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Breaking the Convention: Re-reading Chetan Bhagat's 400 Days as an 'Indianised' Detective-Mystery Fiction

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Abstract:
Chetan Bhagat (1974-), conceivably the trendsetter of Indian English popular fiction, puts on an alternative lens to portray Indian society. Since his first novel, *Five Point Someone*, Bhagat not only earns immense readership but also attests to writing stories with which the lower-middle-class Indian youth feels connected. A maverick in style, tone, and temperament, Bhagat has often been criticised by the intelligentsia for compromising the conventions of Indian English fiction in the pursuit of establishing his popularity. Contrarily, his admirers consider him a voice to champion colloquial/*anchalik* Indian English.
With the publication of *The Girl in Room No 105*, Bhagat introduces a detective-mystery series. His insistence on highlighting the prevalent social contradictions through the marginalised position of the detective(s), certainly gives the series a post-colonial utterance. In *400 Days* (2021), the detective duo Keshav and Saurabh rescue Siya Arora, a twelve-year-old child, after nine months of her abduction. Structured in the form of a 'whodunit', the multi-layered narrative neither portrays the detectives as 'perfect' nor mystifies the reader in the jigsaw puzzle of its necessary pre-requisite mystery. Here, the plot thickens as the narrative progresses, revealing the complex dynamics of relations that involve the members of the Arora family and Keshav's affair with Alia, the abducted child's mother.
The main objective of this venture is to underscore Bhagat's points of 'departure' from the 'established' formulas of detective-mystery fiction as he puts equal weight on unfolding the stereotypes of Indian society. I will also try to zoom in on the fact that Bhagat is commercially successful not because he writes in 'accessible' English, but because of his tactical selection of the genre to serve the 'appetite' of his intended readers.

Keywords: Detective-Mystery Fiction, India, Chetan Bhagat

Since the dawn of civilization, mystery has accompanied human experience. Crime, with all its perspectival uncertainty, is a common occurrence of life. And the detectives are entrusted to investigate and unravel the mystery and identify the criminal. Interestingly, literature revolves around entangled mystery. Its apprehensive decoding has appealed to the readers across the ages. Any conscious reading may find out the elements of detective-mystery in ancient texts like the *Bible*, *Oedipus the King*, *Sarama*, etc. These texts, beyond their specific purposes, imply transgression of acceptable social law as crime and the methods of controlling it. In the nineteenth century, with Edgar Allan Poe's "tales of ratiocination," modern detective-mystery fiction finds its shape. His sleuth, Auguste Dupin, is hailed by

P.D. James as "the first fictional investigator to rely primarily on deduction from observable facts" (James, 12). What makes Poe's novels unique is his inclination to the scientific method of deduction. He conceives a plot leaving myriad clues which the readers more often than not overlook, but later the detective explores and solves the case. His detective is not a vigilante but a professional who solves crime. This form of writing becomes more popular in the hands of Arthur Conan Doyle, whose sleuth self, Sherlock Holmes, carries this a way forward. Conan Doyle formalises Holmes as an unsung hero who solves mysteries with broader social and political significance.

Though the words 'mystery' and 'detective' are considered complementary, there is a fine line of difference. In a mystery fiction, the readers are invited to a world where gradually the cause-effect relationship lacks logical coherence. This appals the readers to whom the narrative rarely offers respite to re-establish the relation, leaving dysfunctional signs that augment their agony. However, the singularity of place and inclination to portray the stasis in social order or human nature allows the investigator of a mystery novel to take a predictable strategy. It is an extremely plot dominated form. On the other hand, the detective novels are much more complex, as the sleuth has to interview, collect samples, understand the motive, trail a suspect, and above all, verify the process of investigation to reach the goal. Here, the detective is not allowed to presuppose any predicted relation between the victim and the perpetrator, and this trope enhances its readability. This is purely a character driven form where the charisma of the detective makes the reader glued to the narrative. However, Denis Porter's structuralist analysis of a plot centering on crime as recorded in the book *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1981), allows us to use the terms 'mystery' and 'detective' interchangeably. Porter argues that the beginning of a mystery/detective novel prefigures its denouement. This insight allures us to mention the opinion of another stalwart of structuralism, TzevetanTodorov, who stresses the double plot structure used in the detective-mystery novels, especially in the 'whodunit' form. He identifies these as the story of the crime that concerns the heinous act done on the victim and the story of the investigation that unfolds the first one.

