

Multicultural Context of Chetan Bhagat's *2 States: The Story of My Marriage*

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Globalization Advancing Monoculturalism

We are living in an era of liberalization, privatization and globalization. These ideologies, which were used primarily in the discourse of economics, have come to dominate the discourse of all the social sciences as well as the general social discourse. All these ideologies are so much intertwined and mingled that it is almost impossible to think of them separately and for the present purpose globalization is used to represent all of these together. Broadly speaking, globalization stands for open competition in market, liberal policies and free trade. It has resulted in patterns of life that were never seen nor experienced during earlier times in human history.

Metropolitan cities, information technology, fast food, migration, consumerism, free trade etc. are some of the manifested forms of life. Fresh air and open expanse gives migraine and Malls and multiplexes give a new lease of life. Things have certainly changed. This phenomenon has immense implications. First, and foremost, the center of the inherently

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hierarchical structure lies with the West and establishes the superiority of Western things like advanced technology, money, cut-throat competition, nuclear-families, success at any rate etc. It sidelines Eastern concepts like joint families, slow-paced life, mutual trust, spirituality etc. By impact, it swallows other cultural patterns, promotes one culture and kills plurality. Everything gets reduced to pay-packages, hotel living, canned MNC food, rapid technological changes and fast changing paradigms. In short, it causes cultural mutations. Though it claims to liberate us from shackles of narrow-mindedness, it seems to be working against multiplicity and advancing Monoculturalism.

Three Definitions of Culture

Raymond Williams cannot study culture without reference to those issues which have become most vital to our understanding of human being and calls it ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (Williams, 1983 87) and proposes three broad definitions. Two of these are broad generalizations and adhered to by majority.

First, culture can be used to refer to ‘a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development’ (90). In this sense it may refer only to intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic factors—great philosophers, great artists and great poets and come out to be an understandable formulation.

Second, it may refer to ‘a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group’ and finally it may be used to refer to ‘the works and practices of intellectuals and especially artistic activity’ (90).

Two Levels to Look at

These definitions of Williams may alternately be viewed as an effort to look at culture at two levels—content and process. At the content level culture encompasses everything from dos and don’ts, beliefs, values, myths, folk tales, rituals, institutions, customs and religion and spans all aspects of life. As such, cultures sustain and bind together divergent elements. At the process level culture holds the throbbing, seething dynamic and stagnant, decaying passive contents to create a life space. Culture as process then tends to hold diverse elements in the life space of man in correspondence, congruence, convergence and coherence to create a rhythm and theme of life which individuals enact. (Garg 13)

Practice of Monoculturalism and Multiculturalism

All through the historical period, Monoculturalism, in different forms, has been practiced in various parts of the world, but its deficiencies as a theoretical paradigm have been noticed only in recent times. The greatest deficiency is its unashamed and unequivocal stress on compelling people to subscribe to a unitary value system and a single cultural pattern.

Even in America, a classic example of monoculturalism ('melting pot') is being increasingly replaced by Multiculturalism. There are several conceptual positions that are held under this umbrella like term. It is a doctrine that several different cultures can coexist peacefully and equitably in a single country; as the practice of acknowledging and respecting various cultures, religions, races, ethnicities, attitudes and opinions within an environment.

A multictural society is one that continually evolves and is strengthened by the contribution of its diverse peoples. This perspective also enables us not only to recognize structural and hierarchal relationships of different constituent cultural groups of a bigger culture but also the need to resolve such differences and helps develop the strategies required to resolve, certainly not to dissolve, the said differences. Globalization, hence, gives an opposite impetus to the society by propagating monoculturalism.

Human societies, by their very nature, tend to have differences, so anything that facilitates obliteration of differences, even with the willful cooperation of the people, and howsoever ideal or ideologically correct it might be projected, may not necessarily be conducive to the growth of humanity. Multiplicity of all kinds—lingual, social, traditional—being at stake— must be protected in all walks of life.

Response to Globalization

People have come to respond to the practice of Globalization in terms of 'neo-imperialism' or 'neo-colonialism'. Nations are being described as developed, developing and under developed nations in place of the first, the second and the third world countries. Globalization, thus, being hegemonic, invites resistance from the affected peoples. Multicultural perspective becomes one of the ways of recognizing the need for resistance as well as a strategy to counter the neo-colonialism/globalization.

