

Between Old Values and New Realities: A Critical Study of Chetan Bhagat's *12 Years: My Messed-up Love Story*

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Abstract

This study contends that Chetan Bhagat's 12 Years: My Messed-up Love Story offers an incisive portrayal of the tensions between tradition and progress in contemporary India, positioning the novel as a prominent examination of shifting class structures, generational anxieties, and the ongoing negotiation of identity. Through humor and sharp social observation, Bhagat interrogates evolving norms in modern relationships within a rapidly globalizing society. Drawing on New Historicism, Bourdieu's Doxa, Foucault's Panopticon, and Bakhtin's Chronotope, this research presents an integrated analytical approach that clarifies how Bhagat's work demonstrates the transformative influence of globalization and digital technology on both individual and collective lives. This study advances the debate on Bhagat by asserting that 12 Years: My Messed-up Love Story offers a unique lens on contemporary Indian values in flux.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, society, change, values

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat, India's best-selling English novelist, is renowned for his relatable stories and simple language, which especially appeal to the country's young, urban audience. His novels, shaped by his engineering and business background, examine themes such as college life, career struggles, class differences, identity, marriage, and family— issues central to the Indian youth experience. His simple English and accessible style have enabled his novels to be adapted into Bollywood films, thereby magnifying his cultural impact (Dhaliwal). Several of his novels have been adapted into Bollywood movies. His first novel, *Five Point Someone* (2004), "a seminal work...reflecting the complex sociocultural landscape of metropolitan youth in India" (Vimal and Subramania 1299), was adapted into the highly successful movie *3 Idiots*. Bhagat's latest novel, *12 Years: My Messed-up Love Story*, continues this trend by focusing on the relationship between Saket, a 33-year-old stand-up comedian, and Payal, a 21-year-old private equity professional. Their story highlights India's economic growth, the challenges brought by globalization and digital change, and the complexities of modern relationships. This study analyzes how the novel navigates the interplay between tradition and modernity and how spaces and new technologies influence identity and social control. It is guided by two research questions: (1) How does the novel depict the balance between traditional values and individual aspirations? (2) How do spatial shifts and surveillance technologies function as mechanisms of social control and identity negotiation? While there is little academic analysis of Bhagat's latest work, early reviews focus on its examination of class, generational conflict, humor, and urban anxieties, with

mixed assessments of its accessibility and depth. Some argue that Bhagat's humor, simplified prose, and focus on youth culture may trivialize and undermine complex societal issues while overlooking the perspectives of other social groups. Conversely, the value of his popular appeal in bringing important cultural debates to a wider readership cannot be ignored. This study builds on these discussions to explore how *12 Years* reflects the ongoing tensions between social norms and personal desires in contemporary India.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research study that adopts an analytical, interpretive, and deductive approach grounded in close reading of the text. The analytical framework synthesizes New Historicism, Bourdieu's Doxa, Foucault's Panopticon, and Bakhtin's Chronotope to illuminate the novel's engagement with tradition and change across multiple dimensions. New Historicism situates the novel within its specific historical and cultural context. Bourdieu's Doxa reveals how unquestioned social values shape the upper-middle class and how challenges to these norms generate tension. Foucault's Panopticon illuminates mechanisms of surveillance and control, particularly through digital and spatial means, while Bakhtin's Chronotope elucidates the narrative's temporal and spatial organization. Integrating these frameworks enables a comprehensive, multi-angled analysis of the novel's negotiation of identity, power, and contemporary social expectations. Thus, theoretical synthesis is essential for grasping the complexity of Bhagat's commentary on contemporary Indian society.

New Historicism views works of literature as products of the historical moment in which they are produced. The author, text, and context are considered mutually constitutive. Within this paradigm, Chetan Bhagat is both a product of his time and a chronicler of it. Bourdieu's Doxa refers to the beliefs and values a society accepts as obvious and universal. These norms are rarely questioned until challenged, which then sparks strong reactions. Doxa helps build the social order and maintain hierarchies. When these hierarchies are tested, orthodox beliefs are defended. In *12 Years*, the story shows a shift from traditional, community-focused relationships to modern, individual ones. This shift challenges the upper-middle class's dominant Doxa, prompting change within the boundaries of new social norms. Bakhtin's Chronotope blends time and space in storytelling. This interaction shapes the story, themes, and characters. In *12 Years*, Bhagat uses Dubai as a central chronotope. Following Bakhtin, Dubai is a place where India's middle-class values are set aside, allowing the protagonists to rethink their relationship outside Mumbai's watchful society. Foucault's panopticon shows that surveillance works when people watch and judge themselves, aiming to match social norms. This constant scrutiny pushes characters to blame themselves and give up personal wishes.

