

HALF GIRLFRIEND

Chetan Bhagat

(2014)

Story

The Prologue to this novel takes place in a hotel room, where the author himself (Chetan Bhagat) meets Madhav Jha. Madhav has given some journals to the author, who is on a book tour, and asked him to read them. Jha explains that the journals are the property of Riya, his 'half girlfriend, who he says is dead. (We later learn that Madhav has wrongly concluded that she has died from lung cancer.) Bhagat is intrigued but busy. Still, he can't resist reading at least one or two pages. Next day, Bhagat calls Madhav and tells him that he wants to hear the full story of Riya.

Act One Delhi: With Madhav speaking in the first person, he tells the story of how he met Riya. He came to Delhi, from a rural town in north India, where he gained admission at Saint Stephens College under a sports quota. After the interview he went out for a trial show of his talents in basketball and noticed a pretty girl already playing on the court. She is Riya, who comes from Delhi, whereas he comes from Bihar. She is a city person, with greater sophistication and command of English, and he is rough and a little shy. She also comes from a relatively well-off family, whereas his family is middle-class, at best. The friendship between the two of them causes mild surprise among their college classmates. They become close, too close for Riya's liking, and when Madhav wants to have sex with her, she tells him off and says she will never speak to him again. A year and more passes, before they meet again, when she tells him that she is getting married to her childhood friend, Rohan, who it turns out is from the same wealthy social background as she. They will go to London after the wedding, where Rohan has a job. Madhav is hurt but too proud to show it. Madhav is offered an excellent banking position with a high salary, but he turns it down, explaining that he 'didn't want to serve rich people anymore.' He wants to see his mother, so he returns to his home town in Bihar.

Act Two Bihar: Madhav objects to a special event that his mother has arranged to welcome home 'her prince.' At the 'function,' Madhav meets the local politician (MLA, member of the [state] legislative assembly), named Ojha, and asks him for financial help in renovating the dilapidated school his mother runs. The politician turns out to be slippery, but he does inform Madhav of a special opportunity: Bill Gates will soon come to Bihar and look at schools. Madhav goes to Patna, the state capital, in order to arrange a meeting with Gates. While staying in a hotel in the city, where he is taking English lessons in order to be able to deliver a good speech to the Gates Foundation, he bumps into Riya, who agrees to help him write a speech that will capture the foundation's attention. Madhav's speech does just that, but then Riya disappears. She goes to New York, to realise her life-long dream of being a singer. Meanwhile, the Gates Foundation awards a large grant to Madhav's mother's school, which helps the school win national awards for excellence. Chetan Bhagat now reenters the story and shows Madhav the final entries of Riya's journal, which Madhav hasn't read. In them, Riya explains that she got divorced and that she loves him. Now Madhav is desperate to find her.

Act Three New York: Madhav sets off to find Riya, not knowing where she is in New York. Eventually he does track her down and they marry.

In the Epilogue, Chetan Bhagat visits Madhav and Riya in the small town in Bihar, where they run a school. Among the schoolchildren, who are playing basketball, is Shyam, son of Madhav and Riya.

Themes

Rural v Urban A major theme in this novel of aspiration is the gulf between rural and urban India. This contrast, expressed in terms of language, clothes, cuisine and social attitudes, is built into the romantic relationship between Madhav and Riya. From the beginning, the novel emphasises the differences between the urban girl and the rural boy. In the opening scene, for example, when

Madhav is being interviewed for admission to a top-level college in Delhi (where the instruction will be in English), he is ill at ease because his English is sub-standard and heavily accented. He stumbles in the interview, making grammatical mistakes, and only gains admission through a quota for talent athletes. But what chance does a 'jock' stand with a city girl who is studying English literature? When they first begin to talk together, and she is hesitant to share all her family background, he is confused because 'people in Dumraon [his hometown] don't mind talking about their families.' Her urban reticence is something that bothers him. Later, the gulf between them is painfully exposed when Madhav misinterprets her invitation to go with her to see a movie. 'It's not a date,' she tells him. 'We just go to a movie. Like friends.' 'Isn't that a date?' he asks, confused. 'No. You want to see a movie with me or not?' A similar discrepancy arises over their differing notions of love. When Madhav says that he loves her, she challenges him: 'How can you know if you've never been in love?' He hesitates before replying, 'How can you know it isn't love?' This lack of understanding threatens to derail their slowly evolving romance with misplaced hands and wrongly interpreted words. We are not surprised when they separate and Riya marries someone from her own class. That is the significance of the intriguing title: she's too blasé, too sophisticated, to actually become a 'girlfriend,' so Madhav settles for 'half girlfriend'.

