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A MARXIST FEMINIST STUDY OF MALE AND FEMALE IMAGES IN CHETAN BHAGAT'S ONE INDIAN GIRL

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ABSTRACT

The study attempts to ransack Chetan Bhagat's One Indian Girl, and it highlights how the novelist has constructed and represented the stereotypical and dichotomous images of females in contrast to those of males in the Indian society. The current endeavour reveals that some of the women in the novel under study do not conform to the stereotyped and expected behaviour concerning their position in a family and the way they are treated resultantly. Marxist feminism as a theoretical framework is applied to the text for analysis of the data. David Greenham's close reading technique is used as a method for data analysis. Findings of the study showcase that the novel under study has constructed and represented the stereotyped gender images related to male and female characters. Heroines in other novels are usually tender age, shy and submissive girls who blindly conform to the societal norms. However, the whole concept of heroineship in the novel under study has been thrown away, and the novel revolves around a competent, bold and opinionated girl who rejects many boys for not having mental compatibility with them, cancels her wedding on the very day, and at the end opts for a boy for herself. The heroine has been represented as a girl who is financially independent, and who does not follow androcentrism and patriarchal norms and values.

INTRODUCTION

One Indian Girl is a novel written by Chetan Bhagat in 216. It narrates the Indian culture and mindset. Indian culture seems to be patriarchal. Males play dominant roles in the Indian society while it is observed that the females are

usually kept at the margins. Males are thought to be the breadwinners of the family, giving them abundant control over the house and the female members. It is a common observation in the Indian society that most of the females rely on their male family members to decide for themselves or to pursue their dreams.

Patriarchy has been the most discussed concept whenever the discussion of female representation and stereotypical gender roles come to the surface. This dominant phenomenon of most of the subcontinent countries has torn society into authoritative males and marginalized females. Unlike the stereotypical representation of females, the novelist has constructed and represented female image in the novel. Usually, the prevailing assumption in society is that mothers support their daughters and stand by their side, but this is not the case in the novel under study. Girls are perceived as timid, fragile and indecisive instead of being the ones who can be opinionated and career-oriented. However, the novelist has constructed and represented image of the heroine of the novel as an opinionated, bold and decisive female who pursues her career and follows her dreams.

In Pakistan, women's movement began with the formation of the Women Action Forum (WAF) in 1981. The core issue about women's movement in Pakistan has been the relation between feminism and Islam (Gardezi, 1990). Many gender-biased laws were enacted during the 1980s that added fuel to the plight of this marginalized section. It is unbelievable to comprehend that being a Muslim majority, the country is struggling to concede the basic rights to women as are enunciated by Islam. Feminism and interpretation of women's rights have always been the subject of difference between the country's fundamentalists and liberals (Mir-Hosseini, 2013).

It is a common observation that gender roles and perceived gender-appropriate behaviour are stereotyped in one way or the other. It is quite latent that certain outlooks about life, way of living, dressing and patterns of thought are encouraged in the subcontinent or more specifically in the Indian culture. These stereotyped expectations from a female gender jeopardize their way to pursue most of their dreams. Most of our literature is replete with the fragile and timid representation of a female. However, the novel under study has deconstructed the constructed female images. Chetan Bhagat has displayed a confident, bold and decision-making protagonist. The very novel revolves around a girl's life and her dreams, which is a great contrast to the hero-centric novels.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How has the novelist constructed and represented the stereotypical and dichotomous image of the female as compared to that of male in the novel under study?
2. How is the female gender typically perceived in the Indian culture as constructed and represented in the novel under study?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To evaluate representation of the male and female images in the novel under study;
2. To analyze how female image and representation contradict the prevailing and stereotypical gender values and norms of the Indian culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminism is a movement that holds the flag of women's rights as equal as men's. Feminism has endeavoured for decades to seek an equal position for women as compared to men. Women have been represented as indecisive and submissive beings throughout the literature. Objectification and stereotyping of women have been in vogue in literary writings. This study views male and female images and their representation from the perspective of Marxist feminism. Unlike liberal feminists who assert that equality can be attained for women by erasing the primary concept of biological differences between men and women those results in placing both genders at different positions in society, Marxist feminists hold that prevalent inequality in a capitalist world is not waywardness, rather a deep-rooted structural phenomenon.

