

TWO STATES: THE STORY OF MY MARRIAGE

Chetan Bhagat

(2009)

Story

In one sense, this is a typical Chetan Bhagat novel, the best-selling author who specialises in dramas about modern-day Indian love stories. But it is also very different in that it is a comic novel, a romantic comedy about the love, break up and then marriage of two people. It is also a largely autobiographical novel since it more or less follows the true story (as announced in the sub-title) of the author's own marriage; the '2 states' in the title refer to the Punjab and Tamil Nadu. This fact allows the author to mercilessly poke fun at both his own family background (Punjabi in north India) and at his wife's family background (Tamil in south India). In other words, he can be slanderously critical because he is an insider, and what could be more 'inside' than the story of your own courtship and marriage?

The story focuses on Krish, a Punjabi boy, and Ananya, a Tamil girl, who first meet at college. The novel begins with a prologue, in which Krish and a psychotherapist discuss his breakdown after a break-up with Ananya. The rest of the novel is presented as the story that Krish tells the therapist, including his having considered suicide. The story is then told by Krish in four sections. The first is set on the campus of the Indian Industrial Management college, where Krish and Ananya meet, have sex and eventually agree that they are in love. We laugh at the awkwardness of their 'courting', and we wince at the immature and sexist attitudes of their classmates. Ananya, despite her conservative, Brahmin upbringing has no qualms about pre-marital sex and actually initiates it with Krish. After some debate, they also agree to get married, but now the difficult part comes: making sure the other person's family agrees. This section ends on convocation day, when the two families are introduced to each other, to great humorous effect.

In the second part of the story, they both get jobs and Krish takes up an offer to work in Madras because that's where Ananya's family lives. His goal is to reassure them that a Punjabi boy is not going to ruin their daughter by marrying her. He begins by visiting the family home as a tutor for Ananya's younger brother. Here, the author has a lot of fun describing how a north Indian reacts to the very different culture of south India. Krish eventually wins over the family by helping Ananya's father do his first PowerPoint presentation and by arranging for her mother to sing in a concert organised by his bank.

The third section of the novel is the reverse of the second: now the southern Ananya must woo Krish's northern family. She arrives and is invited to stay in his parent's house, in a separate room, of course. She experiences some of the same 'culture shock' that Krish had in the south. But, unlike him, she is not able to win over her potential in-laws, largely because of their own squabbles and unresolved internal tensions. There is also a ludicrous encounter between the two families when they both end up on holiday in the resort town of Goa. The serious fall-out, however, is that Krish's family decide they don't want to be related to Ananya's family. Krish goes into a depression, starts drinking heavily and is only rescued by his father, with whom he has had a difficult relationship, when the father personally convinces Ananya's family that Krish does truly love their daughter.

In the fourth part, Krish finds some guidance from a spiritual guru in Pondicherry, a town just south of Madras. And, finally, the wedding is held, but again there are chances for the author to exploit the situation for humour. Krish's boisterous extended family come to Madras where they are shocked that they are expected to be ready at six in the morning for an important ritual, one of those 'numerous complex ceremonies that south Indian Brahmins love.' A northern guest then asks, 'Is this a marriage or torture?' The story ends when Ananya gives birth to twin boys.

Themes

Indian marriages The main theme of this novel is the complexity, absurdity and potential heartbreak built into the modern system of Indian marriage. Even in the twenty-first century, when the novel was published, most Indians get married with some degree of consent, if not total approval, of both sets of parents and extended families. Although the boy and girl themselves might initially decide that they want to get married (unlike the old system of 'arranged marriage', in which the parents did all the choosing), the couple will still want both sets of potential in-laws to agree. This might be called the 'arranged love marriage'. The system, and indeed the entire plot of the novel, is summarised very wittily in the author's synopsis printed as a frontispiece to the book:

Love marriages around the world are simple:
Boy loves girl. Girl loves boy. They get married.

In India, there are few more steps:
Girl's family has to love boy. Boy's family has to love girl.
Girl's family has to love Boy's family. Boy's family has to love girl's family. Girl and Boy still love each other. They get married.

