

## Emergence of New Woman in the Backdrop of India's Economic Liberalisation in Chetan Bhagat Novels 'One Indian Girl' and 'One Night @ The Call Center'

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**Abstract:**

The concept of the "New Woman" emerged in the late 19th century and had a significant impact throughout the 20th century. The term was first coined by Sara Grand in her 1894 article, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question." Grand, also the author of *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), advocated for equal education and better public health for women. Her vision of the New Woman was one who was educated, independent in decision-making, and contributed to the nation's strength. Women during the late Victorian era, taking advantage of expanding economic opportunities, entered professions such as teaching, secretarial work, bookkeeping, and typing. The concept of the New Woman evolved over time, reflecting different characteristics across the decades. While the New Woman of the 19th century was bold, fashionable, educated, and pushed societal boundaries—including in her sexual liberties—the New Woman of the 20th century was more rational, introspective, and often conflicted. This figure challenged the constraints imposed on women by Victorian and Edwardian society, and today, she might be seen as a liberated woman or feminist. The Economic Liberalisation of India in 1991 marked a turning point, shifting the country's economic policies to focus more on the market and services, and opening doors for private and foreign investment. This reform significantly impacted Indian society, creating more opportunities for women and marginalized groups. In post-liberalised India, the idea of the New Woman became a reality, with women increasingly taking the initiative and embracing change. Although the experience of this transformation varies by individual, modern Indian novels often depict the New Woman as a product of the mercantile society, one who challenges traditional social structures. The rise of capitalism in post-liberalised India provided further momentum for the emergence of this new, empowered woman.

**Keywords:** New Woman, Economic Liberalisation, Patriarchy, Educated Woman, Equality.

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### Introduction-

Chetan Bhagat is a highly successful and influential author in contemporary Indian literature, particularly known for his appeal to young readers. His works, published during India's economic liberalisation, primarily focus on urban youth, with their settings rooted in city life. The female characters in his novels are typically educated, independent, and career-driven women from urban areas. These women demonstrate strong decision-making abilities, excel in their professional lives, and embody the concept of the "New Woman" in their respective fields. The economic liberalisation

of India further expanded the opportunities available to these educated, independent women, opening up a wide range of career possibilities across various industries.

### **Review of Literature:**

Kala, Sasi (2013) in her analysis, "A New Woman in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*," examines the evolving roles of women in Indian society, focusing on the portrayal of women in Anita Nair's novel. Women in Nair's narrative break free from traditional roles such as mother, daughter, sister, and wife, embracing new and unexpected identities, such as teachers, social workers, activists, businesswomen, or corporate leaders. Traditionally, female characters have been silenced by the oppressive patriarchal system, but the "New Woman" resists this oppression. She is career-driven, financially independent, and more open in expressing her emotions, including her sexual desires. (Kala)

Clemons, Vicente Edward (2016) in *The New Woman in Fiction and History: From Literature to Working Woman* discussed that the New Woman is a multifaceted figure in literature, media, and real life. There is no single New Woman, but rather a variety of representations, each reflecting different aspects of late Victorian feminism. (Clemons)

Parvathi, S (2016) in *The Evolution of a New Woman in Sudha Murthy's Novel Mahashweta* examined the depiction of the New Woman in Sudha Murthy's novel. The New Women in Murthy's work are portrayed as hardworking, dedicated, delicate, and docile. (Parvathi)

Goyal, Indu (2019) in *New Woman Underworld to Wonder World* agreed that the image of women has significantly changed over the past four decades. Since the 1980s, women's roles have evolved, with many balancing careers and family responsibilities. The New Woman is career-oriented, educated, economically independent, and capable of making decisions while also guiding her children. (Goyal)

Tiwari, Soumaya (2021) in *Emergence of Modern Woman in Namita Gokhale's Gods, Grave and Grandmother: A Perspective* emphasized the rise of women novelists in post-independence Indian English literature, with Namita Gokhale being one of the prominent voices. The women characters in Gokhale's works are portrayed as strong, assertive, and individualistic, representing a protest and an effort to create a new woman in a new society. (Tiwari)

Arora, Bhavana (2022) in *The Concept of 'New Woman' and Her Appearance in Shobha De's Select Novels* argued that the New Woman signifies a woman's awakening to her role and position within her family and society. Driven by a deep inner desire for individuality, this new woman advocates for women's rights, equality, and power, seeking parity with men. (Arora)

While these studies analyze the emergence of the New Woman in various novels, none of them specifically explore the New Woman in Chetan Bhagat's novels *One Indian Girl* and *One Night @ The Call Center*. Therefore, there is an opportunity to analyze these works in the context of the New Woman in post-economic liberalized India.

**New Woman:** The concept of the "New Woman" emerged in the late 19th century and had a significant impact throughout the 20th century. The term was first introduced by Sara Grand in 1894 in her article *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*. Grand, the author of *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), focused on advocating for equal education and public health for women. Her vision of the New Woman was one who was educated, made her own independent decisions, and contributed to Britain's social superiority.

