SEAGULL JOURNALS
A Peer-Reviewed International Multidisciplinary Research
ISSN : 2584-1963 (Approved)

Gender Negotiations and Urban Relationships in *2 States* and *Half Girlfriend*

Dr. Rashmi Achmare
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
School of Liberal Arts And Social Sciences,
JSPM University,
Pune, India. achmarerashmi@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates gender negotiations and urban relational dynamics in *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* and *Half Girlfriend* by Chetan Bhagat, situating the novels within the socio-cultural context of liberalized, middle-class India. Both narratives foreground romantic relationships shaped by regional identity, class mobility, linguistic hierarchy, and patriarchal expectations. While *2 States* dramatizes inter-regional marriage as a negotiation between tradition and modern aspiration, *Half Girlfriend* explores emotional intimacy mediated by English proficiency, social capital, and masculine insecurity. The study argues that Bhagat's fiction reflects the tensions of urban modernity, where women appear increasingly autonomous yet remain embedded within familial and cultural constraints. Female protagonists such as Ananya and Riya embody aspirational agency, but their choices are circumscribed by social legitimacy and marriageability. Meanwhile, male protagonists grapple with fragile masculinity and the pressures of neoliberal success. Through accessible popular fiction, Bhagat captures the evolving grammar of gender relations in metropolitan India, revealing how romance becomes a site for negotiating identity, mobility, and belonging. Ultimately, the paper contends that these novels dramatize the contradictions of post-liberalization India, where urban relationships oscillate between egalitarian ideals and deeply rooted patriarchal structures.

Keywords

Gender Negotiation; Urban Modernity; Neoliberal Aspirations; Middle-Class Identity; Popular Fiction; Masculinity Crisis

I Introduction

The decades following India's economic liberalization in 1991 witnessed not only structural transformations in markets and media but also a significant reconfiguration of literary culture. The rise of popular fiction in English—particularly narratives centered on campus life, corporate aspirations, and urban romance—signals the emergence of a new reading public shaped by globalization, consumer culture, and expanding higher education. Within this shifting literary landscape, Chetan Bhagat occupies a pivotal position. Often dismissed by elite critics yet widely embraced by young readers, Bhagat's fiction reflects the aspirations, anxieties, and contradictions of India's expanding urban middle class. His novels function as cultural documents of post-liberalization India, capturing the interplay between economic mobility and social conservatism in everyday life.

Popular fiction in the twenty-first century has increasingly foregrounded accessible language, contemporary settings, and relatable protagonists, thereby democratizing English-language readership. As scholars of cultural production note, mass-market literature often operates as a site where middle-class values are negotiated and reproduced (Bourdieu 55). Bhagat's novels, written in colloquial prose and set in recognizable urban environments, resonate with first-generation English readers navigating educational and professional mobility. His narratives of love, ambition, and self-making unfold against the backdrop of neoliberal transformation, where English proficiency, corporate success, and metropolitan identity function as markers of upward mobility.

In this context, Bhagat may be read as a chronicler of urban middle-class youth. His protagonists are typically students in elite institutions, young professionals in multinational corporations, or aspirants struggling to reconcile provincial origins with metropolitan ambition. Novels such as 2 States: The Story of My Marriage and Half Girlfriend foreground romantic relationships that unfold within campuses, corporate offices, and globalized cities. These spaces are emblematic of what Arjun Appadurai terms the "aspirational landscape" of globalization, where identities are shaped by mobility and mediated desire (Appadurai 31). Bhagat's characters inhabit precisely this terrain: they aspire to professional success and romantic fulfilment while negotiating entrenched social hierarchies.

Central to these narratives is the depiction of romance as a site of gender and identity negotiation. Love in Bhagat's fiction is never merely personal; it is deeply entangled with regional identity, class distinction, linguistic capital, and familial authority. In *2 States*, the inter-regional relationship between Krish and Ananya dramatizes how marriage becomes a negotiation between tradition and urban modernity. In *Half Girlfriend*, Madhav and Riya's relationship is mediated by English proficiency, elite education, and masculine insecurity. These romantic entanglements reveal how gender roles are simultaneously reimagined and reinscribed in contemporary India.

