

CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY AND REDEFINING WOMEN'S ROLES: A LIBERAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *ONE INDIAN GIRL* BY CHETAN BHAGAT

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Abstract: This research explores the representation of feminist themes in Chetan Bhagat's novel *One Indian Girl*, focusing on the character of Radhika Mehta. Through the lens of Betty Friedan's liberal feminist theory, the study examines how Radhika embodies feminist ideals by challenging traditional gender roles, pursuing a successful career, and asserting her autonomy. The analysis highlights Radhika's struggle against societal expectations, her commitment to achieving professional success, and her quest for financial independence. The findings demonstrate that Radhika's character is a powerful example of feminist empowerment, serving as an inspiration for women to pursue their ambitions and challenge patriarchal norms. This study underscores the importance of education, gender equality, and personal freedom in achieving true feminist empowerment.

Keywords: *feminist themes, gender equality, liberal feminism, One Indian Girl, Radhika Mehta*

INTRODUCTION

Chetan Bhagat is widely recognized as one of the most influential contemporary writers in India, particularly among the younger generation. His background and life experiences have significantly shaped the themes and characters in his novels. Bhagat, a Punjabi who grew up in a middle-class family, pursued his education at Dhaulakuan Army Public School and later at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Ahmedabad, where he studied management (Aravindan, 2019). Before becoming a full-

time writer, he spent eleven years working in Hong Kong, after which he returned to India and began his literary career.

Chetan Bhagat has emerged as a significant literary figure in contemporary Indian literature, especially among the younger generation. His influence extends beyond fiction, as he also engages in national discourse through his essays and social commentary. Bhagat is known for portraying strong, independent female characters who challenge traditional gender roles and reflect the changing landscape of Indian society. As noted by Khan (2020), Bhagat positions women in his novels as decision-makers who confront challenges with courage, thereby promoting a vision of gender equality. He encourages youth to follow their passions and inspires women to embrace freedom and reject patriarchal constraints, emphasizing the need for a mindset that recognizes women as equal to men in all aspects of life.

Patriarchy can be understood as a social system that places men as the center of power and decision-making, and women are often placed in a lower position in various aspects of life, both in the public and domestic spheres. In ancient Greece, patriarchy was called *patriarchhēs*, or “tribal leader”. Patriarchy is a social system that historically places men in positions of authority, both within the family and in broader society. Its origins are often traced back to ancient Greek and Roman societies, where men held complete legal and economic control over the household. While Gerda Lerner’s early work (1986) on the historical development of patriarchy laid the foundation for understanding these structures, more recent scholars have continued to reference and build upon her theories (as cited in Rani, 2021; Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). In contemporary India, patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in cultural practices, despite significant economic and social advancements. As stated by Sivakumar and Manimekalai (2021), the classic aspects of patriarchal ideology in India are still maintained, especially aspects of sexuality, reproduction, and social production. Gender norms pressure women to act as loving mothers and wives.

The challenges faced by modern women in traditional societies often reflect the tension between personal aspirations and societal expectations. In the context of Indian literature, this dynamic is vividly portrayed through the character of Radhika in *One Indian Girl* by Chetan Bhagat. A study conducted by Nirmalawati (2018) analyzed Radhika’s portrayal and identified the internal and external conflicts she experiences,

despite being a modern, educated, and independent woman. These conflicts stem from enduring patriarchal pressures that subordinate women and compel them to conform to conventional gender roles. Nirmalawati (2018) highlighted four central aspects of Radhika's struggles: societal pressure to marry, financial constraints, the prioritization of men, and restrictive expectations imposed on women. Complementing this view, Fadilla and Wiyatmi (2023) argues that literature often mirrors societal values and stigmas, especially regarding women, who are frequently depicted through lenses of weakness, oppression, and negative stereotypes. However, women who demonstrate rational and autonomous decision-making like Radhika reflect a liberal feminist mindset, challenging such reductive portrayals. Through a post-feminist lens, Radhika's journey can thus be seen as both a response to and a rebellion against the cultural norms that seek to define her.

Similarly, a study by Habiba et al. (2021) analyzed *One Indian Girl* to explore how gender stereotypes are portrayed in Indian culture through a Marxist feminist lens. Applying close reading techniques, the study revealed that while traditional novels often depict submissive women who adhere to societal expectations, Bhagat's novel portrays a bold, financially independent woman who rejects patriarchal norms. Radhika is depicted as rejecting several suitors for emotional reasons, canceling her wedding, and ultimately choosing her own path in life.