Marxist feminists believe that like a capitalist society where labour is ridden with poverty and insignificance, inequality of women is at the roots of patriarchal society. They hold that equality does not need some technical solutions by using women-friendly terms, rather it needs political level change to equalize both genders. Contemporary Marxists point out that women's oppression is inextricably tied in with class oppression at both the national and international levels. Accordingly, the liberation of most women and men is not possible within the prevailing capitalist world system. Integration into social production within a socialist economy is a pre-condition for women's emancipation from the constraints of gender roles (Bandarage, 1984).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Anything related to women has, most of the times, enjoyed special attention in the world. Resultantly, feminism has been a debatable topic for decades, but defining it in precision is not an easy task to do. It is not denying the fact that women have been oppressed and maltreated in each sphere of life to a great or less extent. It is in the eighteenth century and more precisely the nineteenth century that the hard work of early feminist writers started bearing fruit, and the theory bloomed in practice. Feminism is an unending struggle of women folks for their acceptance as equally worthy and significant as men are.

Feminists believe that there is a poor or stereotyped representation of women throughout literature. Feminists hold the notion that in nineteenth-century writings there is a meager representation of working women unless they are in dire need of work, instead, the heroine's centre of attention and sole purpose of life was shown as nothing else, but searching for a suitable match and settling in life (Barry, 2002). In practice, the propagators of feminism struggle for the elimination of gender discrimination, female marginalization, female objectification and other stereotypical behaviours towards women folks.

India has witnessed grave challenges by the feminist movement to its patriarchal intuitions – family, dominant social values, legal and social structures. Studies have suggested that variables, including women's access to education, media and paid employment are some economic pointers to women's status, while participation in decision making, age at marriage, the extent of social and personal acceptance of domestic violence and women's mobility are social indicators (Gangoli, 2007).

Many feminist writers have struggled to expose certain kinds of representation of women in literature throughout history. The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of socialisation, and it was used as a ploy to set an exemplary standard for each gender to conform to. Most of the women fell prey to this structured representation that resulted in an acceptable version of the feminine and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations by society (Barry, 2002).

Derrida's careful analysis of the sign and the Saussurean idea of difference leads to several important, indeed far-reaching insights. The concept of binary oppositions is furthered by Derrida is significant in understanding the contrast between male and female images... He asserts that it is not easy and simple to neutralize any of the oppositions. Derrida sternly believes that there is always a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.) or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment (Atkins, 1983).

Marxism is a celebrated concept, propagated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The theory has highlighted the class hierarchy in society and the power and position that emerge as a result. According to Karl Marx, society is torn with capitalism that has produced many classes and their unending struggle to get themselves un-entangled from these chains. He enunciates that the capitalist class holds all the power in society while the labour class struggles to purchase what they have produced. This results in massive control in the hands of bigwigs of the society who mould the structure the way they want it.

When we talk about Marxist feminism, the concept takes a further step in explaining the prevalent gender inequality in society. According to the proponents, inequality is deeply embedded in the political and social structure, and can only be eliminated by erasing the existing social setup. They assert that, like a capitalist, patriarchy holds a decisive position in social structure. Men are economically strong and independent in our society that adds to the miseries of the dependent women.

In Pakistan, Women's rights movement began in 1981 with the formation of the Women Action Forum (WAF) (Gardezi, 1990). The forum provided a platform to the disgruntled women who were facing heinous gender-biased laws in the military regime. It is also worth pondering that being a Muslim majority country, Pakistan has been wrangling between the fundamentalists' and liberals' interpretations of Muslim women's rights in Islam. "Islamic feminism" is defined as a cross-border movement that brings together all Muslim women who

are endeavouring to redefine their identities in ways that befit their cultural and religious affinities. The women refused to submit to fundamentalists and their rigid and hardline interpretations of women's rights. There have been many political, religious and cultural reasons that led Muslim women to dissociate themselves from the general feminism movement and find a culturally more acceptable term.

Women, who associate themselves with Islamic feminism, find their salvation in Islamic laws, and they believe that Islam has given enough rights to women that are denied by the fanatics and fundamentalists. These women mostly live in Muslim majority countries, and their focus is on the acquisition of their legitimate rights by highlighting the need for enlightened and proper definitions and interpretations of Islamic laws concerning them (Grami, 2013).

RESEARCH METHOD FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Close reading technique is applied for the analysis of the selected text of the novel. Close reading technique is a method that helps a researcher to unearth the deeply embedded and intended meanings of some plain appearing utterances. In close reading technique, the text is analyzed at the structural and content levels that helps to unfold the semantic and hidden meanings and influences.

Close reading technique chiefly propagates the significance of context for the better understanding of discourse. Research method used for data analysis in this study is David Greenham's (2019) close reading technique which includes six contexts/levels of analysis. The semantic context/level deals with the meanings of the individual words. The syntactic context/level deals with the meanings of the words when they are put together in a sentence. Meanings can be best interpreted and explained by deeply analyzing the use of pronouns, vocabulary, grammar, verbs and sentence structure at the syntactic level. The thematic context/level focuses on how themes emerge and meanings are perceived when the text is being read closely. The iterative context/level deals with the effects of repetition and patterning on meanings. The generic context/level tells us about the kind of work or genre we are reading changes our approach to its meanings. The adversarial context/level deals with the historical, political and theoretical concerns and context reshaping meanings (Greenham, 2019). The best way to interpret and explain a discourse is to deeply analyze the power structure and ideological basis embedded in a text (Dian, Heriyanto, & Soemantri, 2018).