There are thousands of ways, covert and overt, in which globalization has affected life and thus literature. The pattern that has emerged finds full expression in literature. Literature itself has become a lucrative industry. Just as multiplexes have replaced cinema houses, similarly so called literature has replaced classics in this era. The MTV form of novel writing, M.K. Naik

describes as the 'Book of the Hour' is alleged to have compelled writers with humane feelings to take a back seat.

Culture Synonymous with Elitist Culture?

It is against this implied or stated position of culture being considered synonymous with high/elite culture and the popular culture being only its absent/present other that the conceptualization of popular culture must be made. This fluid position makes John Storey go to the extent of calling popular culture an '*empty*' conceptual category, one which can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use (Storey 1). Besides, both the terms in 'popular culture' have multiple meanings which adds to the problem of getting at a generally agreed upon definition. Williams suggests four current meanings of the term 'popular': 'well liked by many people'; 'inferior kinds of work'; 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people'; 'culture actually made by the people for themselves'(Williams, 1983 237). Different definitions of 'popular culture', thus, are inevitable depending upon the complex combination of the different meanings of the term 'culture' with the different meanings of 'popular'.

Popular Culture and Popular Literature

Almost all the theoretical positions/stances used in the study of popular culture are used in the study of popular literature. J. O. Halliwell recommended the study of popular literature:

A student who is anxious to obtain that extensive knowledge of the habits, customs, and phraseology of our ancestors, without which the humour of Shakespeare and his contemporaries can only be imperfectly appreciated, will do well to turn his attention to the ancient literature of the cottage, and make himself acquainted with the tales that were familiar 'as household words' to the groundlings of the Globe or the Blackfriars...Let us ask, where would a reader turn for explanations of the jocular allusions in a modern farce or extravaganza. Certainly not to the words of Faraday or Mrs Somerville, but oftener to the ballads of Seven Dials (Qtd. in Neuberger 11-12)

The recommendation has become only more valid today not only to understand past but also to understand the present, becoming increasingly more complex, in a better way. Today, we are inclined to look at it much more sympathetically and we are also backed by a literary theory which is much more inclusive than it was a hundred years ago. Popular literature, in simplest terms, may be defined as what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure. This reader

may come from any class of society, although the primary appeal of popular literature has been to the poor. Generally this literature has comprised non-establishment, non-official publication.

Social Meanings

Like other cultural products/creations, popular literature also reflects social meanings and mores and also intervenes in the life of society by organizing and interpreting experiences which previously (in Literature) might have been only partially reflected. To read popular literature in this way is to read it as a process of meaning creation (Pawling 4). In this kind of reading the links between the text and society are present in that text itself, as well as existing outside the text in the form of norms, world vision etc.

John Cawelti finds popular fiction intrinsically more ideological than its 'elite' counterpart (Qtd. in Pawling 10). For him, 'formulaic' fiction has the function of reproducing cultural consensus, in contrast to 'mimetic' (elite) fiction which confronts us with the problematic and contradictory reality of our world: the mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty and the limitations of the world of our experience.

Thus Cawelti creates and defends popular fiction by assigning it to the realm of escape and distraction though for these characteristic features it has been condemned severely. For example, Margaret Spufford examines popular fiction in 17th-century England and finds it useless, a pass-time and truly a relaxation. She finds chapbooks crude, unsubtle, earthy, uncompassionate but full of movement and violence, sex, vivid imagery and better or worse jokes (Spufford 322).

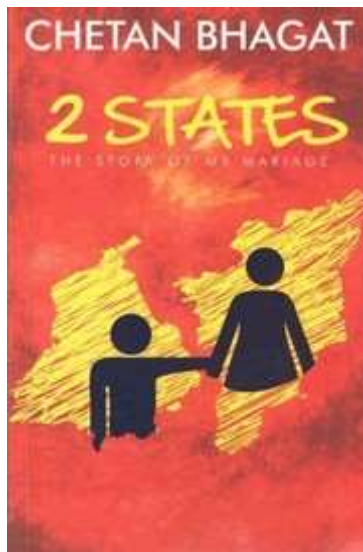
Transmission of Popular Culture

Popular culture by and large is transmitted through the electronic mass media today. One mass medium that really caught on in India was film. Television initially only supplemented film but now it rivals and has overshadowed film. An increasing number of films, film makers, actors and technicians are using television for profits or survival. The most important television genres are: commercials, news shows, documentaries, situation comedies, soap operas, talk shows, interview shows, science shows, game shows, sports programmes, action-adventure shows, science fiction shows, how-to shows, and so forth.

