Book Review of Chetan Bhagat’s novel *Half Girl Friend*

Reviewer:
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Introduction:

Chetan Bhagat (b.1974) is one of the most realistic popular fiction writers in the contemporary postmodern era of Indian English literature. He has written six fictions and one non-fiction, all of them are best-selling. They are like *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night@ the Call Center* (2005), *Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *Two States: the Story of my Marriage* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), and a non-fiction *What Young India Wants* (2012).

His sixth fiction *Half Girlfriend* was published in 2014 by Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi. He is the bestselling writer in recent times, and his books are sold in millions. He writes his fictions keeping in mind the contemporary taste and demand of the day. His wide readership includes both the young and aged young students, professionals and housewives, small business men and many others. *The Guardian* calls him the king of India’s paperback writings. His books are sold in millions because of some of his exclusivities of writing such as writing his fictions in very simple and understandable English to the average readers. He uses words, phrases and idioms, slangs and jargons, simple and straightforward sentences which are in common use so he is very easy to read and comprehend. Moreover, he realistically represents all his characters and incidents, settings and story sequences based on the contemporary Indian society, so the readers find it easy and convenient to read and remember the content of the fiction. And also the readers are mentally and emotionally connected to the realistic or historical references in the fictions, so the readers’ interest is sustained throughout the novel.

Detailed Review of the Novel *Half Girlfriend*

The present review of the novel *Half Girlfriend* includes all the related information regarding the novel in four different categories as follow:

1. Preliminary information about the Book *Half Girlfriend*.
2. Supplementary information about the novel *Half Girlfriend*. 

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Select Issues of Contemporary Indian Society in the Fictional Works of Chetan Bhagat
3. Summary of the Storyline of the novel *Half Girlfriend*

4. Reviewer’s critical analysis and observations

**Preliminary Information about the Book *Half Girlfriend***

- **Book title**: *Half Girlfriend*
- **Name of the writer**: Chetan Bhagat
- **Publisher**: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd
- **Publication year**: 2014
- **Place of publication**: New Delhi
- **Edition**: First
- **Cover**: Paperback
- **Total pages and paper quality**: Total=260 pages, pulp or yellow pages
- **Genre**: Fiction (Realistic Popular Fiction)
- **Language**: English
- **ISBN No**: 978-81-291-3572-8
- **Copy right**: Chetan Bhagat 2014
- **Price**: Rs.176/-

**Complementary Information about the Fiction *Half Girlfriend***

The content of the present fiction has been divided into three different acts; Act-i is titled as *Delhi*, Act-ii as *Bihar* and Act-iii is titled as *New York*. The title of the fiction is noticeably strange enough to raise curiosity, in the mind of a reader, especially to the young readership. A girlfriend is all right but a half girlfriend may be strange to many. The cover page of the present fiction is paperback, easy to fold or carry in a travel bag. The upper front side of the cover-page has been decorated with apt and suggestive picture of a young boy and a young girl. It depicts the scene of separation. The girl has been shown as walking forward whereas the boy in standing position still in hope of her coming back, or turning her face at least once. The background of the cover-page is adorned with a sketch of multistoried buildings in the European style, that itself suggests the reference of the foreign location in the novel. Moreover, the alphabets of Hindi script have been printed the lower front side of the cover-page that suggest some reference to rural or interior location and the indication of some village school in the storyline of the novel. A very brief summary of the story of the novel has been given on the upper part of back cover-page of the novel as:
Once upon a time, there was a Bihari boy called Madhav. He fell in love with a girl called Riya. Madhav didn’t speak English well. Riya did. Madhav wanted a relationship. Riya didn’t. Riya just wanted friendship. Madhav didn’t. Riya suggested a compromise.

She agreed to be his half Girlfriend.

Below the above quoted summary, words of appreciation for the writer, by the renowned media house *Indian Today* have been printed which indicate that Bhagat is a symbol of new India and he is a torch-bearer for an unafraid generation. At the right corner of the upper back-cover page a small picture of Basketball has been given as Basketball is a game which is played by both the central characters in the story. The lower back side of the cover-page is full of contact details including his official email address and his social-sites links like Facebook and Twitter. These references are enough to indicate the writer’s close associations with his wide community of readers.

A brief biographical note with words of appreciations for the writer by some leading media and corporate houses are given on the front sides of the very first page of the present book. The back side of the same page is full of the same and some different lines of appreciation. On the next page all the publication details are given, including copy right information. The book dedicated to his mother, to rural Indian, to the non-English type. The as usual acknowledgment notes on the next page, this time comes with his direct addressing to his readers. He appeals to his readers as: ‘...don’t give me your admirations. Give me your love. Admiration passes, love endures. Also, admiration comes with expectations. Love accepts some flows’.