This study applies new historicism by linking the novel's events and values to major changes in India. Drawing on Bourdieu's Doxa, it identifies instances in the story where social norms shape or constrain character choices and family decisions, focusing on moments when those norms are tested or enforced. Foucault's Panopticon is used to interpret scenes of surveillance and control, such as digital security, parental oversight, and life in gated communities, to show how power and observation shape self-expression. Bakhtin's Chronotope analyzes how shifts in setting and time—such as moving from Mumbai to Dubai or Saket's career change—shape or constrain identity formation and create new social rules.

Discussion

The novel opens with Saket, 33, meeting Payal, 21, at a comedy club. The story begins in late 2013, as Saket plays a new song from the movie *Ranjhana*, released in June 2013 (66). Another

reference that fits the timeline is the mention of the dollar-to-rupee exchange rate at 70 rupees (228), which occurred in 2018. In the story, it also occurs five years after the beginning. The ending corresponds to 2026 because the twelve years finish here, and the protagonists visit a temple in Dubai, which was inaugurated in 2024 (349). So this is the story of the last twelve years of India.

The much-emphasized 12-year age gap between the two protagonists reflects India after the 1991 liberalization. After the Indian economy opened to foreign market players, increased economic activity laid the groundwork for women's entry into the workforce. By 2013, this trend had become pronounced, leading to societal changes and shifts in marriage patterns. Marriage is delayed in such a corporate space where career is paramount. Still, it contravenes the prevailing *Doxa* of India's middle class, which typically favors marriages with a two-to-five-year gap within comparable caste and class backgrounds. Legally, the Constitution stipulates minimum marriage ages of 18 for women and 21 for men, implicitly endorsing a three-year difference. Economic independence has made non-traditional relationships possible, but the socio-cultural setup still demands that the old *Doxa* be respected. Payal's parents still consider her a small child who cannot decide whom to live with, even though she "can decide whether to invest millions in a company or not" (59). Saket and Payal's mutual attraction endures, but it is mediated by guilt and secrecy. Payal's thoughts show that her internalized *Doxa* makes her worry about breaking social and familial rules. She carries her family's established *Doxa*, which holds that "even speaking to boys is a sin" (87), so she polices herself and worries about violating social and familial expectations. Furthermore, dating a much older man is another violation of the entrenched *Doxa* of the familial communitarian code. Economic progress competes with the old *Doxa*, and the relationship works well in private because they can afford to own flats, rent cars, and frequent luxury hotels. In the social field, which has yet to accept these new challenges, the relationship fails. The conflict becomes explicit when Payal's parents discover her with Saket, thanks to advanced security systems in the gated communities of India's metropolitan cities, underscoring the power of the panopticon. Rising incomes post-liberalization led to the rise of gated communities for safety and status. This shows how hard it is to breach society's governing codes. It is not just parental disapproval; technology also supports social surveillance. The space has been so designed that there is no room for privacy. As an old saying goes, 'even walls have ears.' Domestic workers, other residents, and the building staff circulate information, building the panopticon. Foucault's panopticon describes a system where the possibility of being watched makes people police themselves. Saket and Payal try but cannot keep their relationship secret because the system is built that way; it was no accident. They were destined to be discovered. Later, when Payal is grounded by her parents, she is made to block Saket on all networks, and her movements are tracked through an app installed on her phone, as she herself says, "I'm on an electronic leash" (170). Technological advances strengthen the power of the panopticon. In such a situation, as usual, marrying off the girl is the preferred choice of Indian parents, and they had already decided to get Payal married to a suitable boy because, as Payal's mother says, "Young age is like that. We all make mistakes. That's why we get our children married at an early age" (142).