As dramatised in the novel, these necessarily entangled relationships can cause distress. When the two families first meet, at the graduation ceremony of the boy and girl, they eye each other with unguarded suspicion. The mothers, in particular, are not keen on the match. Ananya's mother is wary of marrying her 'baby' to someone from the 'crude' north, while Krish's mother isn't ready to have 'black people' in her family [southern are generally darker than northerners). When Ananya's family breaks off 'negotiations' (the term used for discussions between the two families), Krish goes into a tailspin and nearly commits suicide. That, however, is the only 'dark' moment in this romantic comedy, which, after the 'additional steps outlined above, concludes with the couple living happily ever after.

IT culture Another target of the author's satire in this novel is the puerile nature of boys and men in the IT world in contemporary India. This is the sector in which Indians have excelled, inventing or programming many of the important innovations in digital technology since the 1990s. The school that churns out the executives of tech firms is the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad. This is where the author took his degree, so it is not surprising that he gets inside the immature minds of the boys (mainly) who will be running the tech world in the next few years. As the book shows, these 'IT nerds' are serious cases of arrested sexual and emotional development. In one scene, the boys in the queue in the cafeteria cause a minor delay in serving so that they can ogle the 'best-looking girl in their batch (who, of course, is Ananya). The immaturity is also revealed when, after only a week into their course, one of the boys asks Ananya to marry him. Later, when Ananya asks Krish to sit with her in the lunch, the entire cafeteria stares at them wondering what he has done to merit sitting with her. As the author puts it, 'We had become everyone's matinee show.' After the two become lovers, they are the objects of a slur campaign online and in conversation. The author often refers to the students at the institute as 'ITians,' which captures perfectly their identity as technological geniuses who resemble aliens more than humans.

Regional prejudices One of the delights of this humorous novel is the light-hearted way it pokes fun at both north Indians and south Indians. It is not just a story about a marriage between north and south, it is also a story about the cultural contrasts between the two regions in terms of language, dress, attitudes and, especially, cuisine. As one critic observed, it is a story about 'a marriage of paranthas (north Indian snack) and idlis (south Indian), of paneer (north) and coconut (south).' The author gives us both sides of this cultural divide. First, we follow Krish as he goes to Madras in the south to take up a job but also to win over Ananya's parents. Although he is still in 'India,' he feels alienated and confused, as illustrated in this passage: 'The sign in every shop was in Tamil. The Tamil script resembles those optical illusion puzzles that give you a headache if you stare at them long enough. Tamil women, all of them, wear flowers in their hair. Tamil men don't believe in pants and wear lungis even in shopping districts.' Krish also comments that Tamil words, even when written in English, are still unpronounceable and 'so long they wouldn't fit on a single row of Scrabble.' Another example occurs when Krish is invited for dinner by Ananya's parents. Again, he is put off by what he sees inside their house: 'The sofas were simple, with cushions thinner than Indian Railways sleepers ... There were pictures of various South Indian gods all around the room... The house had an eerie silence. A Punjabi house is never this silent even when people sleep at night.' Krish is also

confused by the calm temperament of Tamils: 'We ate quietly. Ananya had told me they never spoke much anyway. The best way to fit in was to never talk. "More chutney?" Ananya's mother's question (and my shaking my head) was the only conversation we had during the meal.' When the tables are turned and Ananya visits Krish's parents in the Punjab, the satire is more harsh, as would be expected because now the author is making fun of his own community. He mocks the Punjabi tendency to show off, to talk loudly and to make exaggerated claims about their sons' careers and the daughters' beauty. Most of these humorous passages, in both north and south, are based on stereotypes, but, like many stereotypes, they contain a healthy dose of realism. These passages are laugh-out-loud funny and the main reason why many critics have dismissed this novel as lacking depth. To be fair, however, the novel never presents itself as anything other than entertainment. And there's nothing wrong with that, as millions and millions of readers have confirmed.

Krish (Impulsive)

Character Krish is an 'ordinary' Punjabi boy. He is tall, nice-looking and clever, but also emotionally immature and impulsive. He doesn't do well while studying at the IT institute, although he does manage to attract the beautiful, wealthy Ananya. He is sincere but somewhat confused, buries his emotions and avoids any kind of confrontation. Whenever Ananya asks about his father, about whom he has said nothing, Krish just says, 'Long story. Another time.' We later learn the reason for his reticence on that particular issue. But his inarticulacy is more widespread. For example, he gets upset when he doesn't get a job because, in the interview, he can't articulate his reasons for wanting the position, other than the truth, which is that he needs the money. Then Ananya coaches him into saying something more impressive about 'access' and 'outreach.' He then gets the job in a bank, but he really wants to be a writer.

