

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

ONE ARRANGED MURDER: BHAGAT'S DEPICTION OF HUMAN EMOTIONS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL VALUES RATHER THAN PURE CRIME

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Article Received: 18/11/2021

Article Accepted: 27/12/2021

Published online:31/12/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.4.264](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.4.264)

Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel the threads of some of the human emotions like the hurt and pain, jealousy and revenge, prevailing individual, social and cultural values Chetan Bhagat tried to depict in his seeming murder mystery thriller *One Arranged Murder*. Chetan Bhagat is an accomplished writer with a huge readership. Five of his novels have already been adapted into Bollywood films. Bhagat has successfully created a niche for his fiction. *One Arranged Murder* is the ninth book and the latest fiction of Bhagat in the pipeline of thriller and murder mystery. Emotional distress, Psychological imbalances, contemporary socio-cultural issues such as indulging in hook up relationships, craving for drugs, ignorance of social norms and family values; the behavioural pattern of the younger generations of the educated elite middle-class, were dealt with at length rather than the pure crime. Bhagat has a penchant for social commentaries on various aspects of modern middle-class Indian society. His characters are caught up between "tradition and modernity." Ramesh Malhotra's decision to hide the family secret concerning the illegal twins of Bindu forms the crux of the novel. Family honour was more precious for Ramesh Malhotra than to find out whether Prerna's sudden demise was an accidental fall from the terrace or a suicide or an arranged murder. The mental trauma Anjali had undergone proved fatal for her twin. Having lost her resilience, Anjali meticulously planned, arranged and executed the murder of Prerna on the auspicious day of Karva-Chauth. The twins were juxtaposed against the social, cultural and economic backdrop. The narrative subtly pokes at the growing tendency of the contemporary youth towards casual sexual relationships and the increasing use of online dating apps such as Tinder. Chetan Bhagat devoted the narrative to exposing the emotions of his characters to the fullest rather than to pure crime.

Keywords: family honour, emotional distress, socio-cultural values, jealousy

Chetan Bhagat is an accomplished writer with a huge readership to his credit. Many of his protagonists are the educated youth from IITs and

IIMs like the author himself. Bhagat's novels deal with the stereotypes of highly educated and ambitious middle-class youth, their lifestyle,

individualism, lovemaking, adaptation of western perspective of celebrating life, carefree indulgence in romance, sex, and their ultimate struggle between “tradition and modernity.” Many of his novels are bestsellers and five novels have already been adapted into Bollywood films. He has written the screenplay for his works *Half Girlfriend* and *The Three Mistakes of My Life (Kai Po Che)*. Chetan Bhagat’s best-selling novels are *Five Point Someone*, *Two States*, *One Night @ the Call Centre*, *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, *Half Girlfriend*, and *The Girl in Room 105*.

Bhagat had realized that the author in him could not be thrown backstage therefore, sacrificed his flourishing career to pursue his passion for writing and emerged as a full-pledged writer. Bhagat is a columnist for *The Guardian*, *The Times of India*, and *Dainik Bhaskar*. His articles focus on youth, career, leadership, political issues, and current affairs. Bhagat uses simple colloquial language mostly used by the younger generations on the campuses’ and in everyday life. *One Arranged Murder* is the ninth book and the latest fiction of Chetan Bhagat in the pipeline of thriller and murder mystery. Bhagat’s first novel of the same genre is *The Girl in Room 105*. Bhagat elucidates his shift of the literary genre as:

I think I took the feedback from readers. They were saying that you were writing too many people love stories. Chetan Bhagat’s books have this middle-class hero from a small town of India and then he goes for a girl who is out of his league. So I felt maybe I should move away from that and try a completely different genre. (Bhagat, *The Telegraph*)

Striving to safeguard the family reputation, craving for drugs, indulgence in hook up relationships, ignorance of established social norms, jealousy, and revenge are some of the social and cultural undercurrent themes along with emotional distress and psychological imbalances, *One Arranged Murder* dwells upon. Bhagat has a penchant for social commentaries on various aspects of modern middle-class Indian society. Superficially, the narrative is about Perna Malhotra, an ambitious young professional, and her sudden death as she falls from the three-storey terrace of

her house on the auspicious day of Karva-Chauth and the mystery involved in her death. In this consequence, the story revolves around a middle-class Punjabi joint family in South Delhi, Perna’s fiancé Saurabh and his close friend Keshav Rajpurohit. Saurabh and Keshav are the same characters found in *The Girl in Room 105*.

Family honour is more precious for Ramesh Malhotra than to find out whether Perna’s sudden demise is an accidental fall from the terrace or a suicide or an arranged murder. Ramesh Malhotra’s decision to hide the family secret concerning the illegal twins of Bindu forms the storyline of the novel. The decision of Mr. Malhotra in a fateful moment eventually leads to the tragic incidents of the narrative.

