthday party, he feels awkward and can sense his low class as everyone there was wearing expensive dresses, looking classy and rich. Madhav even borrows his friend's best suit for the party but then also he couldn't match the attire of the rich people at the party. When Riya makes Madhav meet his father at the party for the first time then he gives a very peculiar look- "Mr. Somani looked at me. He paused for a second before saying hello. I had worn Shailesh's best blazer and shirt, but it still didn't match the clothes of the other guests. Mr. Somani, with his impeccable taste, had noticed my less-than-designer outfit." (Half Girlfriend, 54). Mr. Somani also brags a lot about Rohan Chandak at the party, who is his friend's son and would later marry Riya, saying that how at just the age of twenty-four he is so rich and successful. Even Madhav's friends tell him that such a rich and upper class girl is beyond her reach and in one of her journal entries Riya also mentions about him as, "Crass Bihari Hindi. He sick. I should have known, My friends were right. He is an idiot gawaar. I must have had a phase of insanity." (Half Girlfriend, 197-198). But despite of all the difficulties, Madhav is persistent and obstinate in his love. Class, though plays a major role in defining their relationship but eventually love overpowers it.

## 3. Language as an obstacle in the novel *'Half Girlfriend'*

India Today, a famous magazine says that "Bhagat is a symbol of new India. He is really a torch bearer for an unafraid generation." He comments on the issues of faulty education system, communal and racial society which are very true in the terms of contemporary times. Madhav is a true representative of non-English types. As he has never gone to a proper English speaking school, he is unable to speak in English fluently. His admission process is not easy. In the college interview, the committee makes his fun as he is unable to reply the answers in English. "I switched to Hindi. Answering in English would require pauses and make me come across as stupid...Can you please answer in English?" Prof. Gupta said. "Why? You don't know Hindi?" I said in reflex and in Hindi. "I really wanted to know why they had to interview me in English when I was more comfortable in Hindi..." Prof. Pereira seemed to me the kindest of the lot. He turned to me. "We prefer English as the medium of instruction in our college, that's all." (Half Girlfriend, 10). So language hinders his interview process but somehow he manages to get the admission through sports quota.

It became very important for Madhav to learn English for his survival in the college and especially if he wants to befriend Riya and have her in his life. Madhav starts to daydream his life with her but Riya can speak fluent English and there lies a huge communication gap between them as Madhav can't speak proper English with right accent. Even though Riya never had issues with Madhav speaking in Hindi but still Madhav feels the need to learn it so that he can communicate with her properly as per her level and standard. When Madhav says, "My English isn't good" (Half Girlfriend, 22) then Riya replies, "What you say matters, not the language". (Half Girlfriend, 22).

Riya had to marry Rohan Chandak, a rich class English speaking guy under social pressure but she later divorces him and comes to Patna from London. Here she meets Madhav accidentally. Madhav has rejected a high-paying job at HSBC and is helping her mother run a school in Bihar. The school is not in a good condition lacking even the basic facilities like washroom and proper infrastructure. He goes to the politicians for help but they are good for nothing. Then opportunity comes to him in the form of world's richest man, Bill Gates who wants to pay visit to the schools of Bihar and will fund for their betterment. But the problem is he needs to prepare a speech in English to convince him to fund for his school. His conversation with Samantha Myers, who works in Bill Gates Foundation portrays his trouble very clearly, "A speech, eh?" I said. "Yes, not too preachy, not sales. Just from the heart. 'In English, of course.' 'English?' Yes. But we are speaking in English. I can barely talk to you. Addressing a US delegation in English in front of an audience? I can't. My English is terrible." (Half Girlfriend, 123-124).

Madhav even decides to join English speaking classes in Patna to work on his English speaking skills and there he meets Riya who helps her deliver a speech before Mr. Gates and after that he even gets a fund for his school. Madhav

is a very determined character as he overcomes his fears and even masters English and eventually at the end gets his love as well. So linguistic struggles play a major role in the life of the protagonist.