If the Enlightenment movement is considered an impetus to rein crime and criminality to maintain social cohesion, imperialism adds a new dimension to it. Stephen Knight argues, "[c]rime fiction is an early, often the first, voice to respond to new social and cultural encounters generated by the colonial situation" (Knight, 25). As being a realist is the fundamental prerequisite of detective/mystery fiction, such novels made necessary alterations to become 'convincing', minding the socio-cultural realities of the new world.This includes not just the change of locale but also attire, motives of crime and the weapon used for it, the method of deduction, and the imposition of law. It does not mean that such a form of Western literature was not popular in the colonial world. It would be better to deduce that the Western typicalities inspired the germination of literature in the colonial era, where the writers gave particular emphasis to the issues concerning race, nation, and empire. In the post-colonial world, such novels acquire different expression. The writers of such novels must have the insight to comprehend and explain the attitude, sentiment, and ethics of the post-colonial people, even though they sound strange or complex in the Western eyes. In his book *The Post-Colonial Detectives* (2001), Ed Christian opines that the enfolding flaws in the socio-political spheres in the form of contradiction and corruption offer the crime a distinct feature. He continues, "]p]ost-colonial detectives … are especially quick to notice such societal contradictions because they have always been exploited by them" (Christian, 2). The post-colonial detectives are desperate to solve cases to gain power or prestige, which is otherwise denied to them. These detectives usually are of low-profile, and their acquaintances or authority seldom take them

seriously. The writers allow them to integrate the Western method of deduction with the local cultural uniqueness. In the process, such literature becomes engrossing and commercially successful, both for the tactics the detectives adapt and the revelation of the pluralistic character, typical of a (post-colonial) society.

In her book, *Reading India Now*, Ulka Anjaria coins the term "new provincialism" to suggest the shift of focus from the tales of migratory estrangement and dilemma to the nuances of post-colonial reality that the new age Indian literature shows since the beginning of the 21st century. She highlights some major areas of focus, like "new forms of aspiration-entrepreneurialism, social mobility, financial independence, individual success…" (Anjaria, 29).The writers of this new wave are pragmatic in their approach. They present India not as a dysfunctional place but as a site of endless independence and opportunity. As language is a potential weapon to mark and manifest the change, they consider customising the elitist 'Indian English' by adding regional flavour. This tailored Indian English gives these writers a new tongue to proclaim distinctiveness. However, India is still valorised as 'home,' not as a nostalgic place of never-return but as a living place with all its complexity and possibility. Chetan Bhagat, one of the most heard voices of this new movement, denounces the portrayal of India as an 'exotic' site. His works try to penetrate deep into the life of 'real' India. Despite his 'temporary' diasporan experience, Bhagat feels that India is in his self. Bhagat proudly informs that whatever he is today is *because* of India. His India is conservative in outlook but liberal in heart. This duality (not hypocrisy) forms the crisis and achievement of the youth whose stories he narrates and to whom he is popular. His writing presents India as a 'new province' of promise and prospect. The changing dynamics of the society and the Indians growing interest in the digital world (both as a means of convenience and communication) feature in his writing. In *400 Days*, Bhagat sets the story of the abduction and rescue of a girl in Gurugram, a tier-2 Indian city, subverting the common fact that only the big cities are prone to crime. His detectives, though influenced by the Western method, remain Indian when emotion comes. The same comes true to the dynamics of relation, which would be revealed to the reader. Before analysing the novel to find out how much Bhagat breaks up with the Western convention of detective-mystery novels, it is better to have the story first.

The narrative reintroduces the reader to Keshav Rajpurohit and SaurabhMaheshwari, who, shutting down their agency, "Z Detectives," now live in the building complex Icon, located in Gurgaon. Saurabh is working in a computer security company, "Cyberspace." Keshav is busy preparing for UPSC, and like a typical Chetan Bhagat hero, he confides to the reader, "I have this stupid UPSC exam" (Bhagat, 1). Soon the readers are informed of his parents concern for his future, as despite being an IITian, he is still jobless and unmarried. The narrative takes a sharp turn when Alia Arora asks Keshav's help to find out her elder daughter Siya, a twelve –year- old child, who has been missing for nearly nine months when the police fail to do anything substantial. On his insistence, Alia unfolds in detail the night of the mishap and what followed, including the Arora family's initiative, police investigation, and the media trial that victimized the family. Keshav undertakes the case and starts the investigation with his friend. However, as the story progresses, Alia and Keshav get intimate (courtesy of her difficult marriage with Manish). Investigation complements the romance, and the duo, with the help of the police, catches the criminal, who turns out to be the highly respected 'panditji' of the Arora family. The story ends with Siya's rescue, which binds the Arora family together. Keshav withdraws himself and plans to reopen their agency backed by the heavy monetary reward he receives from the Arora family.

While discussing Bhagat's absence from the university syllabi, Suman Gupta plainly states, "Bhagat's

novels largely escaped scholarly attention" (Gupta, 48). He elaborates that Bhagat's choice of theme and vocabulary gives him easy popularity and, on the contrary, denies the status of a 'literary fiction' writer. This conflict between popular fiction and literary fiction is nothing new, and history witnesses that this binarism faces reconsideration many times. Being popular does not mean lack of literary merit. Rather to becoming popular, a writer has to negotiate his/her imagination with the relevant and relatable issues of the society. Bhagat's choice of writing detective stories surely has an axis of becoming popular, and it empowers him to analyse the society more widely and penetrate it with objectivity.