Contemporary literature often plays a significant role in challenging gender stereotypes and inspiring female empowerment. In *One Indian Girl*, Chetan Bhagat presents Radhika Mehta as a modern, successful woman who confronts various societal expectations placed upon her. Born into a middle-class family in Delhi, Radhika achieves notable success from an early age and earns a high income through her career. However, despite her accomplishments, she continues to face pressure from cultural norms that emphasize traditional roles for women. As noted by Pokharel (2021), Bhagat's novel encourages women to overcome stereotypical and demeaning treatment by men and to live freely according to their own choices. Radhika's decision to reject marriage proposals and assert her autonomy reflects her resistance to societal expectations. This study focuses on feminist perspectives to raise awareness of women's struggles, and it is hoped that Radhika's experiences will contribute to changing perceptions about gender roles in society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist theory provides a critical framework for understanding how social structures perpetuate inequality and marginalize certain groups, especially women. This perspective encourages scholars to examine deeply rooted systems of power and domination that affect individual experiences and societal norms. Egbert and Sanden (2013) support this view by identifying key feminist concepts such as sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, difference, and choice. They argue that research conducted within a critical paradigm seeks not only to uncover hidden truths within these structures but also to raise awareness of systemic oppression. Ultimately, the goal is to empower marginalized communities by amplifying their voices and challenging dominant narratives, leading to a more inclusive and equitable discourse.

The concept of liberal feminism emphasizes that women should be granted equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life, including education, employment, and decision-making. This perspective is strongly influenced by the ideas of Betty Friedan, whose thoughts on gender roles have been widely discussed by recent scholars. According to Riswan and Banu (2021), Friedan viewed women as belonging to a disempowered group, while men held dominant positions in society. She believed that the solution to this imbalance was for women to engage in professional work and pursue higher education, which would benefit not only themselves but also their families. By working outside the home, women could overcome dependency and develop autonomy without neglecting their roles as mothers and wives. Recent research by Hutahayan et al. (2024) reinforces this view, asserting that liberal feminism continues to emphasize education, agency, and empowerment as key pathways toward achieving gender equality in modern society. This alignment between foundational theory and contemporary findings highlights the enduring relevance of liberal feminist principles in advocating for women's active participation in both personal and public spheres.

Indian culture is a complex and diverse system shaped by thousands of years of history, philosophy, and tradition. It encompasses various aspects such as religion, art, literature, language, and architecture, reflecting the richness of its civilization. Kuiper (2011) notes that several major world religions Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Jainism originated or flourished in India. The country has also made significant contributions to classical literature and artistic expression, with epics

like the Mahabharata and Ramayana being central to its literary heritage. Hindi and English serve as the official languages, but India is home to more than 1,600 spoken languages. Architecturally, India is renowned for historical monuments such as the Taj Mahal and ancient temples that illustrate cross-cultural influences. Another fundamental component of Indian society is the caste system, which continues to influence social dynamics. Wise (2005) explains that the traditional caste system has evolved into the varna system, a hierarchy based on notions of ritual purity, with Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

Women's empowerment is a crucial process in addressing historical inequalities and creating inclusive societies. It focuses on enabling women to attain equal standing in economic, social, and political spheres by eliminating discriminatory practices and patriarchal barriers. In this context, Rani (2021) explains that women's empowerment involves freeing women from various forms of marginalization—such as those based on caste, class, gender, and geography—while promoting gender equality. Specifically in India, the effectiveness of empowerment efforts is shaped by several factors including whether women live in urban or rural areas, their education level, age, and their position within the caste system. Ultimately, empowerment is not only about individual progress but also about transforming societal conditions so that women can thrive without fear of oppression, exploitation, or systemic discrimination.