#### 4. Role of Free Spirit and Individuality in Half Girlfriend ‘

The role of individuality, freedom, independence and believing in oneself is shown through the character of Riya. Even though she belongs to high class, she has some simple and ground level dreams which she wants to fulfil. She becomes good friends with Madhav and never judges him because of his low class. It is only when Madhav tries to become physical with her then she leaves him. She is very firm in making her decision in leaving him without a second thought when Madhav says a very cheap statement, *Deti Hai to de, varna kat le.*” (Half Girlfriend, 75). Even though she also has feelings for Madhav, but after this incident she marries Rohan, a rich and well-established businessman in London. She might sound selfish when she decides to drop college and marry Rohan as Rohan has promised that he will allow her to fulfil her dream of singing in New York. But when Rohan misbehaves with her and she faces domestic violence, then she even leaves him and decides to free herself from the role of wife and seeks divorce.

Riya is very different from the members of her family who are just occupied with riches and want her to just get married and leave as that is what a girl is destined to and her brothers will occupy the family business. Riya, on the other hand, is very down to earth girl, she does not just believe in accumulating wealth, rather she wants to chase her big dreams. When she told her parents that she wants to study music after college, then they ask her to just marry and get settled with some rich Marwari boy and live like a queen. But when Madhav asks her about her dreams then she says- “Okay so, I have this dream. I want to play music and sing...in a bar in New York.” (Half Girlfriend, 33). Apart from being a good singer, Riya also plays basketball very well.

Many people might feel that Riya is a confused personality as she is not stable and keeps on escaping from everything but she leaves everything just because she doesn’t want to become a toy in the hands of other people. She doesn’t want to stoop down especially if it’s not her mistake and wants to live life on her own terms and when she realises that Madhav will support her in her dreams then eventually she decides to be with him for the rest of her life and Shyam is the outcome of their love. At the end, she also helps Madhav run the school in Bihar and they even go to USA for three months each year where Riya can sing and enjoy her dreams. Overall, Riya is a very self-reliant, liberated and self-contained girl and believes in choosing her destiny rather than let others decide it for her.

#### 5. Conclusion

Class barriers, linguistic non-capabilities, role of individuality and freedom are few major issues that Chetan Bhagat has tried to convey through this novel. This novel tells about the gap that exists between rich and poor both economically and socially. Through portrayal of Madhav, Bhagat represents many villagers who move to urban areas to cherish their dreams but due to non-adjustment they receive a hard blow. Due to class differences, Riya has to leave Madhav and under society’s pressure she had to marry Rohan, who is a rich NRI based in U.S. Rohan is older than her and she is not comfortable with him, but she marries him anyway as he assures her of helping in fulfilling her dreams. Riya becomes resolute and leaves Rohan when he harasses her. She wants to live an independent life without any boundaries and breaks all the barriers that stop her from chasing her dreams and at the end she breaks class barrier and marries Madhav. So Riya becomes the symbol of independent spirit which can be taken as an inspiration by the young generation.

Novel also throws light on how linguistic disabilities can cripple one and make one feel dwarf in the society where knowledge of English is must. India is a country with various languages and this novel shows the everyday struggle of people in a very realistic way. Though English is now a global language and its knowledge is necessary for communication in this world, but Chetan wants to put forward a point that language is just a medium to express oneself, not a dominating power. On the other hand, Chetan also shows that how after three months of unremitting practice, Madhav learns English and delivers a beautiful speech in front of Bill Gates. So Chetan also makes it a point to convey the message to the modern generation that how their understanding of English would serve them a better place in society and eventually in their career. Bhagat also gives some advice over how one can improve English through Madhav’s listening of speeches on YouTube of personalities like Steve Jobs, watching English movies and talking to the customer care section in English language.

Bhagat shows his extreme anxiety and distress by showing the condition of schools in rural India and how they need to get some good education, proper infrastructure, basic facilities and learn English to compete with the schools of urban areas. Through the speech of Madhav in the annual function before Bill Gates, it is very clear that the schools in rural areas are in a very poor state- “Today, I speak to you in English. I didn’t know this language well. I was scared and ashamed. People made fun of me. I spent my whole college life with a complex. I don’t want that to happen to

these kids. I don't want anyone to tell them they are not good enough." (Half Girlfriend, 183). So novel talks about class & language barriers and how one can overcome them, about the different and free personality of Riya and how she never stops without pursuing her dreams and also about the importance of communicative skills in one's life if one wants to become successful.

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