Activities While at college, Krish avoids studying whenever possible, preferring to concentrate on getting Ananya into bed. Later, when in Madras, he likes cruising around the city on his motorbike. He likes to spend money in fancy restaurants and to drink good-quality whisky. Although he is an expert in IT programming, he gets bored with his work and prefers to read novels and magazines. However, when he is depressed, especially after a break-up with Ananya, he buries himself in his work, taking his laptop home and working until late.

Illustrative moments

Impulsive Like most of the boys studying at the IT institute in this novel, Krish is emotionally immature and inarticulate. He loves Ananya, or thinks he does, but doesn't know to express it, except in overblown phrases full of platitudes. This makes him impulsive with her, bursting out from time to time with his pent-up emotions. An excellent, and very funny, example of his impulsiveness comes midway through the story when Krish decides it is finally time to ask her to marry him. The fact that she is in the middle of a job interview does not matter, not to Krish. He bursts through the door and asks the startled members of the interview committee for a 'few minutes to speak with your candidate.' Ananya is horrified and embarrassed and yet also somewhat proud of him. 'Can't this wait?' asks the committee chairman, but Krish says, 'Please, sir. It will only take a minute.' With everyone stunned into silence, Krish walks up to the seated Ananya, kneels down before her and whispers, 'Ananya Swaminathan, I, Krish Malhotra, am deeply in love with you and want to be with you always. Apart from when we go to an office of course. Will you marry me?' Ananya smiles and says, 'Of course, I will, you idiot, but not right now. Bugger off.' Krish stands up and the chairman says, 'Finished? I hope it's good news.' This is a characteristic Krish action: impulsive, embarrassing, immature, but endearing and humorous.

Protective Krish is also quick to act in another scene, but this time the motive and the tone is very different. He protects his mother against violence from his father. The situation is that Krish and his parents have been arguing about a marriage proposal for him. Krish himself is not interested in the potential bride, but his father is very keen, as the girl is the daughter of a close friend. When his mother steps in to defend him, his father starts slapping her, and when Krish intervenes, he raises his hand to slap him, as well. But Krish quickly grabs his wrist and slaps him back, once, twice, three times. Then he forms a fist and punches him in the face. As Krish himself explains, 'My father went into a state of shock, he couldn't fight back. He didn't expect this: all my childhood, I'd suffered his dominance. Today...was a reaction to two decades of abuse...I couldn't stop. I punched his head until he collapsed on the floor...I looked at my father and vowed never to speak to him again.' Here

Krish acts to protect not just his mother, but himself as well. He has been the victim of bullying all his life and now he strikes back, in a cathartic response. Although it settles the dominance issue between father and son, it leaves him with a lasting scar of guilt for striking his father ('luckily there wasn't a gun in the house,' he admits). This deep trauma is one reason that Krish is protective of his own feelings and emotions, and rarely shares them, even with Ananya.

Clever Krish may be immature in emotional terms, but he is a whizz kid when it comes to IT skills. And he is also clever in how he uses his talents to win over Ananya's parents. Her mother has always wanted to be a singer, so Krish organises a business conference at his bank where she will be the 'entertainment.' His handling of Ananya's father is even more timely and effective. In terms of the technological revolution, Mr Swaminathan is stuck in the 1970s, having just managed to learn how to operate a slide projector. The problem is that his boss expects him to make a PowerPoint presentation on the bank's past year performance and future prospects. Mr Swaminathan is at his wits end. He has never felt fully appreciated at the bank, and now he will simply hand his boss another reason to deprecate him. Krish arrives, sees the problem and then spends three patient hours going over the facts and figures with him. Next he lays out a plan: Day 1, we lay out all the information in sequence. Day 2, we make the images...and so forth. Krish has also brought with him a bottle of whisky, which he shares with Ananya's father on the sly (Ananya's mother doesn't like him to drink in the house.). By the time Krish leaves at midnight, exhausted and a little drunk, Mr Swaminathan's resistance to his daughter marrying a 'boy from the north' has evaporated.

