RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)
www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Impact Factor: *8.373 (SJIF)* | **Vol. 10, Issue 4 (October, November & Dec;2025)**

Benevolent Patriarchy and the Illusion of Female Freedom: A Gendered Reading of Chetan Bhagat's *Two States*

M. Pochayya[1] and **Prof. T. Ashok**[2]
[1] Assistant Professor Dept. of English, AKNUMSN Campus, Kakinada
[2] Professor, Dept. of English, AKNUMSN Campus, Kakinada

Paper Received on 05-11-2025, Accepted on 03-12-2025
Published on 04-12-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.4.410

Abstract

This study investigates the subtle operations of patriarchy and implicit masculinity in Chetan Bhagat's *Two States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009), reading it as a text that reproduces traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of modern liberalism. While the novel appears to celebrate cross-cultural love and women's emancipation, its narrative structure, voice, and resolution reinforce male centrality and female subordination. Through a close textual and contextual analysis, the research demonstrates how Bhagat's use of first-person narration, comic tone, and emotional mediation conceals persistent patriarchal dominance. The female protagonist's apparent autonomy is mediated through male agency, revealing the ideological continuity of masculine control within a modern, English-educated milieu. Further, the study situates this gender dynamic within the broader framework of colonial modernity, arguing that Bhagat's narrative exemplifies the residual influence of colonial patriarchy where moral guardianship and relational duty replace overt authority. By exposing these covert structures, the paper contends that *Two States* mirrors a society negotiating between modern aspiration and inherited subjugation, making its gender politics emblematic of postcolonial India's unresolved tension between progress and patriarchy.

Keywords: patriarchy, implicit masculinity, false feminism, cultural engenderment, colonial modernity, postcolonial gender discourse, Indian popular fiction, feminist literary criticism.

Chetan Bhagat's *Two States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) is often celebrated as a humorous and accessible portrayal of India's cultural plurality, yet beneath its surface of romantic comedy lies a subtle reproduction of patriarchal values that define the contours of gender and identity in contemporary Indian society. The novel's narrative, structured around an inter-caste, inter-regional romance between Krish, a Punjabi man, and Ananya, a Tamil woman, becomes a site for examining the quiet persistence of male privilege and the gendered expectations embedded within modernity. Bhagat's text, while ostensibly progressive in its celebration of cross-cultural union and female education, reflects a society negotiating between the promises of liberal individualism and the binding force of patriarchal tradition. In this tension between freedom and conformity, the novel dramatizes the deeply ingrained structures of gender that govern even the most seemingly modern relationships.

The subtlety of patriarchal constructs in *Two States* is manifest in the distribution of agency and authority within the narrative. The male protagonist occupies the role of negotiator and saviour, mediating between families, cultures, and emotional crises, while the female protagonist's autonomy remains contingent upon his actions and approval. This asymmetry exemplifies what feminist critics identify as "implicit masculinity," a social condition in which male dominance is exercised not through coercion but through narrative centrality and emotional labor disguised as responsibility. Ananya's education and career ambitions are presented as emblems of freedom, yet her agency is circumscribed by the familial and cultural expectations that dictate her conduct as daughter, lover, and prospective wife. Thus, the novel reconfigures patriarchal order into a softer, more palatable form that appears egalitarian while preserving the male as the narrative and moral anchor.

Cultural engenderment in Bhagat's novel operates through the quotidian rituals, dialogues, and gestures that define the characters' social interactions. The cross-cultural union, rather than dismantling hierarchical structures, reaffirms the gendered dynamics that underpin familial and social acceptance. Marriage, which should ideally symbolize personal choice and equality, becomes an arena where masculinity is validated through negotiation and endurance, and femininity is confirmed through compliance and adaptability. By embedding these dynamics within the framework of humour and romance, Bhagat renders patriarchal ideology invisible yet enduring. The present study seeks to examine how *Two States* reproduces patriarchal constructs under the guise of modern liberalism, how implicit masculinity overshadows the explicit freedom of the female, and how cultural engenderment

functions as a mechanism through which gendered identity is normalized and perpetuated in post-liberalized Indian fiction.