The novel has three different settings or major locations. The first part of the present novel is located in New Delhi, the second part is located in the village Dumraon in District Buxar (Bihar), and the last part of the novel is located in New York (USA). The writer has depicted a wide variety of characters in the novel. The characters are real and life like. They represent one or the other contemporary Indian social and culture typicality. The prominent characters and their role in the novel Half Girlfriend is as follow:

**Madhav:** The chief male protagonist, the narrator of the story, a boy from a small town like village of Bihar, a prince of the former state of Dumraon, a tall and handsome boy of twenties, knows little English, loves Riya, and wants to reform the village school.
Riya: The chief female protagonist, a modern girl of Delhi, a girl of a rich Marwari family, a good friend of Madhav, wants to be a singer someday, marries early, settles in London, and takes divorce later on, helps Madhav to speak English.

Rohan: Riya’s husband, very rich NRI, very proud, rigid to social and cultural traditions.

Rani Sahiba: Mother of Madhav, a former queen of the state of Dumraon, runs a school, rigid but good at heart.

MLA Oza: The MLA of the local constituency, very cunning, selfish and corrupt, helps organizing Bill Gates visit to the village school, of course, for his self-interest.

Delegates of Gates Foundation: Samantha, Chris and Rachel are the members of the Gates Foundation, organize various visits of Bill Gates for charity, Samantha helps Madhav to reach New York.

Sailesh: An old friend of Madhav, gives accommodation to Madhav and gives all possible help to Madhav in his search of Riya in a foreign land.

Jyoti: Sailesh’s wife, a good natured woman.

Chetan Bhagat Himself: The writer himself appears in the novel. More active role in the fiction, reads all the notes of Riya, motivates Madhav to find Riya, and visits the school as a chief guest after three and a half year of Riya and Madhav’s marriage.

Summary of the Storyline of the novel Half Girlfriend

The story has been divided into three major parts like the prologue, the main story and the epilogue which is a usual tendency of the writer. In the prologue it is shown that Madhav, a Bihari young boy of twenties and the chief protagonist of the fiction, has come to meet the writer Chetan Bhagat in a room at Chanakya Hotel, Patna in Bihar at almost midnight. He is afraid of speaking English as his English is poor and has impression of Bihari accent. He gives the writer a bunch of hand written notebooks. Initially the writer denies taking such stuff as he has no time to read such material as he is very tired and he has an early morning flight to catch. Madhav clarifies that material is a set of personal notes written by his half girlfriend Riya. The writer is surprised by the terms ‘half girlfriend’ and he gets interested in knowing about the same. He also inquired to know the reason why Madhav wants to give the material to him. Madhav replied that he and Riya used to read the writers’ fiction for improving his English. When the writer comes to know from Madhav that Riya is dead, he finds it a sensitive matter and denies taking or reading the manual. Madhav forcefully gives
him and leaves his room by writing his phone number in case the writer needs any help if he happens to visit Madhav’s town Dumraon. After Madhav leaves, the writer casually reads same few pages of the manual and immediately the writer gets his flight ticket cancelled, and sends an SMS to Madhav to come to see him urgently. He comes and now, he starts narrating his further story. Here is the end of the prologue.

The second part of the novel which contains the main story has been divided into three different acts; act-I Delhi, act-ii Bihar and act-iii New York. In the first act, it is shown that Madhav is facing an admission interview at the St. Stephen’s College, New Delhi in sports quota as he is a state level basketball player. He has studied in the village school in his mother tongue. He is poor in English, so he has a lot of hesitation in answering to the interviewing panel. With the help of one of the panelist Prof Pereira and the candidate Piyush, he manages to face the interview and he gets the admission. In following days, he meets Riya on the sports ground and they gradually become friends. Riya is the daughter of a wealthy Marwari family in Delhi. She has been an English medium student throughout and she is very fluent in English. She is also a good basketball player. They frequently meet on the sports ground and the canteen and gradually their friendship becomes closer. Riya takes Madhav as a very good friend but Madhav doesn’t. He is more serious in his relationship with Riya. He wants to go further in this relationship, so he tries to be more physical with Riya. She permits occasional kissing and hugging but she cleverly denies any further advance in their friendship. Many attempts of Madhav being physical are avoided dexterously by Riya, but still Madhav keeps on trying. His hostel-mates keep on inspiring him for physical relationship with Riya. Finally, Riya plainly tells him that he may take her as half girlfriend so that he may not think of such physical intimacy. Once, Madhav visits Riya’s home on her birthday party. There looking at the grandeur and richness of Riya’s family, he becomes astonished but still he wants to be physical with Riya. Riya introduces Rohan in the party to Madhav who is her childhood friend and he is also the only son of her father’s friend. Rohan’s father is dead and now he is running his father’s business in London. Looking at the appearance and richness of Rohan, Madhav becomes envious and insecure for Riya. Later on, within a year, Riya leaves her studies and gets married to Rohan at early age of nineteen and she settles in London with her husband. Madhav completes his graduation at the same college, he faces a campus interview but finally decides not to do any job and he settles
down in his native Dumraon, and helps his mother run a school. Here is the end of the first act of the fiction.