Arthur Asa Berger suggests that all of the important television genres can be reduced to four types of programmes: (1) actualities (2) contests (3) persuasions (4) dramas.

All programmes which are narrative fictions in which there is conflict of either a serious or a comic nature are dramas (Berger 6). Television entertainment is organized around drama, music and dance and slap-stick comedy. It overshadows everything else—‘prime-time’ news hour also has to have content of films, sit-coms and serials (soap operas). Television makes, or attempts to make, meanings that serve the dominant interests in society, and circulates these meanings amongst the wide variety of social groups that constitute its audiences (Fiske 1087). It is within these complex and sometimes contradictory perspectives of culture, popular culture and popular literature that popular individual works need to be studied if the study has to be intellectually/critically remunerative.

2 States: The Story of My Marriage



2 States: The Story of my Marriage draws upon Bhagat’s IIMA campus experiences and has autobiographical tones, if not a true autobiography. This is the story of Krish Malhotra and Ananya Swaminathan who fall in love, have a live in relationship at the campus, and decide to get married only with the blessings of their parents. The rest of the novel is narration of their effort to bring corrections in their parents’ ‘prides and prejudices’. Krish tries to get Ananya’s parents approval by coaching her brother for IIT, helps her father make a power point presentation and facilitates her mother give her maiden performance with S. P.Balasubramaniam. Ananya comes to Delhi, lives with Malhotras for a few days, tries to get approval of his mother, his relatives, helps his maternal uncle come out of a tricky and sticky situation, and wins the favour of one and all for being intelligent and for earning a huge salary. The story is told in first person flashback moves through the multicultural Indian social space and variegated middle

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class values. The families cannot come around and the lovers have to depart. Krish suffers nervous breakdown, comes to Chennai for a the last effort, fails to meet Ananya, has to be taken to a doctor for fever, is suspected to be suffering from nervous breakdown, referred to a psychiatrist, and tells the story of his life to the doctor. This forms the major chunk of the novel. Krish is given professional advice by the psychiatrist, follows it and everything falls in place. Krish and Ananya get married in the traditional Tamil style, Happy Ending. IIMA graduates working for multinational companies become the embodiments of traditional middle class values and ‘unity in diversity’ actually happening.

Core Content of the Courses of Literature

Chetan Bhagat’s novel *2 States The Story of My Marriage (2009)* needs to be given a serious consideration for the simple reason that it is selling like ‘anything’, to use the most neutral and the lightest word from the novel’s majority ‘consumers’. Bhagat’s novels have not yet become part of the core content of the Courses of literature in most universities and also do not dominate the academic discussions but more and more young people are reading them. Our purpose here is not to make a final evaluation of this novel but to view it from the perspective of multiculturalism.

Love Life of the Young

2 States is set in late 1990s. Within its 270 pages it takes us on a guided tour of the IIMA where love life of the young lead pair flourishes, inside the corporate world, lets us peep into the lives of two families representing the two important and dominant cultural constituents of Indian culture and several other thematic and descriptive possibilities. The popularity of the novel is clear from the fact that within a short period, its ninth impression has come out. The blurb of the novel summarizes both the theme and the plot aptly, precisely, concisely, and if we take the liberty of using hyperbolic terms, comprehensively and even completely. The blurb runs as:

Love marriages around the world are simple:

Boy loves girl. Girl loves boy. They get married.

In India, there are a few more steps:

Boy loves Girl. Girl loves Boy.

Girl's family has to love boy. Boy's family has to love girl.

Girl's Family has to love Boy's Family. Boy's family has to love girl's family.

Girl and Boy still love each other. They get married.

Welcome to *2 States*, a story about Krish and Ananya who are from two different states of India, deeply in love and want to get married. Of course, their parents don’t agree. To

convert their love story into a love marriage, the couple have a tough battle in front of them. For it is easy to fight and rebel, but much harder to convince. Will they make it?

The Structure

As expected, they do ‘make it’ and the larger part of the novel is the story of the couple’s journey of ‘making it.’ The blurb establishes the fact that things happen differently in India. The ‘Epilogue’ suggests the possibility of resolving the internal, surface level difference of Indian culture. The comic and satirical manner begins with the ‘tongue-in-cheek’ dedication and numerous aphoristic sentences (of course, reflective of the 21st century world view) maintain this spirit which give the novel a ‘comedy of manners’ or ‘domestic comedy’ form.

