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## CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL REALITIES IN CHETAN BHAGAT'S *THE GIRL IN ROOM 105*

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### Abstract

This research paper examines Chetan Bhagat's *The Girl in Room 105* as a reflective narrative of contemporary Indian social realities, focusing on the intersections of love, communal identity, gender, politics, and digital culture. Through a close textual analysis, the study explores how personal relationships are shaped by structural inequalities and socio-political tensions, particularly in relation to religious polarization and gendered vulnerability. The novel is analyzed as a critique of institutional failure, where justice is influenced by power, ideology, and media narratives rather than ethical accountability. Additionally, the paper investigates the role of digital technology in mediating truth, surveillance, and emotional connection, highlighting its ethical implications in modern society. By tracing the moral transformation of the protagonist, the study argues that Bhagat presents moral responsibility as a relational and ongoing process grounded in self-awareness, empathy, and ethical courage. The paper ultimately positions *The Girl in Room 105* as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English fiction that uses popular narrative form to engage with complex social and ethical concerns.

### Keywords:

Communal identity, Gender vulnerability, Moral responsibility, Digital culture, Contemporary Indian fiction

Chetan Bhagat's *The Girl in Room 105* occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Indian English fiction by blending popular narrative form with serious engagement in social, political, and ethical issues. While often categorized as commercial fiction, the novel transcends simplistic romantic and thriller conventions by offering a layered representation of modern Indian society. Through the personal journey of Keshav Rajpurohit and the tragic fate of Zara Lone, Bhagat explores the complexities of love, identity, communal tension, caste consciousness, political interference, and digital mediation. The narrative situates individual experience within a broader socio-cultural framework, demonstrating how private lives are deeply shaped by structural forces. In doing so, *The Girl in Room 105* becomes not merely a crime novel or love story, but a reflection of contemporary India's moral and social contradictions.

At the heart of the novel lies the theme of love and emotional vulnerability in a rapidly changing society. Keshav's relationship with Zara is marked by intimacy, uncertainty, and emotional imbalance, reflecting the fragile nature of romantic relationships in urban India. Bhagat presents love not as a stable or idealized emotion but as a negotiation shaped by fear, social expectation, and personal insecurity. Keshav's narrative voice reveals a persistent oscillation between hope and doubt, highlighting the psychological strain of emotional attachment. His confession that love requires patience, understanding, and forgiveness

underscores the novel's concern with emotional maturity and ethical responsibility (Bhagat). This portrayal aligns with psychological theories of attachment, which emphasize how emotional bonds are influenced by insecurity, dependence, and the fear of abandonment (Ainsworth).

The romantic relationship between Keshav and Zara is further complicated by religious and cultural difference. Zara's identity as a Muslim woman introduces an additional layer of tension, as their relationship unfolds against a backdrop of communal suspicion and social prejudice. Bhagat does not portray communal conflict as an abstract political issue; instead, he embeds it within everyday emotional life. Keshav's constant anxiety regarding Zara's safety reflects the lived reality of religious minorities in contemporary India, where fear of violence and discrimination infiltrates personal relationships. Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee argue that interfaith relationships often function as microcosms of broader communal dynamics, revealing how private affection becomes entangled with collective identity and historical memory (Chatterjee).

The murder of Zara Lone marks a decisive shift in the narrative, transforming the novel from a romantic account into a meditation on violence, justice, and moral responsibility. Zara's death is not treated as an isolated criminal act but as an outcome shaped by social prejudice, political manipulation, and institutional failure. Bhagat portrays the murder as both a personal tragedy and a social indictment, forcing readers to confront the vulnerability of marginalized individuals in a polarized society. Keshav's grief is depicted with psychological realism, emphasizing the lingering impact of trauma and loss. His inability to articulate his pain reflects what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes as the disorientation and emotional fragmentation characteristic of profound grief (Kübler-Ross).