Aspiration The other powerful theme of this novel, as in all Bhagat's fiction, is aspiration. The background of the characters does not matter—whether you are born poor or rich, happiness only comes when you strive to reach your goal. That goal, too, can be of different kinds: education, romance, finance or artistic expression. Madhav is from the backward state of Bihar but he wants to get ahead, so he applies to the most prestigious college in New Delhi and is admitted. He gets in because he is an athlete, but he uses that talent to get an education. Madhav is also in love with his 'half girlfriend, Riya, but he loses her. Although he accepts that she has left him, he does not stop loving her. Later, he believes that she has died, but (through a few slightly unbelievable coincidences), he then discovers that she is still alive and the two of them go on to build a family. For her part, Riya is confused about her love-life, but she has a dream that she wants to become a singer. Her family cannot comprehend such a goal, but Madhav does. Riya goes through an unhappy marriage and a painful divorce, and in the end becomes a singer. She did not give up. A similar aspiration is evident in Rani Sahiba, Madhav's mother. She lives in a small town in an isolated region, but she is committed to improving a school that is falling apart structurally. Madhav joins her in this campaign, winning a grant from the Gates Foundation, and together, with Riya's help, they build that school into a 'centre of excellence.' The lives of the three main characters—Madhav, Riya and Rani Sahiba—illustrate the underlying message of the novel: happiness lies in the struggle to realise one's goal. As Madhav tells Riya when she says she wants to be a singer, 'Don't quit. It will happen one day.' This is the special appeal of Chetan Bhagat's novels. They don't just carry themes of aspiration, they confirm aspiration. The books are his story, evidence of his rise from relatively modest background to stardom. His story may not be exactly rags-to-riches, but it is uplifting enough to make him the poster boy aspirational India.

Characters

Madhav Madhav is the male protagonist and the narrator of most of the novel. He comes from Dumraon, a small town in a backward region of Bihar, in north India, goes to Delhi and falls in love with Riya. This is where the action begins.

Chetan Bhagat Chetan Bhagat, the author, appears as himself in the beginning and the end of the novel.

Riya Riya, the female protagonist, is a modern girl from a rich Marwari family in New Delhi. After becoming Madhav's 'half girlfriend,' she leaves him, marries Rohan, moves to London, gets divorced, returns to India and goes to New York, where she becomes a singer. In the end she marries Madhav and they have a son.

Rohan Rohan is Riya's childhood friend, who marries her and takes her to London, where he lives. They are then divorced and he drops out of the story.

Rani Sahiba Rani Sahiba is Madhav's mother, who is widowed and runs a school in the small town of Dumraon in Bihar. She is strong-minded with a cutting sense of humour, but also a loving person.

MLA Ojha Ojha is the local politician, a member of the state legislative assembly of Bihar. He appears to help Madhav in his desire to improve his mother's school, but he is actually cunning and corrupt.

Sailesh Sailesh is Madhav's childhood friend, who helps him in his long search to find Riya in New York.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Madhav (Determined)

Character Madhav is the protagonist of this aspirational novel of a person who overcomes initial difficulties, never gives up in his pursuit of true love and is rewarded in the end. Madhav is from a rural part of India, speaks poor English and is confused when he is thrust into a very different social milieu of college students at a prestigious college in New Delhi. He is a sweet and sincere person, who remains loyal to his rural background, to his mother and to the girl he first falls in love with. He also has a sense of humour as well as a humility, even when he returns to his backwaters hometown with a fancy degree and a new, modern outlook. He rejects an offer to work in a bank with a high salary and decides to help his mother run a poorly-funded school in a village. If our hero has a shortcoming it would be a tendency to self-pity. But even when he does suffer setbacks, such as losing Riya, his 'half girlfriend,' he gets back on track and never gives up. Madhav is thus the moral centre of the story. We sympathise with his troubles, his confusions and his awkward movements in the world of romance.

Activities Madhav loves playing basketball, which is how he gains admission to St Stephens College in New Delhi—on a quota for athletes. After meeting Riya, he begins to go to movies, to coffee bars and fancy restaurants. When he graduates, he returns to rural Bihar to help his mother run a school there. His efforts are concentrated on securing a grant from the Bill Gates Foundation, which requires him to take special English language classes so that he will be able to deliver a persuasive speech to the Foundation.