Payal's 'conservative' parents cannot accept their daughter having a boyfriend first thing. Next, he is much older than her. Another hurdle: he is a divorcee from Punjab. Their entrenched *Doxa* cannot accept this match for their daughter, whom they have already found a suitable match for. Bhagat, in his humorous way, uses the often-repeated Hindi trope '*Kamaal ka rishta*' (102), meaning a miraculous match, because the families know each other well, share the same background, and the prospective groom "*Parimal can run dad's business*" (116) and will be "*a perfect heir*" (118). Several contradictions emerge from this matchmaking. First, the girls' choices do

not matter. She is educated at Stanford and has a high-paying corporate job, but in matters of finding a life partner, she has “an impression of being naive” (117) according to her parents. Second, the groom must have the same family background and be from the same community, as in the case of Payal’s friend Akanksha, “married at twenty...A boy chosen by her parents. She’s Marwari, so it had to be a Marwari boy” (90). Third, Parimal is seen as Payal’s father’s successor, even though Payal herself is a well-educated, successful career woman. The internalized patriarchal mindset still rules the upper classes, who have covered themselves with a veneer of respectability and social prestige. Payal’s brother doesn’t do well in studies, plays video games, and hangs out with his friends, yet “he is the son. I’m the daughter” (62). He cannot jeopardize the family’s status, but the daughter can.

When Payal tells her parents about Saket, her father’s reaction is typical: “Saket what? What is his surname...All Indian parents care about religion, community, and caste first, the CV later” (125). Saket’s IIT education and his start-up business matter only if he ticks the basics and the more important columns. One wrong tick and your future is sealed. Payal ticked all the columns and is “done living my life according to my mother’s prescription” (93). The first wrong tick on the prescription list of liking someone of her own choice leads to her being grounded and kept on guard by her parents. The word ‘prescription’ points to the persistence and restructuring of the old doxa through the disciplining or conditioning of children in Indian families. This emphasis leads to the neglect of other vital areas important to children’s growth, such as listening to them. Payal feels a communication gap which becomes apparent when she says, “This is why I never share anything with you guys. Because you won’t listen, and will overreact. Can’t we just talk?” (141). This overemphasis on disciplining and instilling fear of the unknown leads to a situation in which “everyone pretends all the time and everything is fake” (145). This masking of reality to hide vulnerabilities is also visible in the conversation around Akanksha becoming a social media influencer after her marriage. She makes reels highlighting the importance of traditions and established norms, and they get enough likes and comments, such as “Upholding Indian values, amazing! I want my daughter to be like you” (91). However, “in real life, she’s not entirely like this. She wears jeans and drinks wine sometimes” (91). Nor are the parents, who send their daughters to study abroad or to the best possible institutions, such as the IITs, and expect them to remain traditional. The proliferation of social media also adds to the resurgence of culture and tradition and helps reformulate identities, as it is a widely visible marker of social identity. People like Akanksha present themselves as cultured and traditional to make a positive impression, which has also led to the social resurgence of obsolete traditions. This is a particularly perplexing matter, as the self-righteousness of the ‘tradition enforcers’ (215) is rarely countered because they hold social power.

In the prevailing atmosphere, breaching the entrenched Doxa reinforced by surveillance technology and social media requires Saket and Payal to find a different spatial and economic field, a utopia. Bhagat rightly chose Dubai because we have seen the number of people migrating there rise sharply over the past decade or so. Dubai’s policy shifts from labor-centric migration to attracting skilled professionals through tax-free income, Golden visas, and free zones have drawn skilled professionals from India, and the novel records this as a lived experience that became a mass trend in the preceding decade. Dubai functions as a utopian Chronotope because it dismantles Mumbai society’s surveillance mechanism. It is physically removed from panoptic Mumbai society and offers attractive financial packages to skilled individuals. For Saket, “The US has Rashi, Mumbai has Payal, None of these places. Plus, the taxes in the US are too high... Dubai is closer to Mumbai” (221). The UAE’s Golden visa scheme and free zone regime do not monitor personal relationships. Here, Saket and Payal can test their version of a relationship that the Indian Doxa makes impossible. The Dubai Doxa emphasizes individual compatibility and

lifestyle as the basis of relationships, which are negotiated around career planning, weekends, and future projections. However, this intervention does not produce closure, because the central characters' internalized dispositions cannot be easily erased. Saket remains emotionally detached from his relationships in Dubai because the internalized Doxa and emotional attachments persist. The freedom offered by Dubai is always provisional, haunted by the norms left behind.

