



An insight into the portrayal of love and sex in Chetan Bhagat's select novels

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Abstract:

Love and sex are no longer regarded taboo in Indian society, at least by the younger generation. The society has come of age and can talk openly, boldly and with confidence about love and sex. Eroticism has always been there in Indian literature but in refined ways. It is invariably described in implicit terms. It is really an irony that in the land of the Kamasutra, any discussion on love and sex was derided till very recently. But many of the present generation of Indian English writers are going global in their presentation of love and sex in the writings. They have appeal for the international audience in analyzing and presenting human relation under the perspective of sex, love and marriage. The present paper is a humble attempt to present a brief outline of how Chetan Bhagat, one of the most popular writers of the contemporary young generation, has a free and frank portrayal of love and sex in three of his novels--- One Night @ the Call Centre, The 3 Mistakes of My Life, and in 2 States: The Story of My Marriage. Pre-marriage sex is no more a taboo and the young India can talk of it, indulge in it and celebrate it paying proper attention to safe sex. The paper is an attempt to analyse the sexual relation and physical intimacy between characters as portrayed by Bhagat in the said novels.

Keywords: Love, Sex, Marriage, young generation, India

Introduction:

The inception of the 21st century in India has seen the uninhibited celebration of physical intimacy and sex either in the visual and print media or in the various formats of literature, most specifically in the fiction. In short, the century has seen an unprecedented revolution of education and sex among the young generation. Arranged marriage as a social institution has lost a partial luster or sanctity of the bye-gone era. Topics like love and sex are talked of with openness and without much psychological baggage as it used to be about three-four decades ago. Love and sex has been acknowledged as inextricable biological, emotional, psychological, physiological and primal need of life openly within the body of the present generation of fictions. Sex within and outside marriage has been a common theme in most of these fictions and this theme is treated without that social baggage. Rather it is treated with an air of celebration. With the explosion of education, easy access to contraceptives and with an openness in the air, modern urbane youths celebrate love and sex and these aspects are exploited well by the present generation of fiction writers in India. Thus, there has been a paradigm shift and focus of the tenets of the delineation of love and sex in the novels of the present century. The old values

regarding maintaining celibacy or virginity till marriage is no longer regraded sacrosanct. Moreover, love and sex are no longer depicted in fiction with an ambience of art, a gentle luster of imagination devoid of practicalities. Rather, there are realistic, direct and open treatment of sexual encounters that provide exquisite pleasure for both men and women. This pleasure is not however depicted as derived only as a result of physical union, but also as the inter-mingling of two souls.

These portrayals have occupied the centre-stage in the contemporary Indian society among the present generation. In fact, depiction of sexual relations in Chetan Bhagat's novels can be likened to DH Lawrence in English literature. Lawrence's oft-quoted view on sex that he wants "...men and women to be able to think of sex, fully, completely, honestly and cleanly" is echoed by Bhagat in so far his great dexterity in depicting sex relations between men and women. In contemporary Indian fiction, Bhagat is one among the pioneers of these portrayals. He is seen to be very bold in these depictions, deviating from the traditional ones in novels which were very shy of depicting these in vivid, explicit terms. But Bhagat does it very realistically and explores sex relations in lucid terms in all of his novels. His novels truthfully depict many engaging encounters between his hero-heroine enjoying physical intimacy which he regards as a great spiritual passion. Thus, Bhagat is seen to accept sex as an indispensable requisite in man's life and so he seems to celebrate sex in his novels. An attempt has been made below to review how Bhagat depicts love and sex in his select three novels.