Illustrative moments

Inferiority complex Perhaps the predominant element in Madhav's character is his inferiority complex, which is a result of his rural background. Although his mother is a high-school graduate and works as a teacher, and although his family (jokingly) claims some ancestral link to a distant Maharaja, the overwhelming determinant of his personality and public status is that he comes from an isolated, backward region in the state of Bihar. As a result, he does not speak English well, which is an absolute prerequisite to success in urban India. This reality, which Madhav must deal with almost all his life, is brought out in the opening scene when Madhav goes to New Delhi to interview for admission to a prestigious college. As he sits in the waiting room with the other applicants, one of them asks him, 'Where're you from, man?' Madhav answers, 'Me Madhav Jha from Dumraon, Bihar.' The boy and the others laugh. 'Over time,' the narrator explains, 'I learned that this was what they call a "rhetorical" question. It's not a question at all, and is used to make a point. Here, the point was to show that I was an alien amongst them.' The humiliation continues in the interview itself. Madhav is sitting opposite a professor, who asks simple questions, but Madhav struggles to answer in English. The professor tells him to use 'full sentences,' which confuses Madhav even more. Then another professor says, 'You're from Bihar, I see,' and Madhav replies, 'Yes, I am from rural area.' The professor frowns and says, 'I am from a rural area,' emphasising the article 'as if omitting it was a capital offense.' Madhav's humbling continues for some time, making the reader cringe for the 'country bumpkin'. From the beginning, then, the author sets out his theme that India is divided not just by caste and religion but by a geographically-calibrated class system. The book's dedication reads: 'For my mother, for rural India, for the non-English types.'

Confused Madhav's discomfort with language is not the only manifestation of his low self-esteem. It is also illustrated in his fumbling attempts at romance, which is the main storyline in the novel. Madhav and Riya are attracted to each other by their good looks and by their shared interest in playing basketball. But as soon as their friendship steps off the basketball court, Madhav finds himself tripping over his feet. When he tries to 'pry' into her family background and she shuts him out, he thinks, 'I guess rich people are private; we overdo familiarity in our villages anyway.' An even

more dramatic illustration of his romantic confusion occurs somewhat later, when they have become good friends. Again, Madhav commits a faux pas by declaring his love for Riya, who asks why he said such a thing. Madhav answers, as truthfully as he can, 'Because I... I love you.' Riya bursts out laughing and Madhav is hurt. 'Can you please be serious?' he asks. She then sits down cross-legged, composes herself and says, 'Okay, Madhav. I will be serious. I laughed because I don't think you are in love with me.' Madhav challenges her, asking her how she could know that and she says, 'Have you been in love before?' He says no and she then says, 'So how do you know it's love?' Madhav is now totally perplexed. As the author puts it, 'Riya's confusing words left him tongue-tied.' It is a touching scene, in which we feel sympathy for the sincere but unsophisticated Madhav, the boy from Bihar who not only can't speak English properly but finds himself tongue-tied in love, as well.

Determined Madhav may have been humiliated and then confused, but this is a Chetan Bhagat novel in which aspiration and determination are the ultimate message. Indeed, he has had hints of Madhav's steadfastness from the beginning. Despite the alienation at the college, he studies hard and earns a top degree; and, although put off by Riya, he never falters in his love for her. That dogged determination is then illustrated in the last section of the novel, when Madhav discovers (from her journal) that she loves him and is alive. The only problem is that he doesn't know where she is, so Madhav acts like a private investigator, determined to find a missing person. He works logically, methodically, putting together all the little clues and facts he can find and comes to the (correct) conclusion that she is in New York. Even then, however, he spends weeks tramping the streets, looking in music venues (because he believes, again correctly, that she will have become a singer). His determination finally pays off when he sees her singing in a night club. His success is, however, foreshadowed in a conversation he had with Chetan Bhagat months before he set off on the plane to New York. Bhagat points out that New York is a huge city, with millions of people, and that the chances of finding her are slim. But Madhav will not be deterred. Bhagat then says, 'You really are going to look for her?' When Madhav nods, Bhagat asks, 'Even though you may never find her and end up in more pain?' He nods again and adds, 'I can't quit. It's not in genes to do so.' This is the signature line of a Chetan Bhagat novel. Losing is acceptable, but quitting is not.