Ananya (Assertive)

Character Ananya is an intriguing and believable mixture of vulnerability and assertiveness. She comes from a conservative Brahmin family in south India and does not fit in easily with her fellow students at the IT institute in north India, even though she is said to be the 'brightest girl' in her year. Despite her strict upbringing, she is more liberated than her boyfriend, Krish. She drinks alcohol and has no qualms about pre-marital sex, at least with a boy she likes. Indeed, she takes control of the relationship, emotionally and sexually. After leaving the institute, she shows her deep reserves of self-confidence and expresses opinions without wavering. Still, she is sensitive and takes offence when she is not accepted by Krish's parents after a disastrous visit to their home in the Punjab. It is a difficult task for her to navigate the complex path of an 'arranged love marriage' (i. e., initiated by the couple but requiring parental permission). She is anxious that her own parents approve of Krish, which they eventually do. Ananya comes across, on the surface, as a little brash, even crude, but in the end she shows that her love for Krish never faltered and she sticks by him until the marriage is celebrated.

Activities At the IT institute, Ananya spends a lot of time studying, often with Krish, and often in his room. She follows a set routine in the morning, including a full ten minutes combing her hair and then drinking several cups of tea, not from a bag but with loose leaves that come from a particular region of south India. She usually dresses in jeans and T-shirt, but likes to wear a gold-threaded sari to special occasions. Like her mother, she likes to listen to classical south Indian vocal music and is able to identify which *raga* is being sung. She doesn't like the fancy restaurants that Krish likes and prefers a café-style place where she can eat her beloved idlis and sambhar (traditional south Indian snacks.)

Illustrative moments

Vulnerable Although Ananya is an attractive and intelligent young woman, she is from a conservative Brahmin family in south India and finds it difficult at first to fit into college life at the IT institute in north India. Because she stands out, for so many reasons, she is vulnerable. Girls taunt her because she dresses differently, and boys tease her because she is beautiful. But the most humiliating moment comes in the classroom when she is unable to answer a question in microeconomics. The professor is merciless in his comment: 'Notice, class, please notice. This is the state of economics education in the country. Top graduates don't know the basics. And they ask, why is India economically backward?' Then he addresses Ananya directly, 'Ms Swaminathan, I suggest you catch up on your economics.' Ananya breaks down and starts to cry. In fact, Ananya did get top grades in economics, but not in the algebra-based microeconomics that is used by this particular professor. She knows that she is intelligent, a top student, and she knows that professors sometimes try to humiliate students, but she is vulnerable because she is different, a south Indian studying in the north.

Assertive However much Ananya lacks confidence in public, she is very much in control in her private life. She is able, unlike Krish, to talk about her feelings, even her sexual desires, without the giggling and sniggering that paralyses her classmates. She also exerts control during the early stages of her relationship with the immature Krish. This assertiveness is displayed in a scene that occurs after they have had sex for the first time. They are, supposedly, studying together in Krish's room in the hostel, but the sexual energy is still running high. Krish asks her if she loves him and she replies, with a sly smile, 'Well, I could be using you for sex.' This disconcerts him, as he is more straightforward than she is. He again says he loves her, this time more forcefully: 'I love you, damn it. Don't you get it?' 'That's better,' she says half-mockingly. 'Now you sound convincing.' 'What about you?' he asks. 'I'm going to think about it.' This is classic Ananya behaviour and speech. She draws out his statement of commitment but keeps hers in reserve. She gives nothing away and thereby gains the upper-hand in the relationship.

Resourceful Ananya is also a clever person, who uses her charm and ease with words to good advantage. The best illustration of this character trait comes in a crisis moment for Krish's family. One of Krish's cousins, a girl named Minty, is going to be married in a lavish ceremony in a 5-star hotel. But there is acrimony between the families because of a misunderstanding regarding the dowry. The girl's family said they would give the couple a 'new Hyundai' car, by which the boy's family understood it would be a Hyundai Accent model, the most expensive model. But when the keys are handed to the boy's father, it is only for a Hyundai Santro, a full three lakhs (300,000 rupees) less in value. It appears that the wedding will be cancelled (as in Bhagat's other novel, *One Indian Girl*), but, at the last moment, Ananya saves the day. She has been listening and observing as this crisis builds to a crescendo before stepping in with her plan, which she hopes will finally show Krish's parents that she is a 'good girl' and a suitable wife for their darling son. Ananya summons all the bride's female relatives to special room, where she convinces them to donate jewellery that equals the missing value of the promised car. Having rescued everyone from the dowry-drama, and prevented Krish's mother from another crushing social humiliation, Ananya has earned the hard-won respect of both Krish's parents. This is a brilliant display of her resourcefulness, in part because she is out of her own cultural comfort zone, operating in north India with Krish's parents rather than her own.