Bhagat's forte lies in telling the stories of Indian households in effortless and unpretentious way. His characters are remembered not for their heroics but for their humane emotion.Even his detectives are not extraordinarily smart, flamboyant or resourceful, rather sound scratchy at times. They are portrait as boys next door, perturbed by being jobless or rejected by girls for being fat. The story shows, despite their success in solving two tough cases (recorded in *The Girl in Room No 105* and *One Arranged Murder*), Keshav parents still is worried of Keshav's future. He is forced to prepare for the UPSC, keeping aside the fancy of becoming a professional detective. They are desperate to find a suitable match for him. When Alia requests them to fix a meeting Keshav, in her they find a potential bride but her marital status disheartens them. Keshav recollects, "Their disappointed expressions were so funny…I wanted to burst out laughing but controlled myself" (Bhagat, 8). When Alia comes to Keshav's house with the request of taking up the case, his mother barely leaves them alone and as he insists privacy she becomes sentimental, "You have the guts to throw me out of my own living room. Will you try this with your father?" (Bhagat, 17). In the middle of the novel, Keshav plans to go to Kerala to hear the account of abduction from the lone witness, Suhana, Alia's younger daughter. His family restricts him but gives permission when he informs that Alia has already paid him well. Towards the end of the novel, after catching the culprit when Keshav returns home wounded, his father congratulates him. In the end, when SamsherArora transacts 1cr as remuneration to Keshav's account, it is his father who comes with the proposal of restarting the agency, the dream both Keshav and Saurabh cherish for a long time. Actually, being typical Indian parents they cannot be satisfied until their son(s) get settled for a secured future.

The relationship between Keshav and Saurabh 'Golu' Maheshwari is very intimate. Saurabh is not Keshav's assistant or chronicles of his success, a trope used by Western detective novelists. He is rather Keshav's partner, his comrade in solving the crimes. In the novel we find that Saurabh brilliantly hacks Siya's phone, recovers the highly transcripted data, creates reliable fake profiles on the social media (Telegram) and helps Keshav whenever the latter becomes clueless. He helps to track the Panditji's activity, which incidentally leads them to Siya. Though it is Keshav who fights with the Panditji, Saurabh's contribution is nonetheless important. In fact, when they are planning to restart the agency, he offers the innovative plan to "combine the detective agency with a child security software company" (Bhagat , 342).

Keshav's intimate affair with Alia, Siya's mother, makes *400 Days* a Bhagatesque novel. In Bhagat's world, love is the driving force. This novel is not an exception. When Alia meets Keshav, she is in depression. Keshav's words and activity win her trust. Her account shows that she is marginalised in the Arora family, and even though she lives with Manish separately, his extramarital affairs have put the marriage on edge. On top of that, Manish is reluctant to pursue the abduction further as it may badly impact the family's jewellery business. At this juncture of her livfe, she meets Keshav, who relentlessly searches for the criminal and finally catches him. Interestingly, Siya's return arouses the mother-self in

her. She understands that the family needs her now. She fumbles to take the decision of divorce, and Keshav assures her, "It can't be about you and me. It's about Siya. I met Manish. He is trying to make things better…" (Bhagat , 340). The affair may seem unexpected or unnecessary from the perspective of conventional detective-mystery novels, but it is what makes Chetan Bhagat's novels special. Their mutual separation also offers Bhagat's attitude toward marriage and love in the context of present-day India.

In conclusion, I want to highlight two issues: Chetan Bhagat's use of allusion and his concern for the growing crimes against the teenage girls. Bhagat structures the plot of crime after the great Indian epic the *Ramayana*. The name Siya has a direct connection to Devi Sita, who was abducted by the demon Ravana, who broke her trust in the disguise of a sage. In the novel, the Pandit ji capitalises on the Arora family's trust. He was obsessed with her as he reveals, "*Ever since I saw your mother and placed my hand on her head, I felt something...Later I realised, it was you. You were inside her then*" (Bhagat, 325, italics original). On that dreadful night, he threatens Siya that he would murder her siblings if she shows any resistance. He later forces her not only to act like his wife but also to habituate a life of confinement. Until captured, he acts like a pandit (read sage) and uses his profession as a ploy to remain unsuspected. Interestingly, Keshav, whose name resembles one of the names of Lord Rama, rescues Siya. Secondly, in recent times the rate of crime against teenage girls in India is spiking high. Bhagat's choice of using this trend as the theme of this novel seems at once deliberate and purposive. He forms the core of the crime around child sexual abuse (CSA). In their article "Child Sexual Abuse in India: A Wake-up Call", S. Tyagi and S. Karnade (2021) cite a report by United Nations International Children Education Fund which statistically shows that during 2005-12, 42% of Indian girls were victim of CSA. The National Crime Records Bureau points out that sexual crimes against children have risen by 4.5% in 2019, as compared to the previous year. In this context, at the end of the novel, when Saurabh comes up with the idea of combining their detective agency "with a child security software company" (Bhagat, 344), Bhagat's concern for these budding youth seems palpable. In fact, this craft of relating the 'fact' with 'fiction' makes the novelist relevant, which scholars may dub as 'popular.'

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