Riya (Secretive)

Character Above all else, Riya is a shy and secretive person. Despite her blasé, extroverted exterior, she keeps much of herself private, where she can maintain control and not let anyone affect her. That is why she agrees to become Madhav's 'half girlfriend,' that is, in name only, without any physical dimension. Riya comes from a very wealthy family in New Delhi, but she does not feel at home in that superficial and self-promoting culture. She prefers to play basketball and sing. She is also a strong-willed, ambitious young woman, who knows what her dream is and works hard to achieve it. She also shows a social conscience when, after living a luxurious life in London, she chooses to do social work in the rural state of Bihar. In her relationship with Madhav, which is the main strand of the story, she is gentle but cannot help hurting him because of her reluctance to share her private life. At times, she might appear distant, emotionally withdrawn, and even cold, but when her secret is revealed at the end, we understand that those reactions are protective and not meant to cause distress to others.

Activities Riya likes to play basketball, which is how Madhav meets her in the first place. She is also very fond of music, especially singing, and poetry, especially the English Romantics. She goes to movies often and sometimes has parties for her friends on the expansive lawn of her family's palatial house. Later on in the story, after marrying and divorcing, becoming a singer in New York and moving back to India, she begins to do social work.

Illustrative moments

Secretive The inner world of Riya is a mystery to Madhav and to the reader until the final pages, when her secret is revealed through her journal. The character Chetan Bhagat, who has read the whole journal, gives it back to Madhav, who has not. Madhav (and we, the readers) then read one of Riya's entries. It is dated 2002, her fifteenth birthday. 'I'm not a grownup,' she writes, 'but not a child either. People write secrets in journals. Should I? Everyone says I'm so quiet, so mysterious. I don't answer them. What happens when you crush a flower? I was not quiet as a child. I became this way. Daddy knows. Still, he pretends nothing happened. So do I. He hasn't touched me for two years. He dare not.' This journal entry provides the key to understanding Riya and her shyness. The

sexual molestation she suffered from her father is obvious despite the lack of an explicit statement. This is in keeping with Riya's character, however. Even her revelation is veiled. And, of course, the secret is revealed only in writing, in a private journal, and not spoken aloud to someone. It is, to use the language of this novel, a 'half-secret,' told but not shared. Now Madhav can understand why she always kept him at 'arms-length,' protecting her secret, preventing the shame that she would feel if he knew. She was protecting herself, not, as he thought, rejecting him.

Ambitious Riya, the sophisticated city girl, appears to be in sharp contrast to Madhav, the rough chap from a rural area. They share a love of basketball, of course, but they also have something much deeper in common. She is as ambitious as he is. We know that Riya works hard at college to get her degree, and we also learn that, after going to London with her husband, Rohan, she struggled to gain admission to the music academy there. But the most explicit expression of her dream comes early on, when she is talking with Madhav in the beginning of their friendship. He asks why she is upset and she says, 'I told my parents I want to study music after college. But they want me to marry some rich guy and become a queen. I don't want that. That's not what I dream of.' Madhav asks what her dream is, and she tells him: 'I want to play music and sing...in a club...in New York...I don't want to be a famous singer or a rock star...I just want to sing in peace.' Riya has had her dream since she was a little girl. It is characteristic of her that she doesn't want fame or the 'bright lights.' Instead, she wants just to 'sing in peace,' as if she is singing to herself. It is a very Riya-type of ambition.

Controlled Riya is a guarded person who values control, control of her emotions, control of her body and control of her personal space. This need is dramatically illustrated in a scene in which Riya and Madhav first fumble around in something that comes close to sex. After playing basketball together, he smuggles her into his room in the men's hostel, where they lay down on his bed, exhausted. When Madhav takes advantage of their close physical proximity and tries to kiss her, she turns away. 'Control yourself, Madhav,' she says sternly and extricates herself from his embrace. This is a crucial moment in their relationship. Madhav continues to press her, asking why she will not let him have sex with her, and she keeps saying that she wants 'control.' She is emphatic in saying, 'I don't want to [have sex]...I'd feel out of control.' She has drawn a line and no one should cross it. She has her territory staked out and will not allow any penetration. After this scene, in which Madhav basically says he wants sex or they are finished, she leaves him. She doesn't return his calls and avoids him on the college campus, retreating into herself, where she is in control. Riya's obsession with control is also highlighted by the author's frequent references to Madhav being 'out of control.' Riya does maintain control in her friendship with Madhav, but loses him in the process, until the very end of the novel.

