



TRADITION UNDER SURVEILLANCE: MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND SOCIAL PRESSURE IN ONE ARRANGED MURDER

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ABSTRACT

In the novel, *One Arranged Murder*, Chetan Bhagat significantly explored the contemporary Indian society and the practices of marriage within the delineation of crime, psychological distress, social anxiety and technology. The novel portrays the traditional cultural values with the contrast of the pressures of modern urban life. This research paper, titled "Tradition under Surveillance: Marriage, Family, and Social Pressure in One Arranged Murder," explores a thematic analysis of societal expectation on marriage and family relationships. It also exposes the personal bonds within the family and how they are influenced and regulated by the social concerns, status and the fear of societal honour. It stresses that, the role of family is not only a stabilizing force but also a basis of psychological pressure. These pressures lead to emotional conflict, secrecy, and moral instability, ultimately leading to criminal outcomes within the narrative. Societal and familial constraints restrained the individual's freedom of choice making and compel them to conform to follow the traditional practices of marriage and uprightness. Bhagat used crime and murder as the tools for his narrative strategy to reveal the youth's survival struggles to fulfill the family relationships and their ambitions and passions. To unveil this, he used the murder investigation as a symbolic tool. The author blends popular fiction with the anxieties of a generation caught between inherited traditions and modern technological realities.

This paper also takes the way of portrayal of marriage and family as vulnerable institutions under continuous surveillance in the novel *One Arranged Murder*. The novel ultimately critiques contemporary urban culture, suggesting that excessive social pressure and loss of privacy can lead to moral disintegration and psychological distress. This study contributes to scholarly discourse on Indian English popular fiction by highlighting its relevance as a mirror of social transformation.

KEY WORDS: Arranged Murder, Arranged Marriage, Contemporary Indian Society, Family Honour, Social Surveillance, Psychological Distress, Crime Fiction, Technology and Relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction in the post-liberalization era has progressively the most prominent about the complexities of urban life, particularly the evolving institution of marriage, human bonding and family relationships. To expose these realities in the modern times, Chetan Bhagat has taken these socio-cultural and modern contraries as his subject matters. And he became one of the most influential voices in the contemporary Indian popular fiction; addresses the themes of youth, passion, ambition, relationships and social pressures. The novel *One Arranged Murder* (2020) symbolizes a significant thematic shift, amalgamation of crime fiction with a socio-cultural critique of marriage and family in the contemporary Indian society. "I had done 2 States which was a love marriage, but I hadn't touched arranged marriages. I decided to explore it, but with murder." (Bhagat, *The Telegraph*)

In the title of the novel, the word marriage has replaced with murder; it seems something new and created curiosity among the readers. "Did the boy kill the girl is more interesting. So I wanted to explore a genre that creates more thrill and proves to be a better page-turner." (Bhagat, *The Telegraph*) Though the plot has taken its beginning with the family bondage through the arranged marriage of Saurabh and Prema, and leads to the death of Prema on the day of 'Karva Chauth', consequently it ends with the disclosure of the murderer. Bhagat beautifully narrated every occasion of socio cultural activities of the Indian families interwoven with the rituals of the happiest occasions

with the family members and relatives; especially in the overcrowded Punjabi families.

One Arranged Murder is set against the backdrop of metropolitan life, where traditional values coexist uneasily with technological surveillance, social anxiety, and psychological insecurity. Marriage, especially arranged marriage, is no longer portrayed as a purely private or familial matter; instead, it becomes a socially monitored institution subject to constant judgment from family, community, and digital platforms. Bhagat uses crime and murder not merely as plot devices but as narrative tools to expose the emotional strain produced by rigid social expectations.

This paper examines how *One Arranged Murder* portrays marriage and family as vulnerable institutions operating under continuous surveillance. It argues that excessive social pressure, fear of honour, and loss of privacy lead to emotional conflict, secrecy, and moral instability, ultimately culminating in criminal consequences. The study situates the novel within contemporary Indian English popular fiction and highlights its relevance as a mirror of social transformation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly engagement with Chetan Bhagat's fiction has largely focused on his contribution to popular literature and youth culture. Critics such as E. Dawson Varughese (2013) and Tabish Khair (2018) have examined Indian English popular fiction as a site where middle-class aspirations, anxieties, and



social mobility are negotiated. Bhagat's works are often read as accessible narratives that reflect everyday urban realities rather than as formally experimental literary texts.

Several studies analyze Bhagat's earlier novels; *Five Point Someone*, *2 States*, and *Half Girlfriend* in terms of education, regional identity, and romantic relationships. However, limited academic attention has been paid to *One Arranged Murder* as a serious socio-psychological exploration of marriage and crime. Existing commentary tends to classify it as commercial crime fiction, overlooking its thematic depth.