The novel is divided into six acts, complemented with the prologue and the epilogue. The novel utilizes the broad ‘cultural encounter’ pattern – not through the comparison of the two locales one of India and another of a foreign country or two corresponding sets of characters either in outlook or in terms of origin and citizenship, but uses very much Indian characters within the geographical boundary of India – the almost stereo-type North-South cultural encounter.

Even a cursory reading suggests that some of these characters display a complex internalization of Western ethos and are a convincing portrayal of our cultural reality today. The novel has the form of a comedy of manners/ Restoration play form. The ‘Prologue’ sets the story rolling. Krish, the central character, sitting on the couch in a psychotherapist’s office in Chennai takes the story from the beginning to the mid of the ‘Final Act: Delhi & Chennai & Delhi & Chennai’ and his reflective sentence in the delivery room of a hospital gives the novel a complementary close.

The Blurb and the Novel

Let us have a closer look at the blurb and the novel. ‘**Act 1: Ahmedabad**’ is the first stage of the blurb: ‘Boy loves girl. Girl loves boy’. Krish and Ananya fall in love, have sex, and come to have a live-in relationship. It is in this opening act that the value system they subscribe to, what they want to do with their lives and how would they do it has been unfolded. They have sex, without ‘after the act guilt feelings’, practically live a married life in the hostel room, approve of the projection of career of each other. Ananya will try for a Marketing job in HLL (Hindustan Lever Limited) and Krish will go for WPM (Whoever Pays More) for a couple of years so that he may save enough money to become a full time writer, the kind of writer who will change the world. Both of them get desired placements in the Campus interviews. They decide to

get married only with the approval and blessings of their parents. Krish expects their parents to be hostile to their plan but Ananya thinks that their parents would come round easily because they are their middle class parents' 'overachieving children'. Their effort to bring both sets of parents to spend some time together for a better understanding at the time of convocation ends in a fiasco.

'Act 2: Delhi', a short act gives a peep into the troubled family life of Krish and the usual tantrums of a middle class mother who is bent upon realizing the highest price of her highly placed son in the matrimonial market. All efforts of Krish to soften her towards Ananya remain a miserable failure. Torn between his mother and Ananya, he is unable to take a decision about his choice of posting in the City Bank. He ultimately leaves it to the will of God/ Bank to give him either Chennai or Delhi which he writes in one column qualified by the phrase, 'equal preference'. God/Bank decides in favour of Chennai.

'Act 3: Chennai' charts the course of Krish's effort and success to win the love of girl's family. He does it by doing the things in the most prudent manner. Since they have been trained in the best of the B Schools they have become habitual of dealing with the problem by breaking it into manageable components, devising appropriate strategies and taking most appropriate decisions at the right moment. Krish coaches Ananya's brother to prepare for IIT, helps her father, AGM in Bank of Baroda prepare an effective Power-point presentation that is highly appreciated by the Board of Management and all regional offices of the bank asked to prepare business proposals along the same lines. He also manages to get Ananya's mother perform as a singer along with S.P. Balasubramaniam and Hariharan at a time when she had failed to get a Guruji for herself. So, at the end of a six month stint in Chennai, from their initial response of hate the Girl's family comes to love the boy.

'Act 4: Delhi' facilitates Ananya's success in Delhi. She saves the 'izzat' of the family in a difficult social situation. The marriage of Minti, daughter of Krish's maternal uncle, Rajji mama, is threatened by the boy's side just at the time of 'jaimala' who are angry because they have been given a Santro car rather than an Accent at 'Sagan' the previous day. Rajji mama's putting his 'pagari' in their feet is of no use and now they have agreed to keep their jewellery with the boy's father until the pay the difference in cash. Well, Ananya gathers all the cousins of Minti and the groom for an impromptu meeting and challenges the groom on ethical grounds and also the grounds of his personal capabilities. The groom awakens up and the matter is resolved in a dignified manner. Boy's family comes to love girl.

‘Act 5: Goa’, a second effort to bring the families together is a greater fiasco, this time the strategy of the ‘executive’ backfires, the girl finds him making suggestion to his mother that she could make Ananya keep under her toe after marriage.