METHOD

The research method applied in this study follows a qualitative research design, which focuses on textual analysis to examine the feminist spirit reflected in Chetan Bhagat's *One Indian Girl*. This study does not involve numerical measurement but instead relies on a detailed exploration of the protagonist, Radhika Mehta, and her feminist consciousness. The research follows a chronological process, starting with the selection of primary and secondary data sources. The primary data source is the novel itself, while secondary sources include academic books, journal articles, and online materials on feminist theory, particularly Betty Friedan's liberal feminism. The data collection procedure involves an in-depth reading of the novel to identify relevant paragraphs, dialogues, and narratives that reflect feminist themes. These textual elements are then classified systematically before being analyzed using Friedan's

theoretical framework to interpret their feminist implications. This structured research procedure ensures a comprehensive understanding of how *One Indian Girl* portrays feminism and contributes to the discourse on Indian women's empowerment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher presents the findings of analyzing feminist themes in Chetan Bhagat's novel *One Indian Girl*.

Gender Equality

Gender equality remains an ongoing challenge in many societies, particularly those where traditional norms still dictate women's roles and expectations. While some progress has been made in granting equal rights to women, this progress is often uneven, particularly in rural or conservative communities. This is clearly reflected in *One Indian Girl*, where the main character, Radhika Mehta, challenges societal expectations that diminish women's autonomy and limit their contribution to their families and communities. In one scene, Radhika expresses her frustration at the unequal treatment she receives from her parents, who compare her to a son:

‘So what? I am your child. Why can't I help improve your lifestyle?’

‘With sons it is different. It's like your right.’

‘Mom, you know all this stuff irritates me a lot. I have had a long day. I was in office for thirteen hours. Can you please say something nice?’ (Bhagat, 2016, p.80)

Radhika's statement reflects her rejection of deeply rooted gender roles within the family structure, where sons are expected to provide and daughters are expected to submit. Her challenge to this mindset highlights the inequalities that persist even within educated urban families. This rejection echoes broader social issues where gender norms continue to limit women's roles, despite modernization.

Supporting this argument, Khosla et al. (2017) explains that cultural and community norms rooted in patriarchy can significantly hinder women's rights and reinforce gender inequality. In her analysis of gender practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Khosla et al. (2017) describes how social pressure, expectations of virginity before marriage, and the emphasis on producing male heirs are symptoms of a society structured around male dominance. These norms perpetuate control over

women's bodies and decisions, even in aspects not directly related to FGM, such as career or financial independence.

While Radhika's experience does not involve FGM, the underlying mechanisms of control such as expectations for women to conform to family roles or suppress their ambitions are strikingly similar. Both cases demonstrate how cultural expectations limit women's agency under the guise of tradition. The novel thus presents a microcosmic view of the broader patriarchal system, echoing the findings of Khosla et al.'s study and strengthening the argument that gender inequality persists due to deeply entrenched socio-cultural structures.

By comparing Radhika's defiance with the findings of research such as Khosla et al. (2017), it becomes clear that *One Indian Girl* contributes a literary perspective to the broader discourse on gender inequality. Radhika's rebellion against domestic expectations reflects a growing awareness and assertion of women's rights in a patriarchal society, aligning with feminist critiques in academic literature while also offering new insights into how these dynamics play out in everyday life.

Free Identity

One of the key indicators of women's empowerment in literature is the ability to assert personal identity beyond traditional gender roles. In *One Indian Girl*, Radhika Mehta exemplifies this by rejecting social expectations that confine women to the roles of wife, mother, and caregiver. Her refusal to conform to these expectations is a clear assertion of her right to self-determination and individuality.

This idea aligns with what Parveen & Khadija (2021) argues—feminism is not merely a movement or slogan, but a transformative belief system that challenges deeply rooted patriarchal norms in all areas of life, including social, economic, political, and educational domains. Radhika's insistence on being accepted for who she is, including her successful career, reflects the broader feminist struggle to reshape societal perceptions of women's roles.

A notable example in the novel occurs when Radhika states:

'I told you not to mention your career too much,' She said, upset that I had rejected all ten suitors.

'I can't hide who I am,' I said.

'Why can't you be like your sister?'

'Because I am not Aditi didi. I don't want to be her.' (Bhagat, 2016, p.241)

Radhika's rejection of ten marriage proposals demonstrates not only her autonomy but also her refusal to suppress her accomplishments to fit into socially acceptable female stereotypes. Rather than hiding her professional identity, she demands recognition for it insisting that she will not compromise who she is for the sake of acceptance.

This portrayal resonates with recent findings by Kulkarni (2022), who emphasizes that empowerment includes both freedom of choice and the ability to fully realize one's potential. Women who earn their own income, according to Kulkarni, often reinvest it in ways that enhance family welfare and community development. However, women in India still struggle with unequal living standards, economic disparity, and cultural stereotypes that limit their full participation in society.