Discussion:

The discussion in this paper is limited to three of Bhagat's novels- 2 States: The Story of My Marriage (2S); The 3 Mistakes of My Life (3MML) and One Night@ the Call Center (ON@CC)

True to the observations as mentioned in the introduction above, Bhagat deals with physical intimacies between his hero and the heroine in 3MML:

'I opened the top button of her kurta and slid my fingers inside...But she continued to kiss me as she unbuttoned the rest of her top. She pulled my fingers towards her again...By this time my hand was in places impossible to withdraw from for any guy. So, I went with the flow, feelings, desire, nature or whatever else people called the stuff that evaporated human rationality.' (3MML, 200)

Sex here has been presented before us as a soul-soothing, satisfying and coalescing dominant passion that provides the most exquisite pleasure ever known to man and woman. Bhagat is very clear about the all-pervading needs of sex in human life and therefore, he depicts it without any sense of guilt.

Bhagat is explicit in narrating the subtle art of love making by modern-day man and woman. Following is one example:

"Are you going to go down on me? She said, after she had done the same to me.

I went down, and came back up. We looked into each other's eyes as we became one." (3MML, 201)

And, for Bhagat, or for that matter for many of the new age Indian guys and gals losing virginity is no more a serious issue. Rather many gals seem to celebrate it as will be evident what Vidya says after the sex act with Govind:

“Wow, I am an adult and am no longer a virgin, so cool. Thank God,” she said and giggled. She cuddled next to me. (ibid)

Even kissing, which gives man and woman pleasure equal to or perhaps more than the actual act, has been depicted in very vivid terms and in real-life situations. Between Govind, the tutor-and Vidya, the student, there began to develop a very passionate love relationship amidst a sense of guilt during the first time. However, they continued kissing frequently and this is how the many modern day, educated, urbane young people view kisses in relationships:

“We kissed during almost every class since the last month, so it wasn’t a big deal. Sometimes we kissed every time she solved a problem. At other times, we took a kissing break every fifteen minutes. Once, we didn’t kiss at all as she did a mock test. However, we made up for it in the next class where we spent the first ten minutes kissing and the rest discussing her mistakes. When we felt desire, we kissed. When we felt guilty, we studied.” (3MML, 197)

However, the guilt referred to is not the guilt of mere kisses, it is rather a guilt of the perceived sense of neglecting their duties as tutor-student for which they were supposed to spend quality time in a closed room alone. Apart from this, there is no other sense of guilt for the kisses.

The talk of kisses is there in the 2S too. Krish and Ananya are in love and this is how they talk of kisses very frankly without inhibitions and go on to kiss spontaneously as they talk:

‘...I have to avoid looking at your face as much as possible because when I’m at your face, all I want to do is kiss you.’

‘Those lips talk a lot. Yours, I mean,’ she said.

I froze. Ms Swaminathan didn’t as she came close to me. In a second, her Frooti-laced lips were on mine. We kissed for three seconds. (2S, 25)

This kiss is but a precursor to vigorous sex acts to inevitably follow. They do it- spontaneously, true to the desires and passions of their hearts. Not for once, they do it as and when they cannot reign on their desires. This is how Bhagat has described it:

‘Needless to say, one thing led to another and within two weeks we had sex. You put a boy and a girl in a room for a week and add lots of boring books, and sparks are sure to fly.

‘This is my first time,’ she said after we did it and pointed to her mother’s picture on the wall. ‘And if she finds out, she will flip.’

‘We should cover these pictures when we do it. They freak me out,’ I said, scanning her family members.

She laughed. ‘Was this your first time?’

‘I’d rather not talk about it,’ I said

‘Did you have a girlfriend in IIT?’ She sat up to wear the top. I kept quiet.

‘Did you have sex with a guy?’ Ananya asked, eyebrows up. (2S, 26)

For many of these new age young, educated Indians, as Bhagat has portrayed it truthfully, beer, chicken and sex go together. This is how he has narrated such a scene:

“When she finally entered my bedroom, I grabbed her from behind.

‘Can we eat first? I haven’t had chicken for a month.’

‘I haven’t had sex for four months,’ I said, but she went out and opened the fridge.

‘You have beer too. Superb!’ she praised and pulled out a bottle.

...we kissed and kissed and kissed some more. Our lovemaking was more intense, not only because we did it after a long time, but also because we were doing it in this stuck-up city for the first time.