DATA ANALYSIS

If we discuss the novel, it will become latent that the author has deconstructed the whole concept of a heroine and a romantic novel within a strong patriarchal structure where all means of earning and decisions lie in the hands of men. It has been a common observation that the story of a romantic novel revolves around a handsome hero who usually decides for a girl to get married with. However, the heroine is independent, and decides her future for herself, ignoring the established endocentric norms and values. Two sentences have been given below. One is a promulgation of the constructed image. Mother of

the heroine constructs an “expected image” of the girl. While the underlined sentences are the utterances by the female protagonist who deconstructs.

“Wake up. This is so wrong, what you did. Brijesh’s parents will think what an uncultured and irresponsible girl they are getting. Who drinks like this? my mother had said, shaking me non-stop” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 26).

Analysis of verbosity, “uncultured and irresponsible girl,” at the semantic level indicates how the mother has used these words to marginalize female character of the novel. Analysis of the above sentence at the thematic level showcases that there are stereotyped behaviours for both genders, and girls are expected to conform to that set pattern of social right and wrong. Barry (2002, p. 121) says,

“Mostly women fell prey to this structured representation that resulted in an acceptable version of the 'feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations by the society.”

“Even their son did. In fact, he puked and passed out at the club” I’d said (Bhagat, 2016, p. 142).

Analysis of the underlined sentence at the thematic level indicates that it is a deconstruction of the constructed belief that men are free in their actions, and women are bound to be answerable. The protagonist of the novel voices her opinion and thinking blatantly. She enunciates equality. She considers that there is no different right and wrong for girls and boys. The above sentence highlights that there is a substantial difference to gauge the rightfulness of a boy’s action and a girl’s action.

“I am not homely. So maybe I will just stay single” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 225).

Analysis of “Homely” at the semantic level reveals that the word is associated with females. They are expected to manage the house and keep themselves confined within four walls. It is a common and worn-out practice in most of the Indian households that women are judged on their house management. It is also considered pertinent for girls to consider their homes as the centre of their world to get a suitable match and live happily after marriage.

However, the novelist has deconstructed this image through the heroine. She says that she might remain single because she is not a submissive girl. The novel has highlighted the plight of the majority of the women in the Indian society and the expectations from them as married women, and simultaneously the novelist has deconstructed the set norms by showcasing a strong and opinionated woman as a heroine of the novel.

“What about the home? You are going to work too, right? Why can’t I?”

“Oh, so you want to work and I stay at home?”

“I didn’t say that, but why do I have to choose one of the two?” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 99).

Analysis of the above sentences at the thematic level shows that heroine of the novel does not believe in options and choices to make. She believes in equality, and asserts that there should not be options for girls while males can do all they want. She deconstructs the typical celebrated female image. She is an opinionated girl and she confidently decides equal worth for herself. On the other hand, in the above lines, the male has been shown as a representation of the traditional patriarchal mindset who is not willing to allow his wife to work like him. He believes that the sole job of a woman is to manage home and prepare food for her husband who is out for a job.

When compared to men, usually the stories narrate that girl are kept ignorant, and they find it arduous to secure a job, and above all a prominent position there, but her story is unfamiliar. This conversation between her and her boyfriend highlights that she keeps the terms and conditions equal for both genders when it comes to marriage. Contemporary Marxists point out that women's oppression is inextricably tied in with class oppression at both the national and international levels. In marital affairs, usually, a girl's voice is suppressed, but the novelist has voiced the female character who rejects many boys, and she has her say in each affair related to her life. The Indian culture does not encourage any illegitimate relationships of girls. The novelist has portrayed his heroine who does not hesitate to enjoy intimacy with men.

Derrida (cited in Atkins, 1983) sternly believes that there is always a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.) or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.

“Okay, mom, that is enough,’ I said” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 141).

Analysis of the word “enough” at the semantic level is indicative of how the novelist deconstructs the image of females who are not expected to say no to any societal pressures and values.

“What enough? Drinking beer. Having charas-ganja. Is this even a girl?” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 142).

Analysis of the sentence at the thematic level reveals that it constructs the expected and appreciable image of a female in the Indian society. Girls are expected to live up to a pious and socially accepted image. Anything, that is considered normal for men, is taken abnormally for women. The above sentence is uttered by mother of the heroine who scolds her daughter for having a beer with their to-be son-in-law.

