

## The New Woman Avatar in Chetan Bhagat's *One Indian Girl*

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### Abstract

*The paper aims at exploring the female protagonist, Radhika Mehta, of One Indian Girl by Chetan Bhagat in the light of the ideals of the New Woman in Indian context. This is an ideal which had emerged in the late 19th century and has had a profound influence to date. It associates women as independent, physically adept and mentally acute, and able to work, study, and socialize equal to men. Having been exposed to many Western countries during her career, Radhika focuses on her status and career, earns more than boys normally does, involves in premarital sex, and shows her individuality. However, she cannot renegotiate the traditional roles altogether. Rather, she tries to evade a critique of power relations within the family and attempt to get the best of both worlds, concretizing existing gender roles and taking on additional new ones.*

**Keywords:** The New Woman, gender role, modern Indian female stereotype, career woman, traditional feminine role

*One Indian Girl* (2016) by Chetan Bhagat centers around the life of a young Indian woman named Radhika Mehta who was born and raised in a middle-class family in Delhi. Being academically brilliant, she gets a degree in Finance from IIM Ahmedabad and lands a job at Goldman Sachs, one of the most prestigious investment banks based in New York City. Here, she faces not only the pressures of a demanding job, but also the added challenges of racism, sexism, and being an Indian woman in a predominantly Western workplace. Hence, she “is the true representative of today’s generation who is somewhat scrutinizing by preconceived notions and pre-judgmental tendencies of our male dominating society which is neither completely western nor completely Indian and that becomes the major hurdle to cross for Indian girls” (Tripathi, 112). However, she thrives in this environment and quickly climbs up the ranks. Despite her professional success, Radhika is constantly judged by her family for not adhering to traditional gender norms, such as learning to cook, getting married early, and prioritizing family life over career. This tension increases when she enters into romantic relationships that defy traditional expectations.

Coined by Sarah Grand in 1894, the term the New Woman was a feminist ideal that refers to an independent woman seeking radical change. Less constrained by Victorian norms

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and domesticity than previous generations, the new woman had greater freedom to pursue public roles and even flaunt her sex appeal. The ideal connotes women as independent, physically adept and mentally acute, and able to work, study, and socialize on a par with men. The New Woman identity thus both challenged and epitomized cultural anxieties. As signifiers of hegemonic masculinity, it subverted traditional gender performance. It marks a radically new departure in nineteenth-century scholarship by exploring debates around gender, motherhood, class and race. Traditionally, Indian society divided the private and public, male and female roles; public and male roles could easily and freely adopt the influences of Westernization, given the anchor of private spheres and female roles which were held constant, the standard bearers of the culture and nation. Women were regarded as the last upholder against the forces of change. If they are themselves creating the most fundamental of changes, the old easy divide of public and private no longer hold, and tradition and modernity can no longer be neatly classified and controlled, hence the perception of the single working Indian woman as a threat. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan contends that the image of the New Woman in India is primarily derived from the urban, educated, middle-class career woman (130). He further argues, “As middle class, urban women increasingly emerge into the public sphere for action, thereby blurring those previously all-important boundaries, then the only way for the culture to maintain status quo would be if ‘the “new woman” does not . . . jeopardize the notion of a tradition which is preserved intact in the idealized conjugal and domestic space” (132). Hence, the New Indian Women evade a critique of power relations within the family and attempt to get the best of both worlds, concretizing existing gender roles and taking on additional new ones, rather than renegotiating the roles altogether. In this context, the paper seeks to examine how Radhika manages herself to be the Indian New woman by negotiation the power dynamics to get the best of her both roles: traditional gender roles being an Indian woman and additional roles as the New Woman.

In *One Indian Girl*, Bhagat depicts the female protagonist who follows her life not taking care of what others think of and say to her. Unlike other typical Indian girls, she listens to her own voices and pursues her goals independently, not caring the dictates of social norms and values. Richa Tripathi in her book review article maintains that the protagonist Radhika Mehata “like every other independent Indian girl comes out as a fighter who knows how to learn from her own experiences and how to live life on her own terms. Somewhat, Chetan Bhagat is succeeded in setting the example with the help of the climax of the novel which is uncommon and rebellious” (Tripathi, 2). Radhika works at Distressed Debt group of Goldman Sachs; an investment bank. Professionally, she is “very brilliant, having expertise in drafting business deals, liquidations, amalgamation, and resurrections through sale of distressed assets. Due to her professional efficiency, she gets handsome salary and generous incentives” (Tantry and Jaoolkar, 681) . Because of her professional efficiency, she draws attractive salary and generous incentives. She knows that people do not like her because of her three disqualifications. First, she earns much more than average

boys can. At one point, her mother asks her to quit her job and be ready for marriage by saying to her, “who wants to marry a girl who earns so much?” (9). Second, she has her ideology. She is bold. She shows her boldness by rejecting her boyfriends and she even invites them in her wedding. Finally, she performs so well that boys feel embarrassed for not being able to be equal to her. In this context Avantika Pandey Bathija appreciates Bhagat’s depiction of the female protagonist who could “expose the inhibitions and insecurities of an Indian Man in 2016 that has less to do with a woman’s beauty and more to do with her brain” (Avantika, 1). This means, “she appears to be more individualistic acting the way she believes right and suitable for her” (Tantry and Jaoolkar, 680). She takes decisions only after weighing the pros and cons of matters.