The investigative dimension of the novel allows Bhagat to explore systemic inadequacies in law enforcement and governance. Keshav's pursuit of truth is repeatedly obstructed by bureaucratic indifference, political pressure, and social bias. The narrative exposes how justice in contemporary India is often mediated by power rather than principle. Bhagat's depiction resonates with sociological critiques that identify corruption, political interference, and institutional inertia as persistent obstacles to justice (Jaffrelot). Through Keshav's experience, the novel illustrates how ordinary citizens are compelled to navigate informal networks and moral compromise in the absence of reliable institutional support.

Gender emerges as a crucial axis of vulnerability and control within the narrative. Zara's experiences reveal how women, particularly those from minority communities, are subjected to heightened surveillance, judgment, and risk. Her hesitation to move freely and her fear of social scrutiny reflect the gendered dimensions of public space in India. Feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege emphasize that women's bodies often become symbolic sites of communal and moral regulation, especially during periods of social tension (Rege). Bhagat's portrayal of Zara underscores this reality, showing how gender intersects with religion to compound vulnerability.

Caste, though less overtly foregrounded than religion, remains an underlying social determinant in the novel. Bhagat highlights the persistence of caste-based assumptions even within urban, educated spaces such as universities. Keshav's reflections on invisible hierarchies and unspoken prejudice illustrate how caste continues to shape social perception and opportunity. Sociologists such as Satish Deshpande argue that caste in contemporary India operates subtly through cultural capital, social networks, and everyday interaction rather than overt exclusion (Deshpande). Bhagat's narrative captures this subtlety, demonstrating how structural inequality influences both professional trajectories and interpersonal relationships.

The political context of the novel further intensifies its social critique. Bhagat depicts politics not as a distant institution but as an active force shaping public discourse, policing, and communal relations. Political opportunism exacerbates social division, transforming personal tragedy into a matter of ideological convenience. Keshav's realization that truth is often buried to protect political interests reflects a broader disillusionment with democratic institutions. Political theorists such as Martha Nussbaum argue that justice in plural societies requires moral courage and institutional accountability, both of which are shown to be fragile in Bhagat's narrative (Nussbaum).

Digitalization plays a significant role in shaping both the investigation and the emotional landscape of the novel. Keshav relies heavily on digital communication, social media, and online networks to trace Zara's movements and reconstruct events. Technology emerges as both a tool and a risk, offering access to information while amplifying misinformation and surveillance. Bhagat's depiction aligns with contemporary scholarship on digital society, which emphasizes that technology reshapes truth, memory, and social interaction rather than simply facilitating communication (boyd). The novel demonstrates how digital traces complicate privacy, trust, and ethical judgment in modern relationships.

Emotionally, the novel portrays moral growth as a painful but necessary process. Keshav's journey is not one of heroic triumph but of ethical reckoning. He confronts his own limitations, recognizing how fear, control, and silence contributed to relational breakdown. This transformation reflects theories of moral development that emphasize self-awareness and responsibility as central to ethical maturity (Kohlberg). Bhagat thus positions personal growth as inseparable from social awareness, suggesting that ethical relationships require both emotional intelligence and moral courage.

Ultimately, *The Girl in Room 105* presents contemporary Indian society as a space of contradiction, where modern aspirations coexist with entrenched prejudice, and technological advancement coexists with moral uncertainty. Bhagat's narrative reveals how love, crime, and justice are deeply embedded in social structures that shape individual agency. By integrating romance, crime, politics, and social critique, the novel challenges the assumption that popular fiction lacks intellectual depth. Instead, it demonstrates that accessible storytelling can serve as a powerful medium for examining complex social realities.

The novel's engagement with communal identity is one of its most significant contributions to contemporary Indian English fiction. Bhagat presents communalism not as an abstract ideological conflict but as an everyday reality that shapes fear, perception, and moral judgment. Zara's Muslim identity is repeatedly framed through anxiety—anxiety about safety, visibility, and social reaction. This fear is not exaggerated or sensationalized; instead, it is woven subtly into routine decisions and emotional responses. Such representation reflects sociological studies that emphasize how communal tension infiltrates ordinary life, influencing behavior even in the absence of overt violence. The novel thus captures the psychological residue of communal conflict, where historical trauma and present insecurity coexist.