While female protagonists appear increasingly autonomous—educated, articulate, and career-oriented—their agency remains structured by familial expectations and the social legitimacy of marriage. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is instructive here: gendered identities are enacted within normative frameworks rather than outside them (Butler 25). Bhagat's heroines exercise choice, yet that choice is embedded within culturally sanctioned boundaries. At the same time, male protagonists confront new pressures of neoliberal success, revealing the fragility of masculinity in a competitive urban economy.

This paper argues that in Bhagat's fiction, romance functions as a microcosm of post-liberalization India's social transformation. Urban relationships become arenas in which gender, class, language, and regional identity are negotiated, contested, and partially reconciled. By situating intimate relationships within broader socio-economic contexts, Bhagat's popular fiction offers valuable insight into the evolving grammar of gender relations in contemporary urban India.

II Theoretical Framework

This study examines gender negotiations in 2 States: The Story of My Marriage and Half Girlfriend by Chetan Bhagat through an interdisciplinary framework drawing on gender theory, cultural capital, and neoliberal subjectivity. These perspectives illuminate how romance in Bhagat's fiction becomes a site where identity, aspiration, and power intersect within urban India.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a foundational lens for understanding the negotiation of femininity and masculinity in the novels. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but a repeated performance structured by social norms (Butler 25). In Bhagat's narratives, female protagonists such as Ananya and Riya appear modern and autonomous; however, their choices are enacted within culturally sanctioned frameworks of respectability and marriage. Their agency does not dismantle patriarchy but reworks it through strategic negotiation. Gender, therefore, operates as a performative practice shaped by familial expectations and urban aspirations.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural and linguistic capital further clarifies the class dynamics embedded in these relationships. Bourdieu contends that language functions as symbolic power, conferring legitimacy and social mobility (Bourdieu 55). In *Half Girlfriend*, Madhav's insecurity about his English proficiency reveals how linguistic competence becomes a marker of masculine adequacy and class distinction. English, in this context, is not merely a communicative tool but a currency of urban belonging. Romantic relationships thus become spaces where unequal access to cultural capital shapes emotional dynamics.

Additionally, the framework of neoliberal subjectivity helps situate these gendered negotiations within post-liberalization India. Neoliberalism valorizes self-improvement, meritocracy, and entrepreneurial identity, restructuring intimate life around achievement and mobility. Male protagonists confront anxieties of performance and success, reflecting what Raewyn Connell describes as the pressures of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 77). Women, meanwhile, embody aspirational independence while remaining tethered to familial validation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives reveal that Bhagat's fiction stages romance as a socio-cultural negotiation rather than a purely sentimental narrative. Gender, class, language, and neoliberal ambition converge within urban relationships, exposing the contradictions of contemporary middle-class India.

III. Gender and Regional Identity in *2 States*

In 2 States: The Story of My Marriage, Chetan Bhagat situates romance within the layered negotiations of regional identity, middle-class aspiration, and gender performance in metropolitan India. The relationship between Krish Malhotra, a Punjabi from Delhi, and Ananya Swaminathan, a Tamil Brahmin from Chennai, unfolds not merely as a love story but as a socio-cultural negotiation between two distinct linguistic and familial worlds. The novel dramatizes how post-liberalization urban spaces—particularly elite institutions like IIM Ahmedabad—create opportunities for cross-regional intimacy while simultaneously exposing entrenched cultural hierarchies.

