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## **The Marginalised Majority: Voicing the Angst of the Linguistically Challenged in Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend***

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### **Abstract**

The novel *Half Girlfriend* (2014) by Chetan Bhagat exposes a facet of social stratification in India, which is gauged by one's ability to articulate in English and has become a marker of social hierarchy in contemporary times. The protagonist, Madhav Jha, a mouthpiece of the author, who hails from Bihar, endures marginalisation and derision at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, because of his poor English-speaking skills. This linguistic handicap relegates him to the margins, thwarts his agency, rendering him virtually invisible. Through him, Bhagat brings to the fore the class divisions between the fluent speakers of the language and the not-so-fluent ones, illustrating the resultant inferiority and angst in the minds of the latter. This novel has thus succeeded in creating consciousness in the minds of the speakers, who have an extremely exalted opinion about their linguistic skills and are contemptuous towards those lacking proficiency in it. The attempt is hence to advocate for acceptance and inclusivity as well as a refinement in the attitudes of those at higher echelons towards the linguistically thwarted ones, and a plea for a more egalitarian society in future.

**Keywords:** Linguistic-Divide, Social-Stratification, Marginalisation, Inclusivity, Class, Hierarchy

### **Introduction**

Of all the languages globally known it is said that English is a language, which came from nowhere to conquer the entire world. Two thousand years ago, the English language was confined to a handful of savages, who dwelled in the North-Western shores of Europe. The English language originated as a Germanic dialect spoken by a relatively small population in England, which

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eventually spread and evolved through colonisation, trade, and cultural exchange to become a global language. Paradoxically, there was no English in England at one time. Today however, it is used, spoken or written in some form or the other by around 1.5 billion people around the world. “The changing role of English, the liberalisation of economy, the opening up of the market and the increasing employment opportunities for English-knowing educated Indians have made the English language acceptable to a vast majority of Indians in contemporary India” (Krishnaswamy 57). English has become a lingua franca, facilitating communication across continents and cultures on one hand, but on the other hand has also created a linguistic divide between the users and non-users of this language. The hegemony of an English speaker is always felt by a non-English speaker and this is sometimes described as linguistic globalisation. The dominance of English perpetuates a linguistic divide, fostering a global class-system where people are stratified based on their proficiency in the language.

## **Language, Identity, and Marginality**

Chetan Bhagat’s novel *Half Girlfriend*, which is dedicated to “rural India” and “non-English types”, is a work which amplifies the complexes and linguistic struggles of a backward rural Bhojpuri-laced Hindi speaking boy from Bihar as he gets admitted at the prestigious St. Stephen’s College, New Delhi and falls in love with a “high-class English-speaking rich Delhi girl”. Essentially, the novel showcases how fluency in English functions as a new yardstick to gauge one’s social standing. This has led to the genesis of a fresh class-hierarchy, where power and dominion is vested in the hands of the fluent speakers of English while those lacking in proficiency are conveniently tucked to the margins and are thereby denied opportunities in life.

This linguistic sorting is a mirroring of wider class-based fault lines existing in the society. Varying degrees of English fluency, puts individuals into different stratas and thereby influencing their relationships, work, career and future. Chetan Bhagat has tried to articulate the experiences of the linguistically-disabled and the consequent angst arising from the inferiority complex which festers within them rendering them to the margins. The novelist underscores the tacit stratification between the fluent speakers of the language and those who lack proficiency in the same. This schism is often disregarded or ignored yet remains pervasive till date and hence, one’s linguistic skills continue to dictate one’s access to prospects and degree of acceptance in social circles. Madhav Jha, is a mouthpiece of the novelist and representative of the people who are linguistically-restricted, caught in a quest to assert themselves, yet stifled and made to internalise patterns of social-subalternity and humiliation. Patricia M. Greenfield in her essay “Culture and Cognitive Growth” remarks that, either discrete or cumulative identity ultimately resides in the consciousness or recognition of difference. “An explicit concept of self, implies some sort of idea of not self, for every concept must be defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes” (637).