The New Woman challenged the constraints of a male-dominated society, a theme particularly reflected in the works of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. The New Woman was not only a feminist and social reformer in real life but also a literary figure—a poet or playwright who championed female suffrage. In literature, she often represented a character whose thoughts and desires not only focused on her own aspirations but also mirrored societal attitudes. (<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian>)

The characteristics of the New Woman evolved over time. According to Gail Finney, she was typically focused on self-fulfillment and independence rather than the traditional feminine ideal of self-sacrifice. She believed in legal and sexual equality, often remained single due to the challenges of balancing equality with marriage, was more open about her sexuality, was well-educated and intellectually active, worked outside the home, and was physically active, often choosing comfortable clothing, sometimes even male attire, over traditional female dress.

The Lexico dictionary defines the New Woman as a woman who is considered different from past generations; especially one who challenges or rejects the traditional roles of wife, mother, or homemaker, and advocates independence for women and equality with men. ([https://www.lexico.com/definition/new\\_woman](https://www.lexico.com/definition/new_woman)) Similarly, Merriam-Webster describes the New Woman as a late 19th-century figure who resisted traditional societal controls and sought to fulfill a complete role in the world, valuing individualism, autonomy, and self-reliance. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/new%20woman>)

**Economic Liberalisation:** Economic liberalisation in India refers to the significant changes in the country's economic policies that began in 1991, aimed at making the economy more market-oriented, service-driven, and open to private and foreign investments. This reform marked the most important economic shift in post-independence India. These changes are credited with fostering higher economic growth between 1991 and 2011 and significantly reducing poverty between 2005 and 2015. (<https://www.drishtias.com/30-years-of-economic-liberalisation>)

The liberalisation of India's economy transformed the nation into one of the world's fastest-growing economies. It also impacted social life, offering increased educational and employment opportunities for Indian youth, although these opportunities varied across different sectors. The concept of the "New Woman" emerged in post-liberalised India, reflecting the changing role of women in modern society. The New Woman is no longer hesitant to take initiatives and has a more assertive presence in public and professional spheres. While this shift in mindset varies among individuals, its effects are notable. Post-liberalisation novelists often portray the "New Woman" in their works as a product of the modern capitalist society, one who challenges traditional social structures. The rise of the New Woman was further fueled by the growth of capitalism in post-liberalised India, which provided additional momentum for these societal changes.

**Emergence of New Woman In 'One Indian Girl':** *One Indian Girl* is a novel about Radhika, an educated and independent woman who navigates multiple relationships. She works at Goldman Sachs and earns a good salary, confidently expressing her opinions. Radhika openly mentions having a boyfriend, embodying the characteristics of a "New Woman" who challenges traditional patriarchal

views. Throughout the novel, she rejects marriage proposals from three different men, making independent decisions about her life and living on her own terms. (Bhagat, *One Indian Girl*)

**Radhika, As a New Woman, Demonstrated a Strong Sense of Independence and Career Oriented Attitude:** Radhika, the protagonist of *One Indian Girl*, embodies the traits of a New Woman with her independent and career-focused attitude. She is highly educated and works at Goldman Sachs in London. As the first-person narrator, Radhika presents herself in a way that challenges the taboos of conservative Indian society. “Hi, I am Radhika Mehta and I am getting married this week. I am twenty-seven years old. I grew up in Delhi. I now work in London, at Goldman Sachs, an investment bank. I am a vice president in the Distressed Debt Group. Thank you for reading my story. However, let me warn you. You may not like me too much. One, I make a lot of money. Two, I have an opinion on everything. Three, I’ve had sex. Now if I was a guy you would be okay with all of this. But since I am a girl these three things don’t really make me too likeable, do they?” (Bhagat, *One Indian Girl*). In the novel, the protagonist Radhika presents herself as a New Woman, characterized by her education and financial independence. She is an educated, working woman who stands out due to her self-sufficiency and autonomy.

**The New Woman Openly Discusses Her Sexuality, A Subject Deemed Taboo in Indian Society:** Radhika openly discussed her sexuality, a subject that is considered taboo and deeply offensive in traditional Indian society.

“Awkward silence for ten long, slow seconds. *What are we supposed to say to each other? Should I break the ice? Should I say, hey, we can officially start having sex in a week? Shut up, Radhika. Shut the fuck up.*” (Bhagat, *One Indian Girl*)

“I can’t really describe the next ten minutes. His tongue felt the exact opposite of the brutal waxing strips. Every flick transported me to a state of extreme pleasure. *Why don’t people do this all the time? Wow, why didn’t anyone tell me sex feels so damn good?*” (Bhagat, *One Indian Girl*)

“Radhika Mehta, you are finally having sex, I said to myself and mentally high-fived. It felt like a major milestone in life, on par with getting into IIMA or scoring Goldman Sachs. Or distressed debt. Will that job be tough? Okay, why am I thinking about distressed debt when there is a man in me?” (Bhagat, *One Indian Girl*)

In the above lines, Radhika, as a New Woman, openly discusses her sexuality and desires. This reflects how the New Woman is challenging traditional notions of womanhood in Indian society, where sex has traditionally been viewed as a domain exclusive to men. By addressing topics typically considered taboo for women, the New Woman pushes the boundaries of conservative Indian society. In this way, Radhika emerges as a New Woman in the novel *One Indian Girl*.