In the second act, it is shown that Madhav is helping his mother Rani Sahiba in running the Royal school still in the hangover of the memory of his half girlfriend Riya. His family is a royal family of the former state of Dumraon in Bihar, but presently the family is facing a lot of hardships in life. There is no source of steady income in the family. The ancestral haveli they live in, needs immediate repairing. The plaster of the walls has come off. The color of the walls has already faded off. The school which his mother runs, does not have some of the basic facilities like separate toilet for the girl students. The ceiling of the old school-building is leaking. No whitewashing for many years. No sufficient staff for teaching and no government help of any kind to run the autonomous village school in which more than a hundred children study.

Madhav wants this school to get government funding for renovation. So he starts taking rounds of concerned government agencies for any possible help. Once, he meets MLA Oza, the sitting MLA of local constituency for financial help from his local fund, but he refuses to help. When Rani Sahiba comes to know about this visit, she becomes very angry with Madhav for visiting such an arrogant and corrupt person like MLA Oza, for any help. MLA Oza once invite Rani Sahiba and Madhav to his house, for a discussion of world renowned entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Gates’ visit to various places of Bihar for charity purposes. MLA Oza wishes to organize Gates’ visit to Dumraon and the Royal school so that he may come to the notice of his party high command through the media and can make his way clear to get a ticket to contest in the coming parliamentary elections. Rani Sahiba does not agree to the proposal as she even does not know who Bill Gates is but she is convinced by Madhav. Oza gives all possible help in the rural ministry office to schedule Gates’ visit to Dumraon. The only issue was to deliver a speech in English when the Gates delegation visits the place. Madhav takes the responsibility of giving the speech on himself. For that, he wants to sharpen his English language skill. So he stays in Patna and joins English language classes along with being in touch with Samantha who is a female representative of the Gates Foundation. On a casual occasion, at a hotel reception counter he happens to look at a girl looking like his past half girlfriend Riya. In the evening, it is confirmed that she is Riya and she is on her professional stay in Patna as she works with Nestle and sells their brand of
yogurt. When she comes to know that Madhav is learning English for a specific noble purpose, she also starts helping him to learn the language. In the meantime, they revive their old friendship. Riya helps Madhav even to prepare and rehearse his speech. Riya also visits Dumraon and the ancestral haveli of Madhav. She meets Rani Sahiba. She also visits the school and passes some time with the school children. Finally, the Gates delegation comes, and Madhav beautifully organizes the entire occasion. He gives the speech. Riya also attends the function. The program ends with a loud applause and appreciation, and the Gates foundation declares $50,000 as donation, subject to inspection, a grant of $10,000 a year for the following five years.

The function ends, people now disperse with a hope that the donation will do well to the school. Madhav is searching for Riya, but she is not found anywhere. He asks his mother and some other people around but he does not find her. At the end, a school girl named Sabnam gives him a letter written by Riya for him. He reads the latter, reaching home and shocked to know that she has left the place for ever. She, in the letter mentioned that she has lung cancer and she is leaving the job, the city Patna and him forever. Madhav goes there to her apartment but he finds no clue as to where she has gone. At the end, he comes back to his village still confused.

It has been two years, and three and a half months since Riya left. Here is the end of the flashback of the story, Madhav is narrating to the author Chetan Bhagat in the Chanakya Hotel in Patna.