‘Mr. Citibanker, there is no train to catch. Slower, gentler next time,’ Ananya said as we lay back. I sighed as I entered a semi-trance state.” (2S, 101)

This celebration of the loss of virginity, sex and exquisite pleasure is manifest in many such depictions through another of his best-selling novels ON@CC. We get a glimpse of the love-making depiction between Shyam and Priyanka in the same vein here:

“She unbuttoned the top few buttons of my shirt....We were quiet, apart from our breathing.

She confirmed that the windows were shut and ordered me to remove my shirt. She took off her kurta first, and then slowly unhooked her bra.

‘Be careful with your clothes. We’ll need to find them quickly afterwards,’ she said.

‘...I gasped even as I raised my arms so she could pull my shirt over my head. She moved to keep my shirt aside...(ON@CC, 96)

Bhagat has many things to tell about the need for natural, physical unions. He goes on to say:

‘It’s alright. Clumsy sex is better than choreographed sex. And certainly better than no sex,’ I said as I pulled her close. (ibid)

Many of India’s young can talk candidly of safe sex. In many cases girls take the lead. This is what we hear from Priyanka:

‘By the way, do you have a condom?’ she said.

‘Yes sir. We live in constant hope,’ I said as I pulled out my wallet.

We laughed as she embraced me. She started kissing me on my face. I kissed her shoulders. In a few moments, I forgot I was in the company Qualis.

Twenty minutes later we collapsed in each other's arms on the backseat.' (ON@CC, 96)

Conclusion:

Shashi Tharoor's observation about ON@CC that the novel 'has struck a chord with India's young...' can be extended to cover all the three novels under discussion. Tharoor's observation is also echoed by International Herald Tribune which says '...Bhagat has touched a nerve with young Indian readers and acquired almost cult status' This cult status has been achieved only because of his ability to depict the cross-section of the world of the young Indians. Bhagat has a great dexterity in depicting the sex relations between men and women. He is seen to break sexual taboos of the conventional Indian society. His bold deviations in depicting love and sex give his novels a tint of young India. He does it realistically and explores the need of sex for healthy human being. His novels truthfully depict many engaging encounters between his hero-heroine enjoying physical intimacy which he regards as a great spiritual passion. He is seen to accept sex as an indispensable requisite in man's life and so he seems to celebrate sex in his novels.

In Bhagat we also get a glimpse of India's young women who are bold and ready to break many conventions of the bye-gone days relating to marriage as a social institution with paramount sanctity. Many of these young Indians accept pre-marriage sex without any sense of guilt like the bye-gone era. Not to speak about their male counterparts. Many young women can talk freely of measures of safe sex before they engage in the act of sex.

We also see in these novels that many women now take active role in sexual acts. They are no longer the dormant, passive lot who repress their desires. We see them as active, rather pro-active partners in these acts that provide them exquisite pleasure. Thus, we see them as uninhibited in the display of their desires.

However, there are accusations against Bhagat that he inspires the young to explore sexual life without the approval of the society at large since most of these sexual acts are outside the institution of marriage. These acts, some critics allege, contravene the tradition and accepted norms of the society. He also depicts some sort of 'perverted sex' which have enormous potential to impact celibacy or sanctity of marriage. These critics say that sexual desires are to be fulfilled only through the institution of marriage. They further allege that marriage is no more sacrosanct as it used to be in a world where pleasure is the only goal of man-woman relationship.

Whatever may be the criticisms or accusations, the fact remains that Bhagat is 'the best-selling English-language novelist in Indian history and that he must be credited with popularizing the habit of reading fiction among the young Indians with a renewed vigour. None can deny the fact that Bhagat conveys what is real and natural in the society at large. None can deny his daring acts of these depictions even as he continues to highlight the gradual wane of the sexual taboos and the exploration and manifestation of new India in love, sex and marriage.

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Abbreviations used:

3MML: The 3 Mistakes of My Life; 2S: 2States: The Story of My Marriage; ON@CC: One Night@ the Call Center