This paper analyzes the marriage, family and social pressure under surveillance in *One Arranged Murder*, drawing on sociological and cultural theory to reposition the novel within contemporary literary discourse.

ANALYSIS

Chetan Bhagat's *One Arranged Murder* is a significant contemporary Indian English novel that reflects the changing socio-cultural realities of urban India. While the novel is positioned within the genre of crime fiction, it extends far beyond a conventional murder mystery by engaging deeply with the themes of marriage, family, psychological distress, social anxiety and technological surveillance. The novel explores how traditional cultural values, particularly those surrounding arranged marriage and family honour, are challenged and reshaped under the pressures of modern urban life. This paper presents a comprehensive thematic understanding of how Bhagat critiques contemporary Indian society by portraying marriage and family as institutions under constant observation and social regulation.

The theme of surveillance is central to the novel's portrayal of marriage, surveillance operates on multiple levels; familial, societal, and technological. Michel Foucault's concept of surveillance is useful in understanding how individuals internalize social control and regulate their behaviour under constant observation. Families closely monitor the behaviour, choices and emotional responses of individuals to ensure conformity with socially acceptable norms. Society reinforces these expectations through gossip, moral judgment, and the fear of dishonour. The family honour and societal reputation place a key role to impose the observation on the relationships.

Bhagat presents the family as a paradoxical institution both nurturing and oppressive. While families claim to act in the best interests of their children, they often become agents of coercion. The novel reveals how parental expectations and societal norms restrict individual freedom. Characters feel compelled to suppress doubts and conform to traditional ideals; questioning the marriage meant questioning the family's honour. Societal pressure generates emotional conflict and secrecy. The inability to communicate openly leads to psychological distress, reinforcing the idea that silence is a survival mechanism within rigid social structures. From a sociological perspective, marriage is viewed as a regulated social institution shaped by norms of honour, status, and conformity (Giddens, 1992).

Perna's father Ramesh Malhotra craves for family honour, though it seems to be patriarchal domination, he really wants to protect the tradition and social dignity. But, it is fair and acceptable at certain extent, rather to follow the hypocrisy. The marriage arrangements and the expenses in high range budget, lavish publicity indicates the show off of Ramesh in the society to be a high class society family. On contrary internally he has been struggling with overdue and debts with the loss of his business. He maintained secrecy in his economic and financial issues even with his family members. At one point where he has no choice to overcome the financial crisis, he asked his daughter Perna to adjust the money from her passionate business firm. This shows family honour in terms of financial status became under surveillance.

In *One Arranged Murder*, marriage is not portrayed as a personal choice but as a public spectacle governed by family approval and social reputation. Bhagat exposes how arranged marriage operates within rigid expectations of compatibility, behaviour, and honour. In our society, marriage is not about two people; it's about two families and their image. It reflects how personal happiness is subordinated to collective approval. The fear of social judgment transforms marriage into a performative institution, where appearances matter more than emotional well-being.

Family occupies a complex position in *One Arranged Murder*. On one hand, it is portrayed as a stabilizing institution that provides emotional security, cultural continuity, and social belonging; on the other hand, the family emerges as a powerful source of psychological pressure. Bhagat revealed this, through the characters of Aditya, Geetu and Bindu; Ramesh's siblings. Ramesh Malhotra wishes to stand his family in the society as an ideal one, but the family members want their choice of freedom in leading their life in the modern urban realities. Aditya chooses his career as musician and singer with his own composition to work in a bar, as it is his passion to spend the life in such a manner. Ramesh feels that, it is totally a disgraceful job and not at all suitable to his family. Moreover he always hesitates Aditya's attitude that he has addicted to drugs and treats him as a black sheep of the family. Parents and elders, often motivated by concern for social status and honour, impose expectations that restrict individual freedom. The novel reveals how family pressure discourages open communication and emotional honesty. Individuals are compelled to suppress doubts, fears, and dissatisfaction to maintain harmony and uphold family reputation. This suppression creates emotional isolation and internal conflict, which gradually intensifies psychological distress.

Bhagat emphasizes that the fear of societal honour plays a crucial role in regulating personal choices. Honour, in the novel, is not an abstract moral value but a social currency that determines a family's standing within the community. Any deviation from accepted norms questioning a marriage, expressing emotional uncertainty, or asserting individual choice is perceived as a threat to this honour. Consequently, characters are forced to prioritize social approval over personal well-being. This dynamic illustrates how societal and familial constraints restrict freedom of choice and compel individuals to



conform to traditional practices of marriage and moral uprightness, even when such conformity causes emotional harm. The characters of Bindu and Geetu are symbolized for the illegitimate relationships in the family and within the society. Geetu married a cab driver Jogi, who has not well being financial status as Malhotra's. To cover this economic dishonour, Ramesh Malhotra provided all the financial assistance for his minimum respectable livelihood and they settled in USA. Geetu's diverse with Jogi and remarriage with Greg Davis; a school teacher is also a constraint to the family honour. To deviate this position, she has settled in USA, again she has faced a new problem in her marital life with Anjali who assumed to be her daughter, but later revealed the truth that she is an illicit inheritance of Bindu. Bindu, with her affair with Param created a total buzz in the family and puzzled the relationships of the family.