Compared to earlier studies such as Nirmalawati (2018), which focused on how Radhika's experiences reflect post-feminist dilemmas in modern India, the current analysis adds further depth by framing Radhika's personal choices within a broader socio-political context. The emphasis here is not only on Radhika's personal rejection of patriarchal expectations, but also on how her character aligns with feminist frameworks that advocate systemic social change. Thus, Radhika's struggle for free identity becomes both a personal and political act reinforcing feminism's transformative potential in challenging and reshaping traditional societal norms.

Equal Opportunity in Employment

In many parts of the world, women have historically been excluded from equal participation in the workforce due to rigid gender roles and societal expectations. However, in recent decades, increasing access to education and shifting societal norms have created new opportunities for women to pursue careers and attain financial independence. In *One Indian Girl*, Radhika Mehta serves as a fictional representation of this reality. Her professional accomplishments and financial success challenge the traditional view that women should remain confined to domestic roles. As portrayed in the novel, Radhika secures a high-paying position and receives a substantial annual bonus, symbolizing her success in a male-dominated financial sector:

‘And the bottom line,’ Josh said. ‘Your number, or your bonus for the year, is 350,000 dollars.’ My heart skipped a beat.

‘Wow,’ I blurted out, even though I didn’t intend to react. Josh smiled.

‘That tells me you are happy. Good.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, still absorbing my gross compensation. My total base salary and bonus came up to half a million dollars.

‘Keep up the good work.’ (Bhagat, 2016, p.217)

Radhika’s success reflects a broader transformation in gender dynamics at work. Recent studies support this trend. For example, Sapkal and Shete (2022) notes that investments in women’s education have led to higher university attainment rates among women, increasing their participation in sectors traditionally dominated by men. This demonstrates how education policies can disrupt entrenched gender inequalities and open the door for women to achieve economic independence.

Moreover, women today are not only participating in the workforce but also creating and leading enterprises. As Sundararajan and Mohammed (2022) argues, women are redefining business ownership and entrepreneurship, proving their capacity for leadership and innovation across various industries. These developments resonate with Radhika’s journey, which illustrates that professional achievement is not gender-specific but based on competence and dedication.

Importantly, women’s empowerment is not solely about economic success—it also involves autonomy in decision-making. As Bhaskararao (2022) explains, empowering women means equipping them with the ability to make life-shaping choices independently through education, awareness, and skill development. Radhika embodies this principle by asserting control over her career and personal life, even when faced with cultural and familial pressures. Her narrative highlights the ongoing negotiation between personal freedom and social expectation, a tension that many women continue to experience despite increased opportunities.

By aligning these real-world developments with Radhika’s fictional experience, it becomes evident that while structural opportunities for women have expanded, the cultural mindset around gender roles often lags behind. This contrast underlines the importance of not only institutional reform but also societal transformation in the pursuit of true gender equality.

Freedom of Women’s Roles

The freedom to determine one’s own path is a vital aspect of feminist empowerment, particularly in societies where women are pressured to conform to rigid domestic roles. In *One Indian Girl*, Radhika Mehta exemplifies this empowerment by making a conscious decision to marry someone who supports her professional life.

Rather than submitting to traditional expectations of marriage, Radhika chooses a partner who values her autonomy, reinforcing her belief that women can and should define their roles on their own terms.

‘It’s a yes! Aditi’s papa, are you there? ‘Mubarak,’ I heard her scream.
It drowned out everything—my voice, reason and doubts. I, Radhika Mehta, was going to get married. (Bhagat, 2016, p.253)

This moment resonates with contemporary feminist critiques of women’s limited roles. Aliu (2022) points out that in many historical and literary contexts, women were denied freedom of thought and confined to domestic spaces, which prevented them from realizing their full potential. Radhika’s ability to act on her desires, while staying true to her career goals, aligns with this call for intellectual and personal liberation.

Moreover, Kamini (2025) argues that in repressive societies, women are often forced into passive roles under patriarchal norms, which limit their autonomy and suppress their voices. Radhika’s rejection of such norms by choosing a partner who respects her aspirations serves as a form of resistance and self-assertion. Her choice signifies that solidarity and mutual respect in relationships are essential for achieving gender equality.