The central argument of this study contends that *Two States* perpetuates patriarchal ideology not through overt oppression but through the subtle normalization of male agency and female accommodation within the framework of modern romantic love. The narrative's first-person perspective, dominated by Krish's consciousness, allows masculine authority to become both the lens and logic of the story. As Krish asserts, "I wanted to make her happy. I wanted to make both families happy" (Bhagat, 2009, p. 187), his declaration of selfless devotion conceals the structural privilege that authorizes him to act as mediator and decision-maker. The very act of "making everyone happy" presupposes his position as the agent of resolution, thereby marginalizing Ananya's subjectivity into a reactive rather than proactive role. Feminist theorists argue that such representational asymmetry converts masculine action into virtue and feminine silence into complicity (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000). Bhagat's narrative thus embodies what Simone de Beauvoir described as "the eternal masculine," in which the male exists as "the absolute," and the female as "the other" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 16). Although the novel claims to celebrate gender equality, it operates within a moral economy that requires the woman to adapt, persuade, and perform acceptability while the man negotiates between the familial and the personal.

Furthermore, the apparent liberalism of *Two States* masks an ideological process of cultural engenderment that reaffirms traditional hierarchies under the guise of cosmopolitan union. Ananya's professional competence and assertiveness are permitted only within the boundaries of domestic harmony and cultural decorum. When Krish remarks, "She was the best thing in my life, but she didn't belong to my world yet" (Bhagat, 2009, p. 74), he articulates the gendered and cultural estrangement that the narrative seeks to reconcile through marriage, an institution that historically codifies patriarchal control. The novel's resolution, achieved through familial consent rather than resistance, mirrors what Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence," a gentle, invisible imposition of social order that is misrecognized as mutual agreement (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2).

In reconciling the two families through male initiative and emotional diplomacy, the text restores patriarchal balance while proclaiming modern inclusivity. Thus, beneath its comedic tone and surface liberalism, *Two States* constructs a world

where masculinity remains the stabilizing axis and female emancipation is rhetorically celebrated but structurally constrained.

Several scenes in the novel reveal covert patriarchal dynamics, those subtle, unspoken inequalities that regulate gendered interactions rather than overtly enforcing male domination. One such dynamic is the repeated depiction of the male protagonist, Krish, as the mediator between families. Though Ananya is equally determined, it is Krish who secures meetings, negotiates shifts in career or location, and cajoles his mother: thus, the burden of emotional and logistical "work" is allocated to him. On the other hand, the girl "is only slightly better. She's unable to see how insulting her own parents are and refuses to say a word against them. She doesn't want to marry anyone else, but still allows her parents to fix up meetings with other men." In this way, Ananya remains passive, conceding to parental agency while her male partner activates the journey. The power relation is masked under the guise of romantic effort rather than structural entitlement, enabling patriarchy to operate through "helping," "winning over," and "responsibility" rather than explicit command.

Another covert incident occurs in the manner in which the novel presents Ananya's "modern" credentials her education, job, willingness to live in Delhi, with the caveat of familial and cultural acceptability. Although she seems free, the story repeatedly underscores that her choices are conditional: she must gain acceptance from her father, she must tolerate jokes about dress and food from his side, and she must perform hospitality to Krish's Punjabi relatives. One review critiques Bhagat's treatment of culture and gender as full of stereotypes: "His characters are … quick to judge people based on their hair-do, their accent and the food they eat." The subtlety lies in how Ananya's autonomy is celebrated but circumscribed her "freedom" is legitimated only through the male protagonist's labor and her compliance with patriarchal norms. The narrative thereby teaches that even educated women's agency must still align with the structures of marriage, kinship and masculine negotiation rather than independent self-determination.

Chetan Bhagat employs several narrative strategies that conceal the gendered asymmetry underlying its portrayal of romance and marriage. The most prominent of these is the use of a first-person male narrator, which gives the illusion of sincerity and emotional transparency while subtly centering masculine perception as the normative mode of experience. Krish's voice governs not only the storytelling but

also the emotional framing of events, determining what counts as love, sacrifice, or progress. As Sneha Kar Chaudhuri observes, "Bhagat's male protagonists narrate their love stories from a position of self-justification, turning emotional negotiation into masculine heroism" (Chaudhuri, 2014, *South Asian Popular Culture*). This narrative structure transforms Krish's actions: mediating between families, resolving conflicts, enduring insults are transformed into heroic acts of devotion, whereas Ananya's emotional and social labor is naturalized, unacknowledged, and presented as complementary rather than autonomous. The monologic perspective thus ensures that patriarchy operates through voice and narrative control: the male gaze defines and delimits female identity while appearing empathetic and egalitarian.