Keshav's perspective further reveals how privilege operates unconsciously. As a Hindu male, he moves through public spaces with relative ease, often unaware of the structural protections he enjoys. His gradual realization of Zara's vulnerability marks an important ethical awakening. This shift aligns with critical social theory, which argues that ethical responsibility begins with recognizing asymmetrical power relations. Bhagat does not portray Keshav as malicious or intentionally prejudiced; rather, he depicts him as emotionally sincere yet socially naïve. This nuance allows the novel to critique structural inequality without resorting to moral absolutism.

The portrayal of institutions in *The Girl in Room 105* reinforces the novel's skeptical view of justice. Law enforcement agencies are shown to be constrained by political pressure, public sentiment, and ideological bias. The investigation into Zara's murder exposes the fragility of procedural fairness in a polarized society. Bhagat's narrative reflects the argument advanced by legal scholars that justice systems often mirror dominant social values rather than challenge them. When communal narratives gain political traction, institutional neutrality becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Through Keshav's frustration and disillusionment, the novel articulates a broader crisis of trust in public institutions.

Education, traditionally viewed as a space of rationality and progress, is also problematized in the novel. The university setting, rather than functioning as a refuge from social prejudice, reproduces existing hierarchies of caste, religion, and class. Bhagat suggests that formal education alone is insufficient to dismantle deeply ingrained biases. This depiction aligns with sociological critiques of meritocracy, which argue that educational institutions often reinforce inequality under the guise of neutrality. Keshav's experiences illustrate how prejudice persists even in spaces that claim intellectual openness.

Caste operates subtly yet persistently within the narrative. While the novel does not foreground caste violence explicitly, it reveals how caste-based assumptions influence social interaction and opportunity. Characters evaluate one another through markers of language, behavior, and background, reflecting what scholars describe as "soft casteism." This form of discrimination is particularly insidious because it often

goes unacknowledged. Bhagat's decision to treat caste as an underlying presence rather than a central plot device mirrors contemporary urban realities, where caste has not disappeared but adapted to new social contexts.

The emotional core of the novel lies in its portrayal of grief and guilt. Keshav's response to Zara's death is marked by self-reproach and moral confusion. He repeatedly questions his actions, wondering whether greater attentiveness or courage might have altered events. This introspective grief reflects psychological models that emphasize guilt as a central component of bereavement, particularly when death is sudden or violent. Bhagat's depiction avoids melodrama, instead focusing on the slow, disorienting nature of loss. Grief becomes not only a personal experience but a moral reckoning.

The narrative also critiques the commodification of emotion in contemporary culture. Public reactions to Zara's murder are shaped by media narratives, political rhetoric, and social media discourse. Tragedy becomes spectacle, and empathy is often replaced by outrage or ideological positioning. Bhagat exposes how digital platforms encourage rapid judgment rather than sustained understanding. Media theorists argue that such environments reward emotional intensity over ethical reflection, a tendency clearly illustrated in the novel. The result is a culture in which moral clarity is sacrificed for visibility and influence.

Technology, while instrumental in uncovering information, also deepens ethical ambiguity. Digital evidence provides fragments rather than coherence, demanding interpretation rather than offering certainty. Keshav's reliance on digital traces underscores the limits of technological truth. Scholars of digital epistemology emphasize that data does not speak for itself; it requires context, interpretation, and ethical judgment. Bhagat's narrative reinforces this insight, showing how technology can mislead as easily as it can illuminate.

The novel's treatment of masculinity is also noteworthy. Keshav's emotional vulnerability challenges traditional expectations of male stoicism and control. His openness about fear, doubt, and grief marks a departure from dominant masculine norms. At the same time, the novel critiques possessive and controlling tendencies that often masquerade as love. By portraying masculinity as a site of ethical struggle rather than dominance, Bhagat contributes to ongoing conversations about gender and emotional responsibility.

Moral ambiguity pervades the narrative, resisting simplistic distinctions between good and evil. Characters are shaped by circumstance, fear, and social pressure, complicating moral judgment. Bhagat's refusal to offer easy villains or heroes aligns with contemporary ethical thought, which emphasizes contextual understanding over absolute condemnation. This ambiguity invites readers to engage critically with the narrative, reflecting on their own assumptions and biases.