Another chronotopic space within the novel is the stand-up stage, where normative constraints are temporarily suspended, and uncomfortable truths are exposed. The introduction of stand-up comedy into the Indian literary scene is a distinguishing feature of the novel's representation of social reality. Stand-up comedy reflects the impact of post-liberalization India, where Western modes of expression and new ways of telling personal stories are common. The proliferation of the stand-up comedy scene in India parallels the rise in internet penetration and the need for young people to voice their concerns in ways they prefer. This provides young people with a platform to say things they would normally never say and to use language that the moral doxa does not allow. Saket's humor connects his private struggles with his public life, helping him and readers reflect on shifting ideas about relationships, masculinity, and respectability. It serves both as a way to cope with the circumstances and as a means to comment on his and other characters' actions. Humor helps Saket deal with personal failures, especially after his divorce. He left his American life and decided to become a stand-up comic after his first wife took most of his earnings through a divorce settlement. According to Bakhtin's chronotope, Saket's stage performances create a special time and place where social rules can be questioned and personal voices can be heard, even in a society that avoids discussing certain topics. Saket's jokes about food choices in India are a pertinent example of this. The debate over vegetarian and non-vegetarian food is a staple of these performances. When Saket says, "we Punjabis eat non-veg. We're surely going to hell" (8), he exposes the discourse on food choices in India, where certain food items are considered morally corrupt and polluting by some people. In the current environment, such sensitive topics as sexual preferences, food choice, religion, etc., become heated exchanges in newsroom debates, but on the stand-up stage, they create laughter. Saket's stand-up phase also ends with his separation from Payal. She was convinced by her family through various means, even the help of a family doctor, that she herself had some issue, and that her love for Saket was not love but that she was under his spell and being exploited. The old Doxa, with the help of the Panopticon, managed to have its way, thereby separating the couple, and Payal agreed to the "match made in heaven" (205) declared by her parents. The match does not last long because Parimal definitely ticked all the columns on the established doxa's list, but he could not tick the one most desired by millennials: compatibility.

Conclusion

Bhagat's portrayal of the competing doxas of India's upper-middle class in the novel richly lays out the social mechanisms, fears, and anxieties operating within these networks. The struggle is ongoing, with the old trying to reinforce the prevailing doxas and the young finding new ways and charting new territories to break boundaries and remold society. Bhagat's recurring humor has led him to try the latest stand-up technique and present the social reality as he sees it. The novel is full of realist props, social markers, and references to real locations, though normal Indians encounter them only in social media or in movies. The references to Bollywood in the novel help the reader identify with the story. The focus on urban, upper-middle-class experiences limits the generalizability of the novel's social critique. By centering on a segment of society that enjoys particular material and cultural capital, the narrative may not fully reflect the diverse realities of India's broader population. However, as Mohi ud Din et. al. contend Bhagat's writing "holds significant value in raising awareness among the masses, fostering efforts to create a more just

and exploitation-free society” (319). Similarly, Vimal and Pillai observe that Bhagat “aims to entertain, challenge mindsets, and make a lasting impact on society” (1301). The issues examined are not limited to the upper classes. These dynamics are increasingly visible across other social groups as economic liberalization, digital connectivity, and migration trends transform the broader cultural landscape. For instance, as internet access expands into rural and semi-urban areas, young people from different backgrounds are exposed to similar pressures to balance inherited values with new global aspirations. Social surveillance and parental expectations continue across classes, even if specifics differ. Furthermore, shifts towards platforms such as stand-up comedy and social media as spaces for negotiating identity and confronting norms hint at a wider social change in India, where new forms of individual expression and resistance are emerging across diverse settings. Thus, while the novel’s present context is urban and upper-middle-class, its study of identity, autonomy, and social change offers insights that reverberate throughout Indian society and illuminate the evolving nature of contemporary cultural negotiations. Nonetheless, the social media intervention plays a big part here, as the experiences depicted may be rarer, but the larger population is aware of them and discusses them. Stand-up comedy is also expanding into smaller cities; the internet makes it available to people in all corners of the country, profoundly altering lives everywhere. (Yadav 39-56). As for the Bollywoodisation of Bhagat’s oeuvre, this novel is well-suited for adaptation into a successful Bollywood movie because it covers all the required elements: romance, heartbreak, career, comedy, etc. Lastly, this novel goes beyond just being a humorous perspective. It borders on satire. Critics such as Ahmed et al. (568) and Parida & Sarangi (395) have highlighted Bhagat’s use of humor and satire as tools to address dark realities and established social norms. This strategy continues in this novel as well. Bhagat sharply mocks the performative acceptance of tradition among the upper-middle class, as seen in the overstated portrayal of social media influencers who publicly advocate for ‘Indian values’ while privately disregarding them. The novel exposes the contradictions at the heart of social performance in contemporary India, suggesting a satirical intent that warrants further scholarly attention.

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