Ananya is introduced as academically accomplished, professionally ambitious, and emotionally articulate. Unlike stereotypical representations of submissive femininity, she openly asserts her expectations within the relationship. Early in the narrative, she challenges Krish's complacency, insisting that partnership must involve mutual effort rather than romantic idealism (Bhagat, *2 States* 76). Her insistence on intellectual equality signals a shift from traditional gender scripts toward companionate marriage. However, this autonomy remains negotiated within familial frameworks. When she declares, "I want to marry you, but not at the cost of my parents" (198), her agency is clearly circumscribed by filial loyalty. Marriage, therefore, becomes a space of mediation rather than rebellion.

IMPACT FACTOR = 3.979

The novel foregrounds regional identity as both cultural richness and social obstacle. Punjabi exuberance and Tamil conservatism are often rendered through humor, yet beneath the comedic surface lies a serious commentary on how marriage consolidates community boundaries. Ananya's family represents educational prestige and cultural discipline, while Krish's family embodies emotional intensity and social flamboyance. These differences are not merely aesthetic; they signify distinct middle-class imaginaries. As Arjun Appadurai argues, globalization generates "scapes" of identity that are constantly negotiated across local and transnational registers (Appadurai 31). In *2 States*, metropolitan education provides a shared aspirational platform, yet regional affiliation continues to shape belonging.

Gender operates at the intersection of these regional tensions. Ananya's professional success—she secures a high-paying corporate job—positions her as economically independent. Yet the narrative repeatedly emphasizes the importance of maternal approval and domestic negotiation. Ananya's efforts to integrate into Krish's Punjabi household reflect what Judith Butler terms the reiterative nature of gender performance (Butler 25). She performs modernity in corporate spaces but negotiates tradition in domestic ones. Her subjectivity is therefore split between neoliberal autonomy and familial duty.

Krish's masculinity, too, is shaped by regional expectations. As a Punjabi son, he is expected to uphold familial honor and maternal authority. His struggle to mediate between his mother's expectations and his commitment to Ananya reveals the fragility of male agency within patriarchal structures. Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity—defined by authority, confidence, and control—appears destabilized in Krish's character (Connell 77). Rather than exercising decisive authority, he oscillates between filial obligation and romantic commitment. His masculinity is thus reconfigured within a neoliberal context where emotional intelligence and negotiation replace authoritarian dominance.

The climactic resolution of the novel—where both families gradually concede to the marriage—does not dismantle tradition but reworks it. Inter-regional union becomes possible not through radical defiance but through strategic accommodation. The lovers persuade, adapt, and perform cultural flexibility until familial consent is achieved. This outcome suggests that urban modernity does not erase regional identity; instead, it reframes it within a pluralistic framework compatible with middle-class aspiration.

Significantly, Bhagat's narrative voice maintains accessibility and humor, which renders complex socio-cultural negotiations palatable to a mass readership. Yet beneath this simplicity lies a nuanced depiction of how gender and region intersect within post-liberalization India. The metropolitan setting creates conditions for cross-cultural romance, but marriage remains embedded in collective memory and community validation. Ananya's autonomy, while visible, operates within boundaries that ensure social continuity. Similarly, Krish's masculinity adapts rather than revolts against patriarchal expectations.

Ultimately, *2 States* portrays romance as a bridge between regional identities while simultaneously revealing the persistence of cultural boundaries. Gender negotiation becomes the mechanism through which this bridge is constructed. The novel affirms the possibility of pluralistic belonging in "New India," yet it also underscores that such belonging requires continuous performance and compromise. In this way, Bhagat transforms the popular love story into a cultural archive of metropolitan India's ongoing negotiation between liberal aspiration and inherited tradition.

IV. Language, Class, and Masculinity in *Half Girlfriend*

If *2 States* foregrounds regional negotiation within urban romance, Half Girlfriend intensifies the discourse by placing language and class at the center of gendered relational dynamics. In this novel, Chetan Bhagat constructs English proficiency as symbolic capital, thereby revealing how linguistic hierarchies shape intimacy, self-worth, and masculine identity in post-liberalization India.