**IIMs and IITs Became Key Drivers of India’s Economic Liberalisation, Further Contributing to the Rise of the New Woman during This Period:** In 1991, India implemented economic reforms focused on liberalisation and globalisation, leading to a rise in foreign direct investment (FDI) and the establishment of numerous multinational companies in the country. During this period, prestigious institutions like IIMs and IITs gained prominence, attracting many urban middle-class youths, including women, due to the economic boom in India. These institutions offered financial

independence to women and enabled them to ascend to higher positions in the corporate world. As a result, these factors played a significant role in the emergence of the New Woman during this time.

“I finished college and took the CAT for MBA entrance. As you can guess, nerdy me hit a 99.7 percentile. I made it to IIM Ahmedabad. Didi married Anil, owner of three sanitary ware shops in Paharganj and two Honda CR-Vs. They had their wedding the same year I joined IIMA. I finished with IIMA. Overachiever me had a job offer on Day Zero, the prime slot for recruiters. I got an offer to be an associate at Goldman Sachs, New York. The job paid an annual compensation of 120,000 dollars.” (Bhagat, *One Indian Girl*)

The protagonist of the novel, Radhika, studied at IIM Ahmedabad and secured a job at Goldman Sachs in New York. India’s economic liberalisation period encouraged many young Indians to pursue education at IIMs. After graduating from these prestigious institutions, Indian women landed high-paying jobs, gained financial independence, and this contributed to their emergence as the New Woman.

**Emergence of New Woman in Novel ‘One Night @ The Call Center’:** The female protagonists of the novel—Priyanka, Radhika Jha, and Esha Singh—embody the qualities of the New Woman. They are educated, ambitious, and career-driven, advocating for women's liberty and independence. These women challenge traditional gender roles and promote gender equality, opposing the conservative norms of Indian society. Deeply rooted patriarchy in Indian culture perpetuates gender disparity, making the emancipation of women all the more essential.

**New Women Demonstrate A Balance Of Politeness And Assertiveness:** The New Woman displays qualities of both politeness and firmness, adapting to the demands of each situation.

“Esha’s tone was perfect—just the right mix of politeness and firmness. Management monitored us on average call handling times, or AHTs. As WASG got the more painful customers, our AHT Benchmarks were higher at two-and-a-half minutes per call. I checked my files for everyone’s AHT—all of us were within targets.” (Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Center*)

The above lines suggest that Esha, as a New Woman, was courteous with her customers but didn’t hesitate to show firmness when the situation called for it. Unlike the submissive nature associated with traditional or old women, the New Woman is confident in expressing her views and opinions in a clear and assertive manner.

**The New Woman Openly Addresses Topics Considered Taboo, Such As Sex and Sexuality:** New women openly talk about the taboo subjects of sex and sexuality. ‘By the way, do you have a condom?’ Priyanka asked to her boyfriend. ‘Do you think he loves her? Or is it just sex? Some good, wild sex that they share?’ Radhika said. ‘There is more. Aha, here is what I was looking for: awesomeindia.com—the best porn site for Indian girls, adultfriendfinder.com—a sex personals site, cabaretlounge.com—a strip club in Boston, porninspector.com... hello, the list goes on this department.’ ‘What’s with him and Boston?’ I repeated Esha’s words. (Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Center*)

The above lines from the novel clearly demonstrate that the New Women characters express their views on any topic openly and confidently. They are not embarrassed to ask their boyfriends for

condoms, nor do they feel ashamed when discussing their sexual desires. Therefore, Esha, Radhika Jha, and Priyanka embody the traits of New Women in this novel.

**Conclusion:** The New Woman is a multifaceted figure in literature, media, and practice, with no single definition, but rather a range of representations that span across society. Her characteristics are not fixed but evolve over time, taking on different forms and dimensions. The New Woman is distinct from past generations, particularly in her rejection of traditional roles as wife, mother, or homemaker, advocating instead for women's independence and equality with men. She is both a real and cultural phenomenon, challenging the boundaries set by a male-dominated society.

In the novel, Radhika embodies the New Woman, characterized by her education, career, and financial independence. She openly discusses her sexuality, which is often considered taboo and offensive in traditional Indian society. The liberalisation of India's economy has transformed it into one of the world's fastest-growing economies, influencing social life by offering more educational and employment opportunities to Indian youth, though these opportunities vary by sector.

India's economic reforms attracted young people to institutions like the IIMs, where many women received high-quality education. Upon graduation, these women secured high-paying jobs, became financially independent, and emerged as New Women. The female protagonists in novels like *One Night @ The Call Center*—Priyanka, Radhika Jha, and Esha Singh—are all examples of the New Woman. They are educated, ambitious, career-driven, and advocate for women's rights and independence. They confidently discuss their sexual desires without shame.

New Women are at the forefront of feminist movements, fighting for gender equality, a right enshrined in the Indian Constitution through Articles 14 and 15. However, true gender equality will only be achieved when society as a whole unites against gender discrimination.

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