Psychological distress is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Bhagat portrays characters that experience anxiety, insecurity, paranoia, and emotional instability as a result of sustained social pressure. The inability to express vulnerability or seek emotional support exacerbates this distress. Anjali, who has brought up at Geetu, represents a psychologically distressed character. As it is revealed that, she is not the daughter of Geetu, but Bindu's, the same is revealed by Geetu in order to sustain her second marital relationship. When Anjali came to know that she is the one, to weaken the Geetu's marital bond, Anjali became shocked and disappointed with her birth secret. As she brought up in the westernised world, she has taken it easily and wants to bounce back with her independent life. "People don't exactly follow relationships in this family as they are supposed to." (287) Later when she came to India, she knows that, Perna is her twin sister. The familial and social circumstances make her to compare the honour and fate of herself with Perna. "The hardest emotion to admit to in this world? It's envy." (294)

The novel suggests that modern urban life, despite its promise of independence and progress, often intensifies psychological strain by combining traditional expectations with new forms of surveillance. This emotional pressure does not remain confined to the inner lives of characters; instead, it manifests in destructive ways, ultimately contributing to moral instability and criminal outcomes. It is dramatically portrayed as 'Karva Chauth' accidental death of Perna; whether it may be an accident or suicide or murder. "When life ends, it doesn't even take a minute." (16)

Crime and murder function as central narrative strategies in *One Arranged Murder*. Bhagat uses crime not merely as a source of suspense but as a symbolic device to expose the darker consequences of social regulation and emotional repression. Perna's father Ramesh seeks to close the case of Perna's death at any cost without further investigation even though the police, media show some interest regarding the justice for the family. "But we can't spoil our family image or discuss internal matters in public." (145) He always looks for the family honour, and the same he expressed to Saurabh; if the misshapen was not arising, he would be Malhotra's son-in-law. Keshav and Saurabh investigated the case along with the police; Anjali is also following the progress in the disguise of

friendship with Kashav. At the end, everyone was astonished as they came to know that the real murderer is Anjali who arranged this murder through the continuous surveillance with the technology.

Technology intensifies this surveillance by enabling constant monitoring through mobile phones, social media, and digital communication. As a result, private life becomes increasingly transparent, leaving individuals with little emotional autonomy. Bhagat suggests that this continuous observation erodes trust and intimacy, transforming marriage into a performance rather than a genuine emotional relationship. The novel critiques the illusion of security provided by digital surveillance, suggesting that constant monitoring does not foster emotional closeness but instead undermines trust and privacy. Technology thus becomes an extension of societal control, reinforcing the pressure to conform and perform.

The murder in the novel is not presented as an isolated act of violence; rather, it emerges as the culmination of prolonged psychological stress, fear, and emotional breakdown. Through the investigation process, hidden tensions within relationships; between Aditya and Anjali, and families are gradually revealed. The crime narrative serves as a lens through which the reader gains insight into the emotional and moral fractures underlying socially acceptable appearances. The murder investigation also symbolizes a search for truth in a society governed by secrecy and performance. As layers of deception are uncovered, the novel reveals how individuals construct false narratives to protect social image and avoid judgment. Bhagat suggests that the need to maintain appearances often leads to ethical compromise and emotional dishonesty.

Though categorized as popular fiction, *One Arranged Murder* performs an important cultural function. As Raymond Williams (1977) argues, popular texts reveal the emotional structure of society. Bhagat's novel captures contemporary India's fear of failure, obsession with honour, and loss of privacy.

CONCLUSION

One Arranged Murder presents a powerful critique of contemporary Indian urban society by examining the intersection of tradition, surveillance, and psychological distress. Through its exploration of marriage, family, crime, and technology, the novel reveals the hidden costs of social conformity and honour-based regulation. This paper underscores the relevance of Bhagat's work within Indian English popular fiction as a reflective mirror of social transformation. The novel invites readers to reconsider the role of tradition in modern life and to recognize the urgent need for emotional authenticity and individual freedom within social institutions.

The novel ultimately portrays marriage and family as vulnerable institutions under continuous surveillance. Rather than offering stability and emotional fulfillment, these institutions often become sources of stress, control, and moral conflict. Bhagat critiques a culture in which social pressure outweighs individual well-being and where privacy is increasingly eroded by both social expectations and



technological intrusion. The novel suggests that without emotional openness, trust, and respect for individual autonomy, traditional institutions risk losing their moral foundation.

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