Madhav Jha, the protagonist, arrives at St. Stephen's College from a rural background in Bihar, carrying with him both ambition and linguistic insecurity. His admission into an elite Delhi institution signals upward mobility; however, his discomfort with English exposes the fragility of that mobility. As he admits, "My English wasn't good enough for her world" (Bhagat, *Half Girlfriend* 73), language becomes the axis around which romantic anxiety revolves. English, in this context, functions not merely as communication but as what Pierre Bourdieu terms "linguistic capital," a resource that confers legitimacy and social power (Bourdieu 55). Madhav's insecurity reveals the persistent stratification within the ostensibly meritocratic urban middle class.

Riya Somani, by contrast, embodies metropolitan privilege. Fluent in English, educated in elite institutions, and socially confident, she occupies a space of cultural ease. Yet her apparent empowerment is complicated by patriarchal expectations embedded within upper-class respectability. Her reluctance to fully commit to Madhav—preferring instead the ambiguous category of "half girlfriend"—signals emotional ambivalence shaped by social constraint. The phrase itself reflects a transitional lexicon of intimacy in urban India, where traditional categories of relationship struggle to accommodate evolving desires. Riya's negotiation of proximity and distance illustrates Judith Butler's argument that gendered subjectivity is performed within normative frameworks rather than outside them (Butler 25). Her autonomy is real, yet it is circumscribed by familial and social pressures.

Language mediates not only class difference but also masculine identity. Madhav's frustration with his linguistic limitations manifests in moments of anger and vulnerability. His internal conflict exemplifies Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which prescribes confidence, authority, and cultural competence as markers of male legitimacy (Connell 77). In an urban neoliberal environment that valorizes communication skills and corporate polish, Madhav's rural accent and hesitant English destabilize his claim to masculine adequacy. His plea to Riya—"Be my girlfriend" (Bhagat, *Half Girlfriend* 119)—is less a romantic declaration than a bid for validation within a hierarchy that measures worth through fluency and sophistication.

The metropolitan setting intensifies these pressures. Delhi's elite spaces—private clubs, corporate offices, international schools—operate as arenas of performative belonging. Arjun Appadurai's notion of aspirational modernity is instructive here: globalization produces imaginaries of success that shape self-perception and desire (Appadurai 31). Madhav's aspiration is not merely romantic; it is social and linguistic. To win Riya is to transcend his provincial origins. Yet the narrative ultimately suggests that such transcendence requires self-transformation rather than mere romantic persistence. Madhav's eventual improvement in English and professional confidence symbolizes adaptation to neoliberal demands.

Importantly, *Half Girlfriend* does not present Riya as an uncomplicated symbol of modern liberation. Her marriage into an abusive upper-class household reveals the persistence of patriarchal control even within elite circles. Her suffering complicates the assumption that English-speaking privilege guarantees autonomy. Gender inequality, the novel implies, cuts across class boundaries, though it manifests differently. Riya's silence within marriage contrasts with her earlier guarded independence, underscoring the fragility of female agency in a society where respectability often supersedes self-expression.

Through these intertwined narratives, Bhagat portrays romance as a terrain structured by linguistic hierarchy and class aspiration. Language becomes the medium through which masculinity is validated or undermined, while femininity is negotiated between autonomy and conformity. The urban middle class, celebrated as the emblem of "New India," emerges as internally stratified, where English fluency functions as gatekeeper to emotional and professional legitimacy.

Ultimately, *Half Girlfriend* dramatizes the contradictions of neoliberal subjectivity. The promise of meritocratic mobility coexists with deep-seated cultural hierarchies. Madhav's journey reflects adaptation rather than revolution; he learns to perform the codes of metropolitan success. Riya's

trajectory, meanwhile, reveals the enduring entanglement of gender, class, and respectability. By embedding these tensions within a popular love story, Bhagat transforms accessible fiction into a commentary on how language and masculinity shape the contours of urban intimacy in contemporary India.