The city itself functions as a moral landscape, embodying both opportunity and alienation. Urban anonymity enables freedom while diluting accountability. Relationships form quickly but lack depth, increasing vulnerability to misunderstanding and betrayal. Bhagat's urban setting reflects sociological analyses of modern cities as spaces of emotional fragmentation. In such environments, ethical responsibility becomes more difficult to sustain, as individuals navigate competing demands and transient connections.

Despite its critique of social structures, the novel ultimately affirms the possibility of ethical agency. Keshav's persistence in seeking truth, even when discouraged, reflects a commitment to moral responsibility. His actions do not restore what has been lost, but they represent an effort to honor relational obligation. Ethical philosophers argue that responsibility is meaningful even when outcomes are uncertain. *The Girl in Room 105* embodies this principle, suggesting that moral action retains value regardless of success.

The narrative's conclusion reinforces the theme of ethical maturation. Keshav emerges not as a triumphant hero but as a more reflective and responsible individual. This transformation underscores the novel's central argument: that personal growth arises from confronting discomfort rather than avoiding it. Bhagat presents moral development as an ongoing process shaped by loss, reflection, and ethical choice.

In synthesizing romance, crime, communal tension, and political critique, *The Girl in Room 105* offers a compelling representation of contemporary Indian society. The novel demonstrates how individual lives are inseparable from social structures and historical forces. Through accessible narrative and emotional depth,

Bhagat invites readers to examine the moral dimensions of everyday life, challenging complacency and encouraging ethical awareness.

The present study has examined Chetan Bhagat's *The Girl in Room 105* as a significant text that reflects the complex social realities of contemporary India. Through its blending of romance, crime, and social critique, the novel reveals how individual lives are deeply shaped by structures of religion, gender, caste, politics, and digital culture. Bhagat's narrative demonstrates that personal relationships cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-political environment in which they exist. Love, trust, and grief are consistently influenced by communal tension, institutional failure, and social prejudice, making the personal inherently political.

The novel's portrayal of communal identity highlights the psychological vulnerability experienced by marginalized groups, particularly religious minorities. Zara Lone's character embodies the intersection of gender and religious insecurity, revealing how fear and surveillance become normalized in everyday life. Bhagat does not depict communalism as a distant or episodic phenomenon; instead, he presents it as a persistent social condition that infiltrates emotional relationships and moral judgment. This representation underscores the human cost of polarization and ideological extremism.

Gender emerges as a critical dimension of ethical vulnerability within the narrative. The novel exposes how women's bodies and choices are subjected to heightened scrutiny and control, particularly within communalized social contexts. Zara's tragic fate reflects broader patterns of gendered violence and silencing, while also emphasizing the limitations of institutional protection. Through this portrayal, the novel calls attention to the need for ethical responsibility that extends beyond legal frameworks and addresses cultural attitudes toward women.

The study also highlights Bhagat's critique of political and institutional structures. Law enforcement, media, and political authorities are shown to be influenced by ideology and power rather than impartial justice. This institutional failure contributes directly to the silencing of truth and the normalization of injustice. By depicting an ordinary individual's struggle against these forces, the novel emphasizes the moral burden placed on citizens in societies where institutions fail to uphold ethical accountability.

Technology functions as both an enabling and destabilizing force in the narrative. While digital tools assist in investigation and communication, they also intensify surveillance, misinformation, and emotional alienation. The novel suggests that technological advancement without ethical awareness can deepen social fragmentation rather than promote understanding. Bhagat's portrayal aligns with contemporary concerns regarding digital ethics and the erosion of trust in networked societies.

Ultimately, *The Girl in Room 105* presents moral responsibility as an ongoing and relational process rather than a fixed moral code. Keshav's transformation reflects the necessity of self-reflection, emotional maturity, and ethical courage in confronting social injustice. The novel affirms that while truth may not always lead to justice, the pursuit of truth remains a meaningful ethical act. By engaging with contemporary social anxieties through accessible narrative, Bhagat's novel contributes significantly to discussions on morality, identity, and responsibility in modern Indian society.