Bala (Weak)

Character Bala (short for Balakrishnan) is the manager of the bank in Madras, where Krish becomes a trainee, in order to be close to Ananya. Bala is a showman, who likes to come across as tough, in an attempt to maintain control over his employees. In reality, he is weak, cowardly and even corrupt. We get a good picture of this sad man when the author describes a meeting at the bank, in which Bala alternates between whispering to his colleagues, as if he is executing some top-secret spy mission, and shouting at them, as if he is a military general. No matter how he speaks, Bala likes to pump his fists and flings his arms about in dramatic fashion. These are all diversionary tactics, used to deflect attention from the fact that he has nothing original or perceptive to say. Bala is not a major character, the way Krish and Ananya are, but he is well-drawn, revealing the mask that some people wear to hide their shortcomings.

Activities Not surprisingly, Bala is uniformly disliked in the bank and therefore spends most of his day in his office by himself. He smokes a lot, drinks a lot and likes to play golf on the weekends, usually bribing an employee to play with him (by offering him some kind of perk) in order that the other members of the golf club believe that he is liked by his 'people.' At home, he is rude to his wife and sugary sweet to his children, who sense that he is a fraud.

Illustrative moments

Demanding Bala is a demanding and intimidating boss at Citibank, where Bala has gained a job. While this is largely a show to conceal his weakness, it is effective, at least at first. His bullying nature is illustrated in the scene when Krish comes to work on his first morning. Bala greets him with a sarcastic greeting: 'Welcome, sir. Welcome to State Bank of India [known for its lax work ethic].' Then he sits on Krish's desk, as if waiting for 'the exact joyous moment when he could squash' him. When Krish offers a weak excuse for being ten minutes late, Bala upbraids him and orders him to arrive at seven every morning. When Krish points out that seven-thirty is the official starting time, Bala has a piece of advice: 'Yes, but when I was your level, I came at seven. If you want to be like me, wake up, soldier.' When he is finished berating Krish, he leaves him, saying, 'Oh, one more tip.'

Never leave the office before your boss.' This is the tough, demanding persona that Bala wants to project, especially on a new employee's first day, when he is most vulnerable.

Weak Bala's true character, that of weakness and irresponsibility, is exposed shortly after Krish begins to work at Citibank. Bala has been recommending that his most loyal customers invest money in a new mutual fund that soon plummets in value, leaving the customers with huge losses and a lot of anger. Dozens of them complain to the head office in Bombay, from where the CEO of the bank calls Bala and demands an explanation. At this critical moment, Bala turns to Krish, asking him to accept responsibility for the ill-judged advice that resulted in such large losses in their customer accounts. Bala now strikes a very different pose to the one he did on Krish's first day. He begs Krish, saying that he [Krish] is from the prestigious IT institute and that he [Bala] will recommend his promotion immediately. Bala also explains that he is more vulnerable than Krish because he is the manager of the branch, who has to 'carry the can' when things go wrong, whereas a young trainee would not be judged so harshly if he made the error in judgement. 'At CitiBank,' he says in a wheedling voice, 'we look after each other. And today, Krish, you have the opportunity to look after me. Please.' What Bala does not say, however, is that as the boss he also gets all the credit whenever anything goes well in the branch.

Corrupt As the manager of a bank, however, Bala's predominant characteristic is his greed, not for the bank but for himself. In a word, he is corrupt. This shady part of his personality appears throughout the chapters devoted to Krish's stay in Madras, but the most glaring example is the loan deal he arranges between Tata Tea and another bank. It is an enormous sum that he convinces the other bank (BankAm) to lend to the Tata company, and he is only able to secure the deal by falsifying figures from Tata's financial statements. Such fraudulent practice is, of course, illegal and Bala might face years in jail if caught, but he knows that this is unlikely given the corruption rampant in the private and public sectors in India, not least in the legal system. So, he takes the risk because, on the morning of day the deal is scheduled to be finalised, he finds that someone has delivered a brand-new BMW car to his house in a leafy suburb of the city. The author manages to narrate this episode of corruption with a light-hearted tone, making fun of the perpetrator rather than condemning the action itself, but the corrosive effect of Bala's behaviour is undeniable.