



Popular Fiction As Social Commentary: A Thematic Study Of Chetan Bhagat's *One Arranged Murder*

Dr. C. SREE VIJAYA DURGA

Lecturer in English, Govt. Degree College, Yerraguntla,
YSR Kadapa District, A.P.

Abstract

In contemporary Indian English literature, popular fiction has emerged as a significant medium for offering accessible narratives that reflect complex social realities faced by the urban middle class society. Chetan Bhagat's novel, *One Arranged Murder* (2020) exemplifies this approach by coalition of crime fiction with a critical examination of arranged marriage, gender roles, family pressure, emotional alienation and middle-class distress. This paper explores a thematic study of *One Arranged Murder* as a work of popular fiction that transcends entertainment to engage with influential social issues, particularly those related to women, patriarchy and the tradition of arranged marriage. It also observes how the novel critiques arranged marriage, emotional constraint, surveillance of women, and the contradictions of modernity. This study reveals the anxieties of a transitional society where traditional norms persist despite apparent progress. Even though the novel does not offer radical solutions, it plays a crucial role in initiating social discourse through accessible storytelling. While the novel exposes systemic anxieties and inequalities, it ultimately reflects the limitations of popular fiction in envisioning radical social change. This paper situates the novel, *One Arranged Murder* within the broader discourse of popular fiction as a form of social commentary in contemporary Indian English literature.

Keywords

Popular fiction, social commentary, gender role, arranged marriage, patriarchy, destructive outcomes, psychological distress.

Introduction

Popular fiction has often been dismissed as lacking literary depth; however, its widespread readership makes it a powerful vehicle for social commentary. In the Indian context, popular English fiction has played a crucial role in articulating middle-class aspirations, anxieties, and contradictions in a rapidly globalizing society. The modern Indian English authors focus on societal issues and expose them as social realities to attain the readers' curiosity and have to think over the contextual reliability to the contemporary scenario. Chetan Bhagat is one of the most significant writers of this platform who has gained prominence by addressing familiar social concerns such as education, employment, relationships, exploitation, passion, desire, ambition, corruption and marriage on the superficial line of love story in a simple and accessible language. Chetan Bhagat stands as one of the most influential figures in this genre. His novels, characterized by simple language and contemporary themes, have reached millions of readers

across India. While his work is frequently criticized for stylistic simplicity, it remains socially relevant due to its engagement with issues such as youth culture, relationships, education, and marriage.

But he has turned the story line to a crime thriller incorporated with the human complexities. The novel, *One Arranged Murder* (2020) is a sequel to his earlier work *The Girl in Room 105*, departs from conventional romantic narratives and adopts the structure of a murder mystery. Beneath its suspense-driven plot, the novel offers a critical portrayal of arranged marriage and the emotional and psychological pressures surrounding it; particularly for women. Marriage, in the novel, is not a private decision but a public institution shaped by patriarchy, family honour, and social surveillance. The novel is significant for thematic study as it brought forth the central core themes; marriage, family expectations, and gender roles of the traditional Indian society transforming to the modern contemporary realities.

This paper examines *One Arranged Murder* as a work of popular fiction that functions as social commentary. The study analyzes how the novel reflects, critiques and at times reinforces dominant social structures; transitional cultural moment in Indian society, where traditional values are questioned but not entirely dismantled.

Theoretical Frame work

Feminist literary criticism examines how texts represent women, construct gender roles, and sustain or challenge patriarchal systems (Showalter, 1985). Gender studies expand this inquiry by analyzing how social institutions regulate gendered behaviour and normalize inequality (Butler, 1990). These observations are pertinent to *One Arranged Murder*, where marriage functions as a central mechanism of social control.

Patriarchy refers to social arrangements in which men hold primary power and women are positioned as subordinate through cultural norms, family structures, and institutions such as marriage (Walby, 1990). In South Asian societies, arranged marriage operates as a key patriarchal institution, governing women's choices, sexuality, and emotional expression. Feminist scholars argue that consent within such systems is often shaped by coercion and obligation rather than genuine autonomy (Kandiyoti, 1988).

The concept of emotional labour, introduced by Hochschild (1983), refers to the expectation that women manage emotions to maintain social harmony. In marital contexts, women are often required to suppress doubt, anxiety, and dissatisfaction to fulfil social roles.