The writer asks Madhav how he could collect the notes written by Riya which he gave him to read. He tells him how Hemant, the agent of Riya’s apartment, called him to inform about the notes, the new landlord of the apartment found from the wooden cupboard and he collected them from him. The writer has already read the notes after Madhav left the hotel room putting his phone number on a piece of paper. Now, the writer wants Madhav to read the notes. Reading the notes, Madhav comes to know how Riya started writing these notes like a personal diary. He also comes to know about her friendship with him, and her concerns for him. He comes to know about how Riya’s parents put pressure on her to get married to Rohan and how she had difficulties in adjusting with in-laws’ rigid family in London. She also mentioned in the notes how Rohan tortured her as he had extra-marital affairs and how she immediately left the house and settled temporarily in Patna. Madhav
through the notes comes to know about how his mother Rani Sahiba accused her to have cast a trap on his son and how she convinced Riya to keep distance from him as she is a divorcee. Madhav through the last note of Riya comes to know how deeply she loves him and why she left Patna forever.

The writer stops Madhav from crying while reading and tells the reason why he called him immediately there to his hotel room, to inform him that she is alive and she has no cancer of any kind. This may be an excuse of her so that Madhav should not try to find her as she did not want to be a burden on him. Herewith, the writer leaves for his place, Madhav goes with him up to the airport to see him off. There he promises the writer that he would not quit his search for Riya as it is not in his genes. Here is the end of the second act of the story.

The third and the last act is located in New York. Madhav presumptions if Riya is alive and has cut off from the world around her, she must try to fulfill her dream to be a singer in a bar in New York. He, with all the possible clues, becomes sure that she must be in the city of New York. Finally, he decides to go to New York in search of her. With the help of Samantha, he manages to take a job in Gates Foundation so that getting visa may not be an issue.

Reaching New York, he stays in his friend Sailesh’s house. He and his wife Jyoti provides him all necessary accommodation and conveyance for searching out Riya in various bar-houses in New York. Within three months, along with his job-responsibilities, he manages to visit hundreds of bar-houses with live music performances but still no success. He is moving like a mad person in search of his girlfriend but he does not get even a single sign of her being in New York. At the very close of the novel, it is depicted that Sailesh and Jyoti have arranged a farewell party for Madhav as his visa tenure is getting over. He, during the party, happens to look at the brochures of ‘Blue Man Comedy Show’, which a lady named Daisy had given him outside the Madison Square Garden. He finally found the name of Riya in one of the hundreds of performers in the event. In an extremely cold night of minus twenty two degree temperature, he walked out in the final hope for searching Riya. At the rail station, he found that, there is no train service possible due to heavy snowfall, for reaching the place called ‘Café Wha’ where he hoped to find Riya. As there was no other alternative left, he decided to go on foot in that heavily snowy night. As time was passed by and the show to be ended in by midnight, he ran in the chilled snowy-night to reach the venue of the show in time. Finally, with all the breathless rushing breathlessly, he reached the place by 12:01 pm. There
in the performance hall, he found Riya singing a song with her eyes closed. Finally, they looked at each other and hugged and kissed. They went to Riya’s apartment and they changed their clothes, got fresh and they grew physical. Here is the end of the third act of the fiction.

In the epilogue, it is shown that it has been three and a half years since Madhav and Riya met and they got married. They have a two year old son named Shyam. They have renovated and developed the village school with world class facilities. Rani Sahiba is now living a retired life with her grandson. All the instruments and sports equipment have been purchased from the US. Madhav and Riya stay three months in the USA every year. There, Riya performs in various cafes and Madhav works with various assignments of the Gates Foundation. Madhav has invited the writer Chetan Bhagat as the chief guest of the annual function. Now he is happy to see the couple running the school of their dream and living a happy life. In the last few lines it is shown that Shyam is playing with a Basketball and he is trying to throw the ball in the Basket but he is failing constantly. The novel ends with Madhav’s double entendre (pun) sentence “Don’t quit. It will happen one day”