Despite her professional success, Radhika is constantly judged by her family for not adhering to traditional gender norms, such as learning to cook, getting married early, and prioritizing family life over career. Time and again her mother tries to convince her about the importance and necessity of marriage in Indian culture. This tension increases when she enters into romantic relationships that defy traditional expectations. Her first relationship is with Debu, a fellow banker in New York who is less successful than her. Debu expects Radhika to fit into the traditional Indian female stereotype, constantly belittling her for her high ambitions and salary. Their relationship ends because of Debu's insecurities and traditional expectations. Radhika then moves to Hong Kong for work and gets into a relationship with Neel, a married man twice her age. Neel appreciates her intelligence and independence. But she eventually ends this relationship, too, due to the guilt of being a 'homewrecker' and her desire for an exclusive commitment, which Neel cannot provide. Both Debu and Neel show their repeated concern to her decision on taking her job and mothering. On returning to India, Radhika is pressured into considering marriage. Discouraged by the attitude of Neel Gupta Radhika feels insulted so she moves to London parting her ways with Neel. In London she gets a marriage proposal from Brijesh. Amidst this, she takes a vacation in Goa where Debu and Neel, independently, come to see her, each hoping to reconcile. Now, she finds herself in a dilemma with three men - Debu, Neel, and Brijesh, her suitor chosen by her parents. Debu tells he is her first love claiming he is unable to find his suitable life partner. On other hand Neel has divorced his wife to get Radhika as his new life partner. Brijesh on the other hand is ready to accept her for what she is. After evaluation, she decides to marry Brijesh at last because she finds more understanding and respectful, the qualities she has not experienced in her previous relationships.

In addition to her love affairs, Radhika defies societal expectation of gender roles in her day-to-day activities. Though Indian societies hold public stigma towards women who drink alcohol in public, she has the habit of drinking alcohol. In connection with her drinking alcohol with her male counterparts, Richa Tripathi writes, “In Indian Society, drinking habits of males are considered as one of the common traits adopted by them as being men but for a girl, it is a crime” (113). However, she often goes to different bars and hotels to drink with her boyfriends:

‘Would you like some?’ Neel said as he lifted the bottle.

‘Yes, please’, I said.

Like a gentleman, Neel stood up and poured the champagne for me.

‘Thank you’. I said

‘You are welcome’, Neel said. We raised our glass in a toast. (161)

She does not hesitate even to stay with them very late at night. At one point, she has a meeting at a restaurant with her boss cum boyfriend Neel Gupta. She frankly talks with him despite the fact that they have 20 years age difference. Neel and Radhika are the partners at the Special Situations Group in the Hong Kong office. They get attracted to each other and have an affair. She tries to impress him by her physical touch, which ultimately leads to sexual intercourse. Here is a description of the scene:

We became quite and enjoyed the silence and isolation. I felt calm because of the surroundings. May be champagne also had something to do with it. I could hear him breathing. I stretched my legs. A wave touched my foot. I moved in reflex. As I did that, my ankle brushed against Neel’s. he turned his head and looked at me. ‘I am sorry,’ I said. ‘Its fine,’ he said rather whispered. (178)

She keeps physical relationship with Neel although she knows that Neel is a married person with a wife and children.

Sex remains a taboo topic in Indian society. She has premarital sex with her boyfriends. Her first sexual contact is with Debu, but it is not an end in itself for Radhika. Lying on the quiet Philippines Island with Debu, Radhika accidentally touch him which soon results in a new sexual experience for Radhika: ”If Debu was French fries, sexual intercourse. If Debu was beer, this was champagne” (Bhagat 180). Although sex is not the topic of open discussion not only for women but also for men, Radhika frankly speaks out about sex, sexual intercourse and the excitement of having sexual intercourse. Radhika speak out the following lines while she is engaging in sexual intercourse with her boyfriend Debu: “Why don’t people do this all the time? Wow, why didn’t anyone tell me sex feels so damn good” (57). Throwing light on this aspect of the female sex, Jessica Valenti in her “Full Frontal Feminism”, writes:

In addition to the fact that it’s pretty much never okay for women to have sex (unless you are married and doing it to procreate, of course), there’s a special emphasis placed on younger women. We’re really not supposed to have sex. The logic is pretty simple: Girls aren’t supposed to like sex, especially teenage girls. So if you’re having sex, either you’re a slut or you’re a victim who’s being taken advantage of. Neither are particularly attractive options. (27)

In patriarchal society like India, a male counterpart can only tolerate a meek, submissive woman earning less than her husband; better still if she earns nothing and confines herself within the four walls of her husband's home. As the story progresses, Radhika must reconcile her past, her family's expectations, her own desires for love and marriage, and the independent woman she has become through her experiences. The book climaxes at her wedding, where she asserts herself and makes a bold decision.

The novel challenges societal norms around femininity, relationships, and career aspirations in Indian context. It gives readers a glance into the stereotypes of career-oriented modern Indian women by depicting their struggles of balancing professional success with personal life in a society where gender norms are deeply entrenched. Radhika herself encounters this contradiction when she meets her college friend Amanda in a party. Amanda is a theatre actress cum a part time piano teacher. Since Amanda is in entertainment industry, she has a stunning look with gorgeous hair and bold makeup. Despite her professional excellence and success, Radhika envies Amanda's public image when she compares herself with Amanda as:

I wanted to be Amanda. I do not know why I scolded myself for thinking that way. Amanda did not have a real job. Amanda didn't know how to make financial models. Amanda couldn't close a financial deal. Amanda didn't make 2,70,000 dollars a year. But Amanda is so hot. Amanda also has men hovering around her, hoping to get her a drink. (85)

The quote implicates how Radhika unknowingly values feminine qualities in a woman. On the one hand, she realizes that she has been good in her career; she is one of a few Indian girls can enter the Goldman Sachs company. On the other hand, she feels that the look or attractiveness matters in a woman. So, she feels fascinated the way Amanda has been hovered around by young men. She lacks self-confidence as she has been narrated as a girl with dark skin throughout the novel.

Despite her boldness and high income, Radhika fails to get out of the mess of patriarchy. Like a typical modern Indian woman, she is forced to comply with the patriarchal order. She gets restless the night before her wedding: "Some people are good at taking decisions. I am not one of them. Some people fall asleep quickly at night. I am not one of them either. It is 3 in the morning. I have tossed and turned in bed for two hours. I am to get married in fifteen hours" (253). The monologue reveals her confusion how to cope up with the codes of traditional gender roles. She should feel excitement and enthusiasm on this special night for her. In another monologue, Radhika reflects:

I am the bride. I should get my beauty sleep. I cannot. The last thing I care about right now is beauty. The only thing I care about is how to get out of this mess. Because, like it often happens me in life, here I am in a situation where I don't know what the fuck is going on. I lay still in bed for another half an hour. (253)

The quote unveils the irony what she wants to do and what is forced to do. She wants to get out of the mess of patriarchy and focus on her career. But she has to follow the societal codes according to the spirit of patriarchy. She obeys her mother to put off her jeans and T-shirt and change into salwar-kameez when a boy is about to arrive to ask her hand in marriage in Marriott. As there is no dress-code prescribed for the boy who is meeting the people on the girl's side for the first time, Radhika ponders "when I did things my way, all the women empowerment and feminism bullshit didn't really take me anywhere (6). Kaushik observes, "When she finds herself compelled to agree with what her mother says she wonders why on earth is she obeying her and doing all these things" (103). This shows how she is conditioned to patriarchal code in her unconscious self.

In short, the book brings the dilemma of the stereotype of modern Indian girl to the fore. Written from a woman's point of view, the novel's protagonist Radhika Mehta is an investment banker working at Goldman Sachs earning a very high salary. Her 8-figure salary might be a dream for other women around her but her own mother looks at it as a threat to her chances of getting a good match. she is afraid of revealing her own daughter's salary to the boys who come to ask her hand instead of being proud of her achievements. Radhika finally agrees to an arranged marriage after two failed relationships. Her first relationship with Debu fails because his male ego does not permit his girlfriend earning thrice his salary. So, he wants her to quit her job and take care of the house. Her second relationship with her married boss Neel fails because he thinks that she could either be a working woman or be a mother but not both at the same time. Despite her traits of being independent, physically adept and mentally acute, and able to work, study, and socialize equal to men, she listens to everything her conservative mother forces her to do, like hiding her real salary from the suitors or wearing an Indian dress in the hotel area where no one else is dressing like her just because she is getting married in the same hotel after some days. Radhika talks a lot about feminism but she succumbs to an arranged marriage.

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