Popular fiction differs from elite literary fiction in its accessibility and mass appeal. However, scholars argue that its cultural influence enables it to reflect and shape social consciousness (Mukherjee, 2013). In *One Arranged Murder*, Bhagat uses the crime-thriller format to draw attention to social tensions embedded within seemingly ordinary practices. The murder becomes a narrative device that exposes emotional repression, mistrust, and the consequences of forced conformity. The novel operates simultaneously as entertainment and social critique.

Thematic Discussion

Arranged Marriage as Social Surveillance

The portrayal of arranged marriage as a system of surveillance is one of the most prominent themes in *One Arranged Murder*. Marriage is depicted not as a private union but as a public event monitored by families, relatives, and society. Individuals are expected to conform to predefined roles; particularly women, whose behaviour is closely scrutinized.

Bhagat's portrayal exposes how arranged marriage often prioritizes social compatibility over personal well-being. While the narrative critiques this imbalance, it also normalizes the inevitability of such arrangements, reflecting the ambivalence of popular fiction. The arranged marriage of Perna symbolises the inevitable practice of social norms. The author elevates the social surveillance through the

marriages of Geethu and the illicit affair of Bindu characters. Neelam, wife of Ramesh stands for silent follower of her husband by suppressing her internal ambiguity; when Ramesh asked a help from her to safe guard the family honour, without knowing the concern, she confirms her acceptance as it is her family's honour. Bhagat projected different types of mindsets of women to justify the transformation of social norms from tradition to modern.

From a feminist perspective, this surveillance reflects what Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power; where individuals internalize social norms and regulate themselves. Women in the novel constantly evaluate their actions, emotions, and speech to align with expectations. This internalized monitoring contributes to psychological stress and emotional conflict. Geetu faced the psychological stress in her marital life to maintain the family secrecy as her brother Ramesh assigned her the responsibility of the family honour.

Gendered Expectations and Emotional Conformity

Gender roles in *One Arranged Murder* are clearly demarcated. Men are granted greater flexibility in expressing doubt or dissatisfaction, while women are expected to display emotional stability and adaptability. Bhagat deployed gender expectation and emotional conformity contextually in the novel as; Perna's ex-boyfriend expressed his condition of commitment; reducing the weight and has to look smart as the other girls of his circle. This type of body shaming expressed by Neeraj hurts Perna, being a self respected woman, Perna strongly resolves to stop the relationship and goes with her new start-up. Even on the day of 'Karvath Chauth' she refuses his request for the continuation of their relationship. Feminist scholars argue that such expectations reinforce gender inequality by assigning emotional labour disproportionately to women (Gill, 2007).

Female characters in the novel are required to manage not only their own emotions but also those of their families. Anxiety and fear are treated as personal shortcomings rather than legitimate responses to systemic pressure. This narrative framing subtly shifts responsibility away from patriarchal structures and places it on individual women. This concept is central to understanding the female experiences depicted in Bhagat's novel; Perna wants to take time for her marriage, as she has to concentrate on her firm to become a successful business woman, her choice dream. But she has to follow the family and societal obligations and has to convince the institutions of the family. It is the phase for the women to balance both the family and the career; in the contemporary urban modern society, the self sustenance and identity of woman are become respectable and build confidence among them.

Women, Consent, and Negotiated Agency

Consent is a recurring but complex theme in the novel. Although arranged marriage is presented as consensual, women's choices are shaped by familial obligation, fear of stigma, and emotional manipulation. Feminist theorists emphasize that consent under such conditions is often compromised (Nussbaum, 1999).

Female characters in *One Arranged Murder* exhibit what Kandiyoti (1988) terms "bargaining with patriarchy", they negotiate within existing structures rather than resist them outright. Their agency is limited to adjustment and compromise, reflecting the constrained choices available to women in patriarchal societies.

Malhotras, a Punjabi family, hailed from Lahore to Amritsar on their own business and settled later in Delhi. Ramesh being an elder son of the family has to continue the family patriarchal responsibilities and has to practice the social institutions. He lavishly celebrated the 'roka', engagement of Perna and Saurabh and spends more than his economic capability for his social status. Bhagat portrays this negotiated agency sympathetically but does not envision alternatives beyond compromise, reinforcing the persistence of traditional norms.

Psychological Distress

Another significant theme in the novel is psychological distress, which manifests through obsession, fear, guilt, and emotional isolation. As Chetan Bhagat portrayed the theme of psychological distress through his characters in his previous novels, the same theme he has projected in the novel, *One Arranged Murder* in an extreme range of destructive attitude; emotional instability and mental pressure can lead to destructive outcomes.