For an individual, this consciousness of difference which is based on the opinion of others, has a psychologically-inhibiting effect and a withdrawing tendency which like a vicious cycle

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influences the nature of subsequent interactions within that social circle. Chetan Bhagat himself acknowledged this, in his interview with Samhita Chakraborty, “There’s a politics around the language [English]. There are certain segments that want to control this language. They don’t want to give it to everyone and they are going to judge anybody who doesn’t know it. That’s what I am fighting. I want everybody to have access to English. It’s just a language. There are millions in the country who don’t speak English well and they are denied jobs. Many girls will not date a guy who doesn’t speak English properly...and it’s not even our own language! It’s something they feel bad about, they may not express it but there’s a lot of feeling behind this discrimination”.

Madhav Jha, the protagonist is hurled headlong into this quagmire of linguistic class divide when he enters St. Stephen’s College. The suburban culture in which he was hitherto raised, has bred in him a passivity and frigidity which bridles his tongue and hinders his spontaneity and diminishes his confidence. The protagonist is constantly on his toes, gripped with a sense of performance-anxiety which instead of spurring him on, keeps him on a tight leash, constantly self-focussed, leading him to retreat into a shell being tongue-tied and remains “a sad victim in whom the rich pageant of life has passed by” (Watson 40). On his very first day in the college, many snigger at him because “his English was 90 percent Bihari Hindi, mixed with 10 percent really bad English” (8). When he entered the room and greeted the interviewers as, “Good morning sir, sir and sir,” they smiled. Madhav remarks, “I didn’t think it was a good smile. It was the high-class-to-lower-class smile, the smile of superiority, the smile of delight that they knew English and I didn’t” (9). However, the snobbish attitude of the panel is quite evident when they pretend to be at loss when Madhav replies in Hindi. “Can you please answer in English?” Prof. Gupta asked. “Why? You don’t know Hindi?” Madhav remarks, “Without English, I felt naked. I didn’t belong here—these English-speaking monsters would eat me alive” (10). Towards the end of the interview Mr. Gupta remarks, “Your answers are sensible, but your English is terrible” (12). Madhav is forced to retort, “Would you rather take a sensible student, or someone who speaks a foreign language well?” (13). He is instantly corrected by them, “English is no longer a foreign language. It is a global language” (13). His defiance stumped them all and he could secure a seat in the college only in the sports-quota based on his basketball prowess.

Not only Madhav but his roommates too are painfully conscious that there exists a wide gulf between them and their college mates, a span which cannot be bridged. As Wittgenstein says, “The boundaries of my language are the boundaries of my world” (56). They become limited in many ways because of the language they spoke. He says, “All four of us came from Bihar or Jharkhand and none of us were the classy types you see in Stephen’s. For instance nobody in Stephen’s would say they watched Bhojpuri movies. We loved Hindi film music, from Mohammed Rafi in the sixties to Pritam in the here and now” (45). Rudyard Kipling in his famous poem- *The Ballad of East and West* says, “Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”... and seemingly the linguistic divide seems difficult to be forded. The despondency of the

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protagonist can be attributed to the fact that his linguistic handicap had rendered him to be on the periphery, he is stereotyped as a non-being, hardly deserving attention. His mother on the other hand is a high-spirited woman who would not be cowed by these pretensions. When Madhav tries to convince his mother that he has to speak English like the high- class people...his mother instantly retorts, “We are not low class either” (162). When Madhav slights the villagers on their backwardness, his mother instantly says, “The over-educated idiots in big cities—whenever they don’t understand villagers, they call them uneducated and old-fashioned” (100). Unlike his mother, he always felt like a misfit and an intruder. At one point, in fact, Madhav says, “I hope I can fit in. I don’t feel I belong here” (100). He loathes the English language altogether. While returning to the village after a long gap, he describes his village as:

Dumraon is in Buxar district around sixteen kilometers from Buxar town on the banks of the Ganges. If you were not sleeping in history class you would have heard of the Great Battle of Buxar in 1764. Frankly it should be renamed the Embarrassing Battle of Buxar. The Battle of Buxar was fought between the East India Company and three Indian rulers. The Company won a decisive victory, laying the foundations for colonial rule because there was so much infighting. And this is our national shame....If the Battle of Buxar had not happened, there would have been none of that English high-class, rest low-class thing bullshit that happens in India. There would not even be St. Stephen’s College. Just imagine, if only the jokers in Buxar had done things differently maybe the white man would have been speaking Hindi and Bhojpuri would be the new cools. (115)

Regarding this linguistic divide Chetan Bhagat remarked in *NDTV Dialogues* interview, “There are some of us who are very lucky, who were born in families where English was spoken. There were English books around, English newspapers used to come. And people, I would count myself also as one of those, we speak a different kind of English. We think in English also sometimes. And that’s the difference. And then there is the rest of India, which tried its best to learn the English because they needed to. But they may not speak it so well. And it shows, you know. So it’s no longer English versus Hindi. But English versus not so good English, and there are these very good English-speaking people which are the Brahmins. And then you have the lower class who know English, but they cannot fluently talk in a TV show and or watch NDTV like this. So I think they feel very judged. They feel it’s their country and there is one language which they kind of know but because they don’t speak it in the way the Brahmins speak they don’t get access to the world of jobs, of relationships or culture. Whether it’s English Nazi’s or Hindi Nazi’s. I don’t like either of these extreme uses.

In fact I feel for the people who, at least, I think, Hindi should be; Hindi is our mother tongue, it is there in our movies and music. But it is not at the cost of English. English is no longer a choice. Everybody needs to know English to rise up in life today.” Riya’s attitude towards Madhav’s linguistic abilities is more commendable, than her classmates. When she coaches

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Madhav for the Bill Gates Foundation speech, she corrects him time and again, but never humiliates him. Riya says, “I’ll correct you sometimes. It is not that I don’t understand you. I just want to make sure you say it right” (149). With her help and his determination, he can win the coveted grant, which is able to transform the Dumraon Royal School into a standard educational institution in that region.

## **Conclusion**

The novel *Half Girlfriend* exposes how English has become powerful marker of class-stratification in urban India and the consequent social exclusion as well due to the creation of water-tight compartments between the fluent speakers and the not-so-fluent ones. Madhav’s struggles bring to the fore the fact that linguistic proficiency governs one’s confidence, acceptance, upward mobility and opportunities in life. There is a politics surrounding the English language-the expectation to speak fluent English persists even though it is not even our native language. The novel hence, is an appeal for greater social inclusivity and the need for democratisation of access to English for people from all quarters of life while respecting the linguistic diversity in India. Besides this, the novel has thus succeeded in creating consciousness in the minds of English speakers, who have an extremely exalted opinion about their linguistic skills and are contemptuous towards those lacking proficiency in it. At the same time the novel has created a platform for those non-English speaking people who find themselves isolated from the mainstream-residing in a no-man’s land, trying to break the divide between “us” and “them”. Thus the majority residing in the borderlands are brought to the forefront, making their voice heard through Madhav Jha, the protagonist. Society can be and should be indoctrinated and exposed to these condescending attitudes, which they harbour in general, the awareness of which will then, in turn, result in a sanctification of their hitherto existing mindsets and a greater policy of acceptance towards the disadvantaged people. In conclusion, Bhagat underscores the need to democratize access to English and acknowledges the psychological impact of linguistic inferiority, urging greater inclusivity and sensitivity in multilingual societies. The novel urges recognition of this hidden discrimination and calls for a more inclusive mindset. In conclusion, it highlights the need to democratize access to English while fostering respect for linguistic diversity.

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