“Their son did the same.” Why aren't you saying they must be ashamed of their son too?” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 142).

Analysis of the sentence at the thematic level indicates that it deconstructs perceived thinking in society. People believe that women hold subordinate and marginal position, but the novelist has deconstructed the structured thinking

through text, and he holds the female protagonist of the novel in an enviable position. Heroine of the novel is a proponent of equality, and she believes that if a son does some kind of mischief, this should also be taken as a shameful act by him. Heroine of the novel raises her voice against this prejudiced behaviour.

“There is an age, beta. You get the best matches then. After that, a girl’s appeal declines. You are twenty-six already” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 203).

The above sentence is uttered by the heroine’s mother. Analysis of this sentence at the thematic level highlights the prevailing practices in the Indian society. Girls are expected to get married at a tender age. It is a common belief in the Indian society that girls do not find good matches after twenty-five years of age, and worse is when they are educated and opinionated as well.

“So I am like a car model? Depreciating over the years” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 203).

The above sentence is an utterance by the female protagonist. She deconstructs the image and counters the prevailing thoughts by comparing herself with a car. She expresses her feelings that there is a difference between car models and alive girls.

“You are going to meet the boy’s side in jeans and a T-shirt? And look at your neck!” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 6).

This sentence by the mother constructs and represents the expected female image. Girls are expected to wear jewellery and be dolled up all the time to appeal to the suitors and their families.

“Again, you said “boy’s side”. And what’s wrong with my neck?” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 6).

The highlighted sentence is deconstruction. The female argues with her mother instead of being a dumb and silent listener.

“There is no jewellery. Go change into a shalwar-kameez and wear a chain from my jewellery box” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 6).

Heroine of the novel faces the pressure of expected and right dress code. Cultural expectations are imposed on her by her mother. Analysis of the sentence at thematic level also highlights the objectification of women and how their appearance matters.

“I have just arrived. I am working to settle the guests in. Why am I expected to doll up? Is the boy expected to dress up right after he gets off a flight?” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 6).

The Indian culture and its masses perceive that fair complexion, wearing traditional dresses, and heavy jewellery are the ultimate criteria of beauty. For her, comfort is essential in choosing the dress for herself. This is a deconstruction of the perceived modest dressing codes. Her mother persistently

rebukes her for wearing western clothes. She compares herself with a boy and argues with her mother that it is unfair to expect a girl to be always “dolloed up” unlike boys.

“It’s her father’s fault,’ my mother snapped.’ He never said no to anything. Ahmadabad, New York, Hong Kong, wherever she wanted to go, he would let her” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 263).

In most of the literature, fathers, the breadwinners, have been represented as the ones hurdling the ways of their daughters’ progress. However, analysis of the above sentence at the thematic level highlights that the mother is entertaining the patriarchal notions, and father is the supportive one for his daughter. He permitted her to do a job, and get education.

“You need a man to support, inspire, understand you. Help you be the best person you can be, banker, mother, both, whatever. And until find a man you trust enough to do that, why settle?” (Bhagat, 2016, p. 270).

Typically, the heroes, that literature has produced over the years, are those who want to curb the ways of females. Men are always shown the ones who are powerful, decisive and not ready to listen to female’s feelings and thoughts. However, the novel deconstructs the heroic image as well. He is the one who encourages the female not to get married until she feels comfortable and ready for it. He does not dislike women to be mothers and bankers simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the data from the novel by using David Greenham’s (2019) close reading technique endorses that the novelist has deconstructed the constructed images of each gender in the novel. Marxist feminism highlights those economic pressures and instability engender persistent gender inequality in society as happens in a capitalist-labour relation. The novel under study presents a different picture where a female is displayed as a protagonist, and is financially independent. Unlike other novels, this novel pays significant attention to the heroine’s decisions and choices, instead of her miseries and sufferings in the hands of patriarchy. Mother of the heroine does not play the typical role of a submissive woman in front of her husband, rather she is the one who has been showcased as the one deciding the major issues and dealing with happenings of daily life. She marginalizes her daughter on many occasions and plays the role of an agent of a patriarchal mindset.

Hero of the novel does not aim at subduing the heroine for his so-called self-esteem. He stands by the side of heroin even when she cancels the wedding with him on the very day. He believes in giving women enough freedom to decide for their lives. He also asserts that women should not be forced into marriage, rather they should be set free and permitted to marry when they feel ready for it. Father of the heroine also deconstructs the typical stern patriarchal image of a father. He has been portrayed as supportive and encouraging. He educates his daughter and takes pride in her success. He permits her to go abroad and do a dream job.

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