V Comparative Analysis: Gender, Language, and Urban Negotiation in *2 States* and *Half Girlfriend*

2 States: The Story of My Marriage and Half Girlfriend by Chetan Bhagat present complementary portraits of gender negotiation within post-liberalization urban India. While both novels center on romantic relationships, they diverge in emphasis: *2 States* foregrounds regional identity and familial negotiation, whereas *Half Girlfriend* intensifies the dynamics of class, language, and masculine insecurity. Yet in both narratives, romance becomes a microcosm of the socio-economic transformations that have reshaped India's urban middle class since the 1990s.

In *2 States*, the primary axis of conflict is regional difference. The relationship between Krish and Ananya is structured around the negotiation of Punjabi and Tamil identities within metropolitan modernity. Education at IIM Ahmedabad provides a shared aspirational platform, symbolizing neoliberal meritocracy; however, familial approval remains central. Ananya's declaration—"I want to marry you, but not at the cost of my parents" (Bhagat, *2 States* 198)—encapsulates the tension between individual choice and collective obligation. Gender here is negotiated within the framework of filial responsibility. Ananya performs autonomy in professional spaces but adapts strategically within domestic ones, reflecting Judith Butler's argument that gender is constituted through repeated performances shaped by normative expectations (Butler 25). Modernity, in this novel, does not erase tradition; it recalibrates it.

By contrast, *Half Girlfriend* shifts the focus from regional negotiation to linguistic and class hierarchies. Madhav's insecurity—"My English wasn't good enough for her world" (Bhagat, *Half Girlfriend* 73)—reveals how English operates as symbolic capital in Pierre Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu 55). Whereas Krish and Ananya share comparable educational capital, Madhav and Riya inhabit asymmetrical cultural terrains. Language becomes the medium through which masculine adequacy is measured and romantic legitimacy contested. If *2 States* emphasizes cultural accommodation, *Half Girlfriend* underscores aspirational transformation. Madhav must acquire linguistic fluency to bridge the class divide, signaling the neoliberal imperative of self-improvement.

Despite these differences, both novels converge in their portrayal of gendered ambivalence. Female protagonists in each narrative appear empowered—Ananya as a corporate professional, Riya as an elite, English-speaking urbanite—yet their autonomy remains tethered to social legitimacy. Ananya negotiates marriage through parental consent, while Riya's eventual marriage into an abusive upper-class household exposes the fragility of female agency within patriarchal respectability. In both texts, women exercise choice but within circumscribed frameworks, affirming Butler's notion that gendered agency is always enacted within regulatory norms (25).

Male protagonists, meanwhile, embody the anxieties of neoliberal masculinity. Krish's oscillation between filial obedience and romantic commitment destabilizes the authority traditionally associated with patriarchal sons. Madhav's linguistic insecurity exposes what Raewyn Connell terms the precariousness of hegemonic masculinity under shifting socio-

economic conditions (Connell 77). If Krish's masculinity is challenged by regional negotiation, Madhav's is destabilized by class and language. Both characters reveal that post-liberalization India demands not only economic competence but also emotional adaptability.

A further point of comparison lies in narrative resolution. *2 States* concludes with familial reconciliation, suggesting the possibility of pluralistic belonging within metropolitan modernity. The inter-regional marriage symbolizes a negotiated national integration, aligning with Arjun Appadurai's notion of aspirational cosmopolitanism (Appadurai 31). In contrast, *Half Girlfriend* resolves through personal perseverance and self-transformation rather than communal integration. Madhav's success hinges on individual growth, mirroring neoliberal emphasis on meritocratic mobility. The difference is telling: while *2 States* imagines collective accommodation, *Half Girlfriend* privileges individual adaptation.

Yet both novels ultimately resist radical rupture. Neither dismantles patriarchal structures nor subverts class hierarchies entirely. Instead, they portray a transitional society in which egalitarian aspirations coexist with deeply embedded inequalities. Romance operates as a site of negotiation rather than revolution. The lovers do not overthrow tradition; they persuade, adapt, and perform compromise.