**Reviewer’s Observations**

The ‘Postmodern Realistic Popular Fiction’ can be identified as the appropriate genre for the novel *Half Girlfriend*. The postmodern sensibilities like true love and failure in love, sex and marriage related issues, family related issues, and others like issue of second language, corruption, issues related to social security, middle class hardships, are realistically represented in the present fiction. The book has been published in paperback form so that it may provide the reader the convenience of portability. The book has been published on pulp pages so that the price can be brought to the lowest. The price of the present book is more than his earlier books, but it is affordable. The size of the book is a moderate one. It contains 260 pages in all. The story of the novel seems very simple which is likely to be written for the ordinary audience. The story is told in a first person singular by the chief protagonist of the fiction. No heaviness of lexicography, no complex structures of the sentences or confusing story incidents, the writer has used very simple and strait forward language to describe a simple love story. The simple love story of the present fiction seems like a typical Bollywood movie. The story sequence constantly keeps the readers in eagerness for knowing what is going to happen next. Most of the characters drawn in the
fiction are flat characters, and not rounded. They do not practice any conspiracy or malpractice of any kind to the other characters. All the major characters like Madhav, Riya, Rani Sahiba, Rohan, Sailesh, His wife Jyoti and Samantha are representatives of the actual Indian mentality. As usual, his hero Madhav lives in low self-confidence. He is lost in the realities of life. He is searching for his own identity. His heroine Riya is modern type as usual. She is very beautiful, wears shorts, and thinks like a modern girl. She has certain aspirations in life. Like other heroines of Bhagat’s fictions, she does not cross her limits and try to keep a safe distance from her boyfriend. The writer has drawn a very realistic portrait of contemporary Indian society in the novel. The growing usage of English in India and the village boy Madhav’s struggle for learning English, Riya’s modernity, her parents’ rigidity, Rani Sahiba’s traditional mentality, MLA Oza’s corrupt practices and inaction for public welfare, the condition of village school and many other incidents realistically represent the contemporary Indian society. In this way, it becomes a social document. However, it must not be forgotten that the writer’s prime focus in writing this book, seems to create a beautiful love story rather than recreating the society as it is today. It seems that the novel is more a promo-version of future happy ending Bollywood movie rather than a typical piece of literature.

The reviewer finds many common characteristics of writing a fiction practiced by the author in all other fictions. He has used the names of real locations and some real historical incidents like the world’s richest entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Gates’ visit to Bihar to give a realistic touch to the story sequence of the present fiction. As mentioned earlier, the language is simple, and the narrations and dialogues have humorous and hilarious overtones.

As usual, the title of the present novel has the number ‘half’ like five in *Five Point Someone*, One in *One Night@ the Call Center*, Three in *Three Mistakes of My Life*, two in *Two States* and Twenty in *Revolution 2020*.

The writer has followed his common tendency of giving name to his chief protagonist, as one of the various names of lord Krishna like Hari, Shyam, Govind, Krish, Gopal and Madhav respectively in his fictions.
As all of his fictions are adapted for Bollywood movies, at the time of publication of the present book, the well-known director Mohit Suri has found it as good stuff for making a Bollywood movie and it is going to be his debut as a producer. Wherever Bhagat goes controversies follow him. The statement is proved true once more. The writer, in a few days of the publication of the present book, was trapped in the controversy of plagiarism issue of stealing the plot of a book *Englishia Boli* by a Bihari scholar Dr. Birbal Jha. Also the royal family of the village Dumraon sent to him a legal notice for spoiling their image by depicting them in a negative manner. It seems Bhagat’s tendency to commit certain silly timing errors in the story. For example, in *Three Mistakes of My Life*, the chief female protagonist Vidya, from a lower class family background, is shown using mobile phone very normally in the year 2002. The fact is that the use of mobile phones was not that level common for lower class people during the time when incoming, outgoing and messaging rates were very high. So the question is how come a seventeen year old girl from a lower class family background has a personal mobile instrument with her and how come she uses it freely as she uses a pen or a pencil. Such a time error is observed in the present novel also. On page number 202, in the manual script written by Riya on 11 June 2008, it is depicted that Kristin, the girlfriend of Rohan sends a WhatsApp message to Rohan. So, how it is possible as the official website of WhatsApp shows that it was initially launched in June 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum.

**Conclusion:**

All in all, the novel is ‘one time read and keep aside’ type of book. This cannot certainly be an everlasting piece of literature as such popular literature type of books is not written for eternal value or universal appeal. Of course, it has high commercial value as the writer could make it a bestselling novel by promoting it in the most popular and super-duper hit comedy show on Colors TV named ‘Comedy Nights With Kapil’ which is supposed to be the gateway to Bollywood movies as almost all movies released by promoting once in this show. The writer has tried to make it a good love story, but he has not been able to bring anything extraordinary in it as it looks an ordinary love story wherein a hero loves a heroine, the heroine denies his love and departs, the hero cannot forget her, they happen to meet somewhere, they depart, they meet again, and at the end, they marry and a happy ending. Bhagat has colored this very simple looking love story with his extraordinary style of
narration. The writer has used some of his exclusive technicalities like flashbacks, suspense and surprises in writing this fiction. The reviewer would like to recommend the initial readers of English books to read the present book at least once, of course, by leaving their mind at home and those who want pure entertainment should wait till the book is converted into a romantic Bollywood movie.