The struggle between societal expectations and self-expression is also seen in the lives of women writers. Zala (2021), in her study of Sarah Joseph’s short stories, explains how domestic responsibilities can stifle women’s creativity and independence. Like Joseph’s characters, Radhika feels the weight of cultural expectations. However, unlike women who fully yield to those expectations, Radhika chooses to redefine them by pursuing both her career and a personal life on her own terms.

In essence, Radhika’s narrative transcends individual experience and represents a larger feminist message. Her character defies the binary opposition of career versus marriage and embraces a more balanced, empowered identity. Bhagat’s portrayal offers a progressive reimagining of Indian womanhood one that affirms a woman’s right to choose freely, love freely, and live freely.

Work and Education

In *One Indian Girl*, Radhika Mehta’s academic and professional journey exemplifies the ideal of women’s empowerment through education and career advancement. Her achievements reflect the feminist belief that access to equal education and economic opportunity is essential for achieving gender equality. Radhika’s

character breaks through societal expectations by pursuing higher education at one of India's most prestigious institutions and securing a competitive job abroad. Her success is clearly illustrated when she proudly states:

‘I finished with IIMA. Overachiever me had a job offer on Day Zero, the prime slot for recruiters. I got an offer to be an associate at Goldman Sachs, New York. The job paid an annual compensation of 120,000 dollars.’ (Bhagat, 2016, p.19)

This quote demonstrates how academic excellence and determination enabled her to access a global career path typically dominated by men. Such achievements align with feminist critiques of patriarchal systems that have historically limited women's access to education and economic participation. As Gunawan (2016) explains, the feminist movement emerged in response to the way gendered power relations position men as dominant and women as subordinate. Although gender equality is increasingly recognized, deeply embedded patriarchal structures still pose significant barriers, especially in countries like India. Radhika's story reflects a challenge to these norms, as she seeks both personal and professional fulfillment outside the domestic sphere.

Feminism in contemporary literature often explores the struggle for not only political rights but also social and economic equality. In many societies, including India, patriarchal values are deeply embedded in family structures and cultural communication, shaping the roles and expectations of women. This dynamic is evident in Radhika Mehta's character in Bhagat's novel, where her decision to prioritize her career over traditional expectations of marriage signals a conscious resistance to these ingrained norms. Her professional success in a global corporate environment challenges conventional gender roles and redefines what it means to be a modern Indian woman. As Rosalinah et al. (2022) affirm, feminism encompasses the broader goal of dismantling societal structures that perpetuate inequality, including those rooted in domestic and cultural traditions.

Furthermore, Singh (2016) highlights how Indian cultural expectations depict women as obedient, modest, and sacrificial—confined within the ideals of virtue and silent suffering. Women like Radhika, who pursue education, financial independence, and careers outside the home, break away from this narrative. Singh notes that many educated Indian women today are choosing to work, earn their own income, and live independently, much like Radhika. Her decision to work abroad and reject gender-based

expectations reflects a growing shift in women's roles from passive recipients of tradition to active agents of change.

Compared to earlier portrayals of women in Indian literature, which often framed female characters as victims or subordinates, Radhika's character offers a more empowered and autonomous representation. Her story not only aligns with modern feminist ideals but also adds to the ongoing conversation about how education and economic independence can transform women's roles in contemporary society.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The analysis of *One Indian Girl* reveals that Radhika Mehta embodies a strong feminist spirit that challenges traditional gender expectations in Indian society. Her journey highlights the struggles and triumphs of a modern woman navigating personal aspirations and professional ambitions in a patriarchal environment. Through her pursuit of higher education, financial independence, and the courage to reject societal constraints, Radhika's character aligns with the principles of Betty Friedan's liberal feminism. Her story serves as a compelling representation of women's empowerment, demonstrating that self-determination and resilience are essential in overcoming gender-based limitations. By making independent choices and asserting her identity, Radhika not only redefines success on her own terms but also inspires other women to break free from restrictive norms.

Ultimately, *One Indian Girl* is more than just a novel. It is a narrative that contributes to the discourse on gender equality and acts as a catalyst for social change, encouraging women to embrace their autonomy and pursue the life they truly desire. *One Indian Girl* could be explored further to expand the analysis of Radhika Mehta's struggle. A comparative study of feminist representation in Indian and global literature could also provide insights into the universal and culturally specific aspects of women's empowerment.

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