In comparative perspective, Bhagat's fiction emerges as a cultural archive of urban India's evolving grammar of intimacy. Regional difference, linguistic capital, gender performance, and neoliberal ambition intersect within romantic narratives that are at once accessible and socially resonant. While critics may debate the literary merit of popular fiction, these novels capture the lived contradictions of a generation negotiating identity in a rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape. Through humor, sentiment, and narrative immediacy, Bhagat renders visible the complex interplay of gender and mobility in contemporary metropolitan India.

Conclusion

The comparative reading of 2 States: The Story of My Marriage and Half Girlfriend by Chetan Bhagat reveals that popular romance in post-liberalization India functions as a significant site of socio-cultural negotiation. While differing in emphasis—regional accommodation in *2 States* and linguistic-class aspiration in *Half Girlfriend*—both novels dramatize the complexities of gender and identity within an urban middle-class landscape shaped by neoliberal transformation. Together, they illuminate how intimacy becomes entangled with questions of mobility, legitimacy, and belonging in contemporary metropolitan India.

In *2 States*, romance unfolds as a bridge across regional difference, yet the bridge is constructed through sustained negotiation rather than defiance. The inter-regional marriage between Krish and Ananya signals the possibility of pluralistic belonging, but it does so within frameworks that preserve familial consent and cultural continuity. Gender here is performed within normative expectations, confirming Judith Butler's insight that agency is enacted within regulatory structures rather than outside them (Butler 25). The novel ultimately affirms reconciliation, suggesting that metropolitan modernity can harmonize tradition and aspiration without dismantling either.

By contrast, *Half Girlfriend* foregrounds the stratification of urban society through language and class. Madhav's insecurity about English proficiency exposes the role of linguistic capital in shaping masculine identity, aligning with Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of language as symbolic power (Bourdieu 55). Romantic desire becomes inseparable from social aspiration; to win Riya is to transcend provincial marginality. Yet Riya's own constrained autonomy demonstrates that elite privilege does not guarantee gendered freedom. Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity further clarifies how both male protagonists struggle to meet neoliberal expectations of competence and authority (Connell

77). Masculinity in these novels is not triumphant but anxious, continually negotiating its legitimacy within competitive urban spaces.

Importantly, neither novel envisions radical transformation. Patriarchal structures remain intact, though reconfigured. Women gain visibility in educational and professional domains, yet marriage remains a central axis of validation. Men adapt to new emotional and professional demands, yet their identities remain tethered to performance and achievement. In this sense, Bhagat's fiction captures a transitional ethos: egalitarian rhetoric coexists with entrenched hierarchy, and romantic choice unfolds within socially sanctioned boundaries.

The broader significance of these narratives lies in their accessibility and cultural resonance. Popular fiction, often dismissed as commercially driven, emerges here as a valuable archive of middle-class aspiration in "New India." Through humor, sentiment, and colloquial narration, Bhagat renders visible the everyday negotiations through which urban youth navigate gender, class, language, and region. Romance, in these texts, is not merely sentimental; it is sociological. It reveals how identity is forged at the intersection of neoliberal ambition and inherited tradition.

Ultimately, *2 States* and *Half Girlfriend* demonstrate that contemporary urban relationships are shaped less by rebellion than by recalibration. Love becomes a medium through which individuals test the boundaries of autonomy while reaffirming collective belonging. In tracing these negotiations, Bhagat's fiction offers insight into the evolving grammar of gender and mobility in twenty-first-century India—an India still balancing aspiration with accommodation, and modernity with memory.

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Bhagat, Chetan. *2 States: The Story of My Marriage*. Rupa Publications, 2009.

Bhagat, Chetan. *Half Girlfriend*. Rupa Publications, 2014.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Harvard UP, 1991.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., U of California P, 2005.