A major cause of psychological distress in the novel is emotional obsession. Certain characters become fixated on relationships and expectations, believing that love should provide security and control, when these expectations collapse, the emotional shock results in mental imbalance. This idea is reflected when a character's actions reveal the notion of literary phrase; 'love was no longer affection, but possession.' The inability to accept rejection or betrayal intensifies psychological pain and drives irrational behaviour. It is clearly revealed in the conversation between Bindu and Anjali; when, Bindu says "You killed my Prerna?" (283), immediately Anjali with psychological pain exclaimed, 'Yes, Ma, "your Prerna." The daughter you kept. How did you decide I was the one to be given away? Did you toss a coin?'(283)

Bhagat portrays toxic relationships that are emotionally suffocating rather than supportive. When Prerna warns Anjali about her relationship with Aditya, Anjali responded and requested not to reveal to Ramesh and to the other family members. This constant fear of anxiety makes Anjali to take the extreme decision of planning the murder. Constant suspicion, control, and manipulation create a state of anxiety and fear. When a character reflects that "trust had turned into constant doubt," it reveals how emotional instability erodes mental peace. In another instance, Prerna suggested to choose right career like her, Anjali hesitated to discuss the topic of her career; feels jealous against Prerna, and compared with her position as both are twins but grownup completely in different ambience. Such toxic dynamics push individuals toward extreme decisions, showing that emotional abuse can deeply damage psychological well-being.

The novel also strongly emphasizes fear and guilt as elements of psychological distress. After the murder, characters are haunted by paranoia and inner conflict. Even when they appear calm externally, their minds are restless. All the family members internally have anxiety and curiosity to know about the murder but they feel guilt and fear for family honour and societal respect. In order to hide this, everyone externally showcases it as an accidental death.

Loneliness and emotional isolation further deepen the theme. Despite being surrounded by friends, colleagues, and digital communication, characters feel internally alone. This emotional isolation allows negative thoughts to grow unchecked, ultimately leading to tragic consequences. Anjali, being a journalist in USA, she always be in the public and think over the public issues, but still her mind feels loneliness; as she has not connected with a good parental affection. Aaditya works in a bar as a musician, he also feels lonely; as he is not prioritize the family respect and chooses such a disreputable job, addiction to drugs etc.

One Arranged Murder presents psychological distress as a powerful and dangerous force that operates beneath the surface of everyday life. Through obsession, toxic relationships, fear, guilt, and isolation, Chetan Bhagat demonstrates how ignored emotional trauma can distort the human mind and lead to irreversible actions.

Family, Honor, and Social Reputation

The narrative sketch of Chetan Bhagat, *One Arranged Murder* is framed on the internal plot of marriage, portrayal of women characters covered with a genre of suspense thriller and mystery of murder. Family honour and social reputation function as remarkable forces in the novel. Individual desires are subordinated to collective expectations, particularly for women. Sakthivel, Suruthi and Nisha, P opines that "The family's own set of restrictions for their own sake is the reason Anjali is envious of Prerna."

Bhagat depicted the women characters in a powerful manner where they have, their own choice of freedom and they play a key role in the decision making and wants to lead independent life. The women protagonist of the novel is Prerna Malhotra; the only daughter of Ramesh Malhotra and Neelam Malhotra, a well being parents and has a significant socio-economic status in the society. Prerna is a well educated, ambitious career minded women. She established her own internet start-up 'Eato'; curated food delivery. She handles the organisation in a profitable way and wants to lead an economically independent life. She is a nice and affectionate modern woman. From the social media matrimony, she came in contact with Saurabh Maheswari, who works for his firm 'Cyber Safe' and passionate as detective. As Prerna, inherited from a traditional patriarchal dominant family, she makes this contact as arranged marriage, where all the family relationships involved and related to socio-cultural norms.

Bhagat presents the lead character in a simpler way, but the depth of feministic perspective is elevated in a versatile approach. Prerna, a hard working and dedicated woman in her work space, she always prioritise the traditional sentiments; she wants to keep fasting on the day of 'Karva Chauth'; traditionally a married women perform this occasion for their husbands. But she wants to do it for her fiancée Saurabh.

In *One Arranged Murder*, female characters are repeatedly reminded of parental sacrifice and societal judgment. These reminders operate as tools of emotional coercion, limiting women's ability to assert them. When Ramesh proposes an obligation to Neelam and Geetu, to consider Bindu's illicit twins as their own daughters, to protect the family honour and reputation they silently accepted and maintained the secrecy even at Nirmala Malhotra, the only elderly person of the generation in the family. Bhagat highlights how love and obligation become mechanisms of control; while Ramesh compromising in Geetu's marriage with Jogi, a cab driver, he has given a financial support and in further sequential he laid a condition to obey his terms.