Rani Sahiba_ (Dedicated)

Character Rani Sahiba, Madhav's mother, is a strong-willed woman. After losing her husband and Madhav's father to a mysterious illness ten years before the novel begins, she continues to manage the family land and farm. In addition, she runs a school, which teaches seven hundred students, who mostly come from the villages surrounding the town of Dumraon. She is a person with a social conscience, who is dedicated to helping others and instills that sense of purpose in her son, Madhav. She is also extremely organised and practical, working long hours in the school. As a mother, she is very protective of Madhav, reluctant to let him go to New Delhi for education but knowing that it is the best plan for him.

Activities Rani Sahiba spends nearly all day in the rural school to which she has devoted her life. She does everything there, from teaching, to administrative work to helping with the cleaning. She is also active politically, especially in efforts to lobby the local MLA (member of the state legislative assembly) to secure government funds for the school. She even considered running for elected office but decided she could make a more significant impact through teaching.

Illustrative moments

Dignified The quality that stands out most prominently in the character of Rani Sahiba is her dignity. Having lived the 'high life' when her husband was alive, she now lives on her own (with her son away at college), surviving on his pension and some savings. Although she runs a school and teaches in it, she takes no salary. The moment when she shows her dignity comes toward the end of the novel. She gets a telephone call from Madhav, who is in New Delhi, telling her that he has been offered a

bank job with a high salary and that he had turned it down. The author then tells us that 'most Indian mothers would not understand if a son or daughter left a high-paying job like that. But not Rani Sahiba. She knew that life and success, true success, involved more than money. She had known what comparative wealth was, but she had also seen her wedding jewels pawned to loan sharks. None of that mattered. What mattered to Rani Sahiba of Dumraon was respect. "Beyond a point, people want money to buy respect," she would say. "Respect, however, cannot be bought. You have to earn it. Live with dignity. Live for others, that's how you earn respect." For the past fifteen years, she had given her all to a dusty school in a rural town.' In this passage, we imagine that the author is speaking of his own mother, who was a teacher in a small town and to whom the book is dedicated.

Dedicated Rani Sahiba is also a hard-working teacher. She arrives at her run-down school every morning before 7 am, when it is still dark. There are three shifts, one beginning at 7 am, one at 10:30 am, and one at 2 pm. Each shift has more than 200 children, aged from 5 to 15. She has two teaching assistants, and together they teach these students all the subjects. She receives no salary and pays for any repairs and upkeep costs out of her own (not very deep) pockets. We appreciate Rani Sahiba's dedication when Madhav, her son, comes to visit the school for the first time. He sees the crumbling physical structure, the paucity of equipment and even the insufficient number of chairs. Many students sit on the ground. There is no toilet or running water. Madhav is shocked and asks his mother how she got involved in running the school, and she tells him that she wanted to 'make a difference.' She didn't have many talents, but she could manage things, organise and inspire others. So, she found this rural school, not far from Dumraon, where she lives. 'You should have seen it when I first came here,' she tells Madhav. 'There wasn't even a roof.' Madhav then says, 'But it must have been an almost impossible task. With no government funding, no local support. Tell me, ma, how did you do it?' Then Rani Sahiba looks at him with a fixed expression and says, 'It was simple. I had to succeed, for these kids. Failing was not an option.'

Protective Rani Sahiba is also a mother, a very protective mother who wants only the best for her only son. She lets him out of her sight to go to New Delhi and get a college education, but she is anxious that he will be 'corrupted' by the big city mores and return a different person. She wants him to make a success of his life but not to leave her behind in the process. This protective maternal instinct is illustrated in a scene when Madhav brings Riya, his ex-half-girlfriend from Delhi, to Dumraon. Riya has said she wants to work in his mother's school, and Rani Sahiba accepts—she's desperately short of staff and the girl speaks excellent English—but she tries to make sure that Riya doesn't spend too much time with Madhav. When she interviews her, Rani Sahiba lays down strict guidelines. First, she insists that Riya must wear modest clothing, a salwar-kameez tunic and blouse made of cotton, instead of her usual skirt and short-sleeved top. Next, she should not spend more than five minutes talking with any other teacher, including Madhav. And finally, she is to stay in the town not in her own house, where there is plenty of room but also where Madhav sleeps. Her efforts to protect her son from the corrosive influences represented by this 'modern' girl are a little ridiculous, and we, as readers, begin to laugh at Rani Sahiba's extreme measures. But Rani Sahiba does not care, as long as 'her boy' is kept safe.