Another narrative device that conceals male dominance is the novel's strategic use of humor and colloquial realism to trivialize patriarchal exchanges. The comic tone diffuses the seriousness of gender hierarchies by masking them as cultural eccentricities or familial misunderstandings. For instance, moments when Ananya must adjust to Krish's family's taunts about her South Indian origins are treated humorously, turning potential cultural and gendered humiliation into social satire. Critics such as Bhatia (2018) argue that "Bhagat's light, conversational narrative style conceals the patriarchal scaffolding of his plots, turning women's negotiations for respect into comic relief" (Bhatia, *Journal of Contemporary Literature*). Similarly, the trope of the "supportive modern man," embodied by Krish, camouflages patriarchal entitlement by rebranding control as care and persuasion as sensitivity. Through this rhetorical softening, the novel presents male dominance as benevolent mediation rather than systemic inequality. The tone, language, and perspective together create a narrative environment in which patriarchy is not denied but domesticated - made invisible by being rendered ordinary, humorous, and loving.

The phenomenon of *false feminism*, a narrative posture that proclaims gender equality while quietly reinforcing patriarchal norms, is not limited to Chetan Bhagat but is evident in the works of several popular and literary authors across contemporary Indian fiction. In such narratives, women appear modern, educated, and assertive on the surface, yet their autonomy is consistently circumscribed by familial approval, romantic validation, or moral didacticism. These writers often employ the rhetoric of empowerment to appeal to a liberal readership while perpetuating conventional gender hierarchies beneath the veneer of progressiveness.

Ravinder Singh's *I Too Had a Love Story* (2008) and Durjoy Datta's *Our Impossible Love* (2016) both exemplify this narrative strategy. Their female characters are described as independent and professionally accomplished, but their identity and emotional fulfilment are ultimately defined through romantic attachment and male perception. As Anureet Kaur notes, "The illusion of female autonomy in Indian popular fiction serves to stabilize rather than challenge male centrality; love becomes the means by which women re-enter the domestic and emotional order of patriarchy" (Kaur, 2020, Journal of Gender Studies in Literature). Similarly, Preeti Shenoy's The Secret Wishlist (2012) presents a protagonist who initially seeks liberation from an oppressive marriage but ultimately conforms to socially sanctioned romantic ideals, suggesting that female selfhood must culminate in relational closure.

Even within more acclaimed literary domains, subtle patriarchal undercurrents persist. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), though hailed as feminist for its critique of caste and gender oppression, paradoxically situates female transgression such as Ammu's sexual agency as tragic and doomed. Shobhaa Dé's urban fiction, including *Socialite Evenings* (1989), foregrounds the modern, cosmopolitan woman but frequently equates liberation with sexual visibility rather than systemic emancipation. As Priya Kapoor observes, "Commercial Indian fiction constructs feminism as lifestyle choice rather than ideological consciousness, producing heroines who are liberated consumers yet moral dependents" (Kapoor, 2018, *Cultural Dynamics*). In all these instances, the rhetoric of equality conceals a deeper structural imbalance wherein the male continues to be the emotional, narrative, and moral axis around which the female revolves.

Thus, what unites Bhagat and his contemporaries is their investment in a commodified form of feminism that decorates patriarchy with the language of progress. The woman is invited to study, work, and choose, but only within boundaries that reaffirm the heteronormative, familial, and moral structures of Indian society. The result is a literature that flatters modern sensibilities while preserving the very hierarchies it pretends to dismantle.