Decision-taking in crucial family issues is still in the realm of men in most Indian families and women are expected to give mere formal consent without any choice to express their perspective. Bindu had an affair at the age of sixteen and gave birth to twin girls. Ramesh decides to adopt her twins within the family one by himself and Neelam, another by Geetu. Neelam and Geetu are forced to accept the proposal to save the reputation of the family within the circle of relatives and in society. Ramesh warns Geetu “This is not the US. This is Amritsar. What will we tell people? Where did the kids come from?” (168).

Ramesh tactfully asks his wife to do a favour for the family as if he always values her opinion. “Neelam, will you do something for my family?” Neelam with sheer disappointment states, “It’s not like I have a choice. I always do what you say” and Geetu tries to disapprove, “I will have to talk to Jogi” “I mean, this is big, I love you Bindu, but this is so big” (169). Both of them expressed their submissiveness to their husbands. Ramesh intervenes with Geetu as “Remind him that I paid half of the money for his taxi medallion. And married you off to him despite him not having a job at that time” (169). Their meek acceptance of his proposal creates a feeling of ego satisfaction and asks for rajma chawal at the dinner table. Here, Bhagat highlights the typical psychology of the dominant

gender. The whole episode explains male chauvinism. According to Nikhil Govind:

Bhagat engages with several such stereotypes that haunt the edges of this global, extended family . . . the secret sexual histories of shadowy aunts who can't be accommodated in stable family narratives. It is in engaging the reader in this slow-motion unspooling of the metropolitan social ethos that Bhagat offers a skilled and distinct vantage point. (Scroll.in)

To save the honour of one sister, to save the honour of the family, Ramesh creates turbulence, indirectly in another sister's life. Geetu marries Jogi, a cab driver, and settles in Seattle. Ramesh controls Geetu and Jogi as he helped money for his taxi medallion. The adoption results in friction in Geetu's married life. The psychological and emotional blocks of Jogi did not allow him wholeheartedly to accept Anjali as his daughter, therefore, abandoned them when she was a mere three years old. After the estrangement with Jogi, Geetu desperately spends her life in shelter homes. Geetu reminds Anjali "you don't remember those days, moving from one homeless shelter to another. Until Greg gave us a home"(293). Her social and economic status is badly influenced.

Later, Geetu, in want of financial stability, social security, and emotional support, marries Greg Davis, an American school teacher, in Seattle. Even this marriage is on the verge of separation due to the individualist attitude of Anjali. Geetu is not willing to "lose one more husband" just because of her adopted daughter, Anjali. Owing to the circumstances, Geetu has no emotional attachment with Anjali. She confesses that it's a duty for her. "I have to take care of you. Every day. Do I love it?", "Please. I have raised you. I did my duty. Now figure your life out" (293). Jogi and Greg are two more stereotypes, who could not accept devotedly, an innocent little girl as their daughter. Greg wanted Anjali to be submissive to him as he had been paying for everything for her. Greg, a die-hard Republican, could not appreciate Anjali's participation in the anti-Trump rally. He wants to dictate even her

political ideology, a typical representative of patriarchal society.

Anjali grows up at the mercy of Jogi and Greg. She passed through the hard life of living in shelter homes in childhood and is deprived of fatherly love, affection and care, a child deserves. Geetu and Greg could not cater to her emotional and psychological needs. She is unaware of the reason for Greg's unhappy behaviour towards her. Geetu and Anjali's parent-child relationship has been a troubled one due to forced adoption. Being psychologically disturbed, she is addicted to drugs. In search of her identity, Anjali finally arrives in India to stay with her uncle's family. She is envious of her twin Prerna, who has all love, attention, and comforts of the rich life, she craved from childhood. On the flip side, she has nothing to be proud of. Anjali is of the impression that Neelam and Geetu have sacrificed to protect the family glory for the "consuming phenomenal fear of shame." Anjali indulged in sex with her uncle Adi and also with Keshav. Being brought up in western culture she does not appreciate social, cultural, ethical, and family values. She is much wild in fulfilling her sexual urges like her nature.

Family structure plays a key role in the well-being of children. Anjali is deprived of affectionate parentage whereas Prerna is fortunate enough to reap the benefits of it. Naturally, this fuelled Anjali's emotional distress as she had a suffered childhood. Anjali expressed her agony as:

Everybody cared about Prerna, Prerna, Prerna, Prerna. Who could have been me? If the toss were different. If I got the head and she the tail. (294)

Anjali revealed the truth, not bothered for the reputation in the society, whereas, the elder generation of the Malhotra family tried to preserve family glory, which emphasizes the changing values with time. Anjali is jealous of Prerna and being a twin she compared her pain and pathos and her asylum in Malhotra house. All of these further inflicted her mental well-being.