Crime Fiction as Social Metaphor

In the novel, *One Arranged Murder*, Bhagat portrayed the murder mystery as the centre of the novel, which serves as more than a plot device; it functions as a metaphor for suppressed emotions and unspoken tensions. All the characters have their inner emotions, which they cannot express freely and suppress themselves within the social constraints of the family. Scholars argue that crime fiction often reflects societal anxieties and moral conflicts (Knight, 2004). In his interview for *The Telegraph* Bhagat expresses that; "I am no Agatha Christie or Alfred Hitchcock writing pure crime. I needed to show my characters' emotions and for that, they needed to be personally involved in the case." In the novel, the crime exposes the emotional cost of forced conformity and unaddressed dissatisfaction. The other side of the coin of each character, they are facing certain unknown struggles, even they are in the same family and have different perception and opinions. That dissatisfaction become a constraint in making choices and is unable to lead the comprehensive life and career of their own choice. The novel suggests that emotional repression and social pressure can have destructive consequences, lending weight to its social commentary.

Narrative Perspective and Its Limitations

Bhagat narrates his novels with the characteristics of popular novel; which is reader friendly in simple prose and contemporary settings capture everyday social realities, making them valuable texts for sociological and gender-based analysis. In his interview for *The Telegraph* Bhagat expresses as; "the main thing is to come up with a great story that defines the characters, the nuances and the central conflict. What is it all about? The language is less of a priority for me then there is a lot of research from real-life cases, for thrillers." The novel covers socio-traditional aspects in a beautifully narrated family story connecting with the sarcasm to make entertainment and suspense and investigation to create a thrilling curiosity to reveal the consequences of the plot.

The novel's male-centric narration influences its social critique. Bhagat portrays the narration with the two male lead characters Keshav and Sourabh; detectives of the agency Z-detective. Bhagat in his interview states that; "I had two characters; I could make one of them personally invested in the case and one of them in detective mode." The plot moves on with Keshav's narration, as he is the primary story

teller and he gradually narrates the story with the voices of the characters and their inner feelings in a conversational mode. This is one of the best techniques as Bhagat has been using from his first novel, which makes him significant. Female experiences are often mediated through male observation, limiting direct access to women's interiority. Although Bhagat demonstrates empathy toward women's struggles, the narrative perspective restricts their agency and complexity. This limitation reflects broader trends in popular fiction, where social critique is filtered through dominant viewpoints.

Conclusion

Chetan Bhagat's *One Arranged Murder* exemplifies how popular fiction can function as social commentary by exposing the contradictions of contemporary issues such as arranged marriage, patriarchal surveillance, emotional violence, gender expectations and family pressure. Through a crime-thriller framework, the novel explores the psychological and social costs of rigid traditions.

This paper has shown that, while Bhagat critiques patriarchal norms, his narrative remains constrained by cultural and commercial considerations. The novel occupies a transitional space acknowledging women's struggles without fully challenging the structures that sustain them. While the narrative does not offer radical solutions, its significance lies in initiating dialogue and questioning normalized practices. As popular fiction continues to shape cultural consciousness, *One Arranged Murder* stands as a testament to the genre's capacity to engage with serious social issues.

Bibliography

- [1]. Bhagat, Chetan. *One Arranged Murder*, Westland Publication, Seattle, 2020.
- [2]. Bhagat, Chetan. *One Arranged Murder: Chetan Bhagat opens up about his 9th book*. Interview with *The Telegraph*, 25th Aug 2020, 10:16 PM.
- [3]. Showalter, E. *The New Feminist Criticism*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- [4]. Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- [5]. Walby, S. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- [6]. Kandiyoti, D. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender & Society*, 2(3), pp 274–290, 1988.
- [7]. Hochschild, A. R. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- [8]. Mukherjee, M. *The Twice Born Fiction*. New Delhi: Heinemann, 2013.
- [9]. Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- [10]. Gill, R. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
- [11]. Nussbaum, M. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- [12]. Sakthivel, Suruthi. and Nisha. P. *Analysing The Portrayal of Character Under Deconstruction Theory In One Arranged Murder By Chetan Bhagat*, IJPREMS, Vol.V, Issue 04, April 2025.
- [13]. Knight, S. *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000*. London: Palgrave, 2004.