Upon closer reading, it becomes evident that *Two States* and similar works within the corpus of contemporary Indian popular fiction articulate a deceptive discourse of modernity in which patriarchal dominance persists beneath the surface of liberal sentiment. Bhagat's narrative, while ostensibly promoting cross-cultural understanding and gender equality, reinstates traditional hierarchies by rendering

masculine authority indispensable to emotional and social resolution. Through its narrative voice, humour, and romantic idealism, the novel naturalizes gender asymmetry, presenting male initiative as benevolence and female accommodation as virtue. The subtle transformation of patriarchal power into emotional and relational negotiation ensures that the structures of dominance remain intact, albeit concealed under the rhetoric of love, equality, and cosmopolitan progress.

Such covert reinforcement of gender inequality aligns Bhagat with a broader literary trend that has shaped post-liberal Indian fiction. Many popular writers employ the language of empowerment to reinforce the very gender scripts they claim to challenge, offering female characters symbolic freedom but denying them ideological autonomy through their narrative. This liberalization of the female ends in characterization only. In *Two States*, Ananya's apparent liberation is conditional, her agency contingent upon the acceptance of patriarchal institutions and masculine mediation. The novel thus stands as an emblem of the transitional ethos of contemporary Indian society: modern in appearance yet deeply anchored in inherited patriarchal traditions. Recognizing these undercurrents allows for a more critical engagement with the narratives that define modern Indian identity, compelling readers and scholars alike to distinguish between performative feminism and genuine gender consciousness in twenty-first-century fiction.

Viewed through a postcolonial lens, the subtle patriarchal order in the novel reveals itself as a lingering residue of colonial modernity, which reconfigured traditional gender hierarchies without dismantling them. Bhagat's narrative inherits this ambivalence: it celebrates modern education, English-speaking fluency, and urban professionalism: traits shaped by colonial aspiration yet retains the patriarchal logic of male rationality and female decorum. Krish embodies the colonial subject who has internalized Western individualism but continues to wield traditional masculine privilege, whereas Ananya's freedom remains bound to relational ethics and familial compliance. As Kumkum Sangari observes, "colonial modernity re-inscribed patriarchy in subtler forms, replacing physical dominance with moral guardianship" (Sangari, 1990, *Recasting Women*). *Two States*, in this sense, mirrors a society negotiating its hybrid inheritance where modern love becomes a theatre for both colonial mimicry and patriarchal preservation.

The novel's resolution, which situates reconciliation within familial acceptance rather than systemic transformation, further attests to the pervasiveness of

Indian patriarchy in the postcolonial imagination. Even as Bhagat's characters speak the language of equality, their moral and emotional fulfilment is contingent upon the restoration of patriarchal order. This reconciliation reflects what Partha Chatterjee terms the "inner domain of culture," where the nation's authenticity is preserved through the control of female agency (Chatterjee, 1993, *The Nation and Its Fragments*).

Thus, the gender dynamics in *Two States* do not simply dramatize interpersonal conflicts but reproduce a national pattern wherein patriarchal authority is rationalized as tradition and moral duty. Beneath its liberal layout and romantic optimism, the novel bears the imprint of a colonial legacy that fused patriarchal dominance with cultural identity, perpetuating a social order in which the rhetoric of progress conceals the continuity of subjugation.

References

Bhatia, N. (2018). Gender and the illusion of equality in Chetan Bhagat's popular fiction. Journal of Contemporary Literature, 5(2), 112–125.

Bhagat, C. (2009). 2 States: The story of my marriage. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). Masculine domination (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.

Chaudhuri, S. K. (2014). Popular fiction and the gender of affect: Reading Chetan Bhagat. South Asian Popular Culture, 12(3), 199–210.

Chatterjee, P. (1993). The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories. Princeton University Press.

de Beauvoir, S. (1949). The second sex (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Hooks, B. (2000). Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics. South End Press.

Kaur, A. (2020). The illusion of female autonomy in Indian popular fiction. Journal of Gender Studies in Literature, 9(1), 45–57.

Kapoor, P. (2018). Commodifying feminism: Female subjectivity in contemporary Indian fiction. Cultural Dynamics, 30(4), 326–341.

Sangari, K. (1990). The politics of the possible. In K. Sangari & S. Vaid (Eds.), Recasting women: Essays in Indian colonial history (pp. 1–26). Rutgers University Press.