The mental trauma Anjali had undergone proved fatal for Prerna. The emotional disturbances

and the consequent psychological imbalance have led Anjali to go to the extent of taking the life of her sister. The twins are juxtaposed against the social, cultural, and economic backdrop. Having lost her resilience, Anjali meticulously planned, arranged and executed the murder of Prerna on the auspicious day of Karva-Chauth. Anjali's selection of Karva-Chauth to execute her plan is also an indication of her jealousy as she is unable to bind in a successful relationship like Prerna. Anjali worked for "left-wing" publications. The agony of Anjali and her search for individual identity in the family and career reverberates with the reality of elite middle-class India.

Karva-Chauth is a tradition that married women, mostly in North India, keep fast for a whole day for the well-being and longevity of their husbands. Prerna too keeps fast secretly for her fiancé, asks him to break her fast by coming from the back door of the terrace. Prerna takes Anjali into confidence in this issue. Chetan Bhagat's women characters are powerful in their own way. For instance, Radhika Mehta of *One Indian Girl* with her "mini-me" judgemental voice, emerges as an assertive woman. She is bold enough to fulfil her sexual urge, handles her two ex-boyfriends, and is courageous to cancel the wedding with Brijesh when all the relatives and guests had arrived. Prerna is ambitious about her food delivery start-up, Eato and Anjali, unafraid of executing the murder and facing further consequences.

Bhagat admitted in an interview given to *The Telegraph* that his main intention is to dwell upon human emotions rather than the crime. Therefore, *The Girl in Room 105* and *One Arranged Murder* are not purely dedicated crime novels. He wanted to expose the emotions of his characters to the fullest. Chetan says about his book as:

I am no Agatha Christie, Alfred Hitchcock writing pure crime. I needed to show my characters' emotions and for that, they needed to be personally involved in the case. Chetan further adds "So obviously they have to solve this case and since I had two characters, I could make one of them personally invested in the case and one of them in detective mode. So that was the challenge. I had to make it

more fun, gripping and exciting than the last one. (Bhagat, *The Telegraph*)

Adi, the younger brother of Ramesh, is a misfit in the family. He is secretly involved in taking drugs. Adi and Anjali want to settle down in their respective careers of choice, for which they need financial support from Ramesh. Ramesh refuses to give twenty lakhs to boost up their career but lavishly spent fifty lakhs for Prerna's engagement, which further pricked Adi and Anjali. Ramesh offered a luxury car for his son-in-law, though his credibility is on the verge like a sinking ship as his company owed around sixty crores to banks. Adi and Anjali, both are emotionally disturbed and psychologically imbalanced. Both are addicted to drugs. The emotional and psychological suffering of Anjali ultimately resulted in cruelty.

Bhagat has skillfully portrayed the elite middle-class pomp and show in modern Indian marriages. Both the bride and groom are highly educated professionals, yet dowry plays a key role, which satisfies the ego and the established social status of both the families. Though the 21st-century Indian youth are well educated and professionally well settled, the amount of dowry is also skyrocketing like their qualifications and emoluments. Chetan Bhagat comments on existing and emerging social trends.

Keshav and Saurabh are close friends and work at CyberSafe. They have a detective agency named Z Detectives. Keshav has not been into a serious relationship and enjoys life with tinder hook-ups; whereas Saurabh believes in an arranged marriage. Bhagat juxtaposes Keshav and Saurabh in their nature, outlook and interpretations. The narrative subtly pokes at the growing tendency of the contemporary youth towards casual sexual relationships and the increasing use of such online dating apps. The narrative engages the reader's interest as several suspects gradually emerge during the investigation process of the duo, from the maid Gopika to Ramesh Malhotra. The police allowed them to do the investigation as they had previously helped the police. Finally, Keshav detects that Anjali is the murderer.

The title indicates not only marriages are arranged but most of the murders are also meticulously arranged/ planned and executed in real-life situations. Bhagat affirms:

Then there is a lot of research from real-life cases, for thrillers. For example, there was a girl in Gurgoan who was on the roof celebrating Karva Chauth and she died. That's a real case that inspired this book. (Bhagat, *The Telegraph*)

According to Nikhil Govind:

The attainments in the novel lie in its appraisal of the contemporary, multi-generational Indian family. It is social commentary in the veil of a thriller (and this is a good thing). For the presumed addressee of the novel (the Indian middle class), is in the midst of a contradiction: On the one hand, there is a strident rhetoric of the family as the lynchpin of a conservative social order—this is not dissimilar from similar calls in the West. (Scroll.in)

Chetan Bhagat delineates several social and cultural issues of Indian families in the guise of a suspense thriller and murder mystery. The Malhotra family is an example of the emptiness present in the superficially successful lives of the middle class.

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