‘Act 6: Delhi & Chennai & Delhi & Chennai’ resolves the novel. In a swift movement the problems between the families are sorted and the marriage takes place. The marriage is solemnized in the traditional Tamil way.

Post-colonial Outlook

A close look at the novel suggests that it is indeed possible to treat the novel as reflective of a post-colonial outlook. The most important factor to decide whether a certain attitude is post-colonial or not, is a certain sense of awareness of countering the colonialism/neo-colonialism (any or all of its numerous possible implications) either on the part of the novelist or his characters. Krish and Ananya certainly show this heightened sense of awareness. Both of them have been trained in one of the best institutions of the world in the western liberal humanistic education and have been finally trained to be suitable leaders of the Trans-National Corporations.

Krish and Ananya work for the TNCs which have their headquarters in west and it is where from the strategies of sales (could be read as exploitation) come and ultimately the profits go. When Krish and Ananya decide to do the things in typical Indian way they do it with complete awareness of what they are, how do they live, and what do they want from life, what excites them, and what their ultimate goal in life is. This clarity on their part defines their awareness which is reflective of the post colonial stance. It is so because it is an effort to resist neo-colonialism on the one hand (an effort from the within, if we feel like interpreting it in this manner) and to affirm and revalidate their cultural ethos on the other. It is, in other words, is a stance of reverting back to one’s own culture.

Ironic Representation of Cultural Angularities

The ironic representation of cultural angularities of both Panjabis and Tamils from the within and without the communities saves the novel from being biased one way or the other. The earlier perception of both the communities to view each other in hierarchal terms changes to adopting an ideologically more correct position of acceptance and appreciation of difference and also an effort to not to make any effort to dissolve the difference can be taken to be reflective of a multicultural point of view.

Krish and Ananya are individuals as well as types and represent a community, howsoever small it may be—that is highly educated and resists the neo-colonialism at various levels. In this era of LPG they represent the state of affairs where some of such people start rediscovering their ethnicity without losing their modern western English speaking executive class status. Post-colonial theory is indeed a very complex theory constituting numerous paradigms within it. One of the paradigms used in this novel is the assertion of indigenous culture. Krish and Ananya get married having won over their respective parents and parents-in-law. The way their families come forward, though they have different cultural background, to respect the cultural differences, is significant, positive and healthy sign of a progressive society.

Celebration of the Marriage Free from Cultural Burden

Celebration of the marriage together free from any accompanying cultural burden becomes symbolic of mutual respect of each other's beliefs, rituals, conventions and lifestyle. The seemingly comic drama of the speeches delivered by Ananya's father and Krish's maternal uncle underlines the transformation of their outlook. The novel ends in the hospital where Ananya, in the presence of Krish, is in the very process of giving birth to their twin sons. The last words of the Epilogue are worth considering:

The nurse cleaned up the two babies and gave them to me.

'Be careful,' she said as I took one in each arm.

You are from two different states, right? So, what will be their state?' the nurse Said and chuckled.

'They'll be from a state called India,' I said.

Predictable Conclusion

Thus the end of the novel is along the predictable lines: all problems solved and happy times of the happy family are ahead. But it can also be viewed as symbolic of another political possibility: integration of the country which is constantly threatened by the secessionist tendencies fomented by selfish, power hungry, myopic political discourse of the people with vested interest. Bhagat in this novel, thus, is able to highlight two important contemporary concerns, viz., the need to adopt a multicultural perspective and to constantly work to strengthen the cultural integration. In the recent years a debate is going on in the middle class in particular and the whole society in general about the impact of a liberalized economy on the typical Indian value system, joint family, place of parents, endogamous caste matrimony, crass consumerism, pre-emptive place of money in life, and so on. In short there is a clash between the middle class values and value system put in place by the TNC culture.

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The younger generation of India subscribes to this new value system without any feelings of remorse.

Bhagat's novel *2 States* read by these younger people tries to attain a balance between these opposite positions. The story endorses the new pattern of life not by propagating a 'to hell with you oldies' but by propagating a first taking that extra step which is required in all bridging positions. Bhagat, thus makes an effort to reconcile the tensions of contemporary life rather than squarely condemning either of them. It is for this that the novelist may be hailed than brushed off for writing in the popular mode and adopting an easy, almost sentimental, text-book type attitude towards the serious cultural issues.

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