



Estranged Father-Son Relationship in Chetan Bhagat's *Two States*

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Abstract:

Family estrangement can be an emotional distancing, a cessation of communication or a cold war between the members of a family. Chetan Bhagat, one of the most popular contemporary writers in Indian English literature has exhaustively dealt with family estrangement in his novels. Coincidentally, the strained relationship mostly happens between a father and a son. Unconcern, coldness, indifference, inability to recognise the inherent talents of children, over dominance, abuse, over possessiveness and emotional blackmailing are some of the common characteristics of a protagonist's father in any of these novels of Chetan Bhagat. The paper focuses on the estranged father-son relationship in his autobiographical novel, *Two States*.

Key Words and Phrases: Family estrangement, indifference, father-son relationship, abuse, domestic violence

Family estrangement can be an emotional distancing, a cessation of communication or a cold war between the members of a family. It is so widespread and so difficult to talk about that it is sometimes considered a silent epidemic. It is very often not discussed in the family but most of the times it is misunderstood. As a matter of fact, an estrangement may not necessarily last for a long-time. According to Wikipedia, 'Estrangement is the loss of a previously existing relationship between the members of a family, through physical and/or emotional distancing, often to the extent that there is negligible or no communication between the individuals involved for a prolonged period.'(Family)

Paul Johannes Tillich, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, in his book *Systematic Theology*, emphasizes that estrangement prevents the process of self-realization; it

in fact operates as an intimidating force highly destructive to the elemental self. "Man's estrangement from his essential being is the universal character of existence." (Tillich, 74)

Chetan Bhagat is one of the most popular contemporary writers in Indian English literature whose novels strike a chord with the modern Indian youth. His novels have been best sellers in recent times in India. Interestingly the first six novels of Chetan Bhagat have dealt with family estrangement. Coincidentally, the strained relationship mostly happens between a father and a son. Unconcern, coldness, indifference, inability to recognise the inherent talents of children, over dominance, abuse, over possessiveness and emotional blackmailing are some of the common characteristics of a protagonist's father in any of these novels of Chetan Bhagat. The opinion of the protagonist of *Two*



States about his father generally applies to any father character in Chetan Bhagat's novels: "I didn't want my father's chapter in my life again. No father is better than a bad father." (TS, 116)

Chetan Bhagat himself reveals about the dysfunctional relationship between the protagonist and the father in an interview to *Times of India*:

I wrote three books while I was at the bank, when I met a French journalist friend and he said to me, 'In all three books of yours, the relationship between the protagonist and the father is dysfunctional. In *Five Point Someone*, one guy doesn't like his parents, the other guy has a paralysed father and the third guy has a strict father, in *One Night @ the Call Center*, Shyam is under-confident and his parents are always fighting. In *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, the father has deserted him and even Ishan's father slaps him and he has a bad relationship with his father. (Gupta)

Among all the novels of Chetan Bhagat, *Two States* deals with 'father-son' estranged relationship most extensively. It is largely based on his real life incidents. It describes the protagonist's never compromising attitude with his rebellious nature and his hatred towards his father who horribly ill-treats his mother. Krish seems to be always cheerful and in high spirits except in the presence of his father. He is so tolerant whenever

he faces any difficult situation either it be his attempts to impress his in-laws or his girl friend. But he loses his cool at the very mention of his father's name and behaves very wild.

Krish's father is a retired military colonel who is very autocratic. He ill-treats his wife and son in every possible way. He cannot tolerate even if his wife speaks to her sisters or other relatives. He would never appreciate any of her sisters or other close relatives visiting his house in his presence or absence. He would be very unkind to them. Even if anyone visits his house anytime by chance, he will be so ruthless that he even doesn't mind showing them the door.

'I said hello jija-ji.' Shipra masi said and smiled.

'I like your goodbye more than hello,' my father replied.

'I would appreciate it if you don't interfere in our family matters,' my father said. (TS, 69)

Krish's mother has suffered many insults by her husband since her marriage with him. She is very scared of his presence at home. As long as he is busy outside with his work, she is so relieved. She watches TV only in his absence. Her husband despises anyone watching TV be it his wife or son.

The doorbell rang twice.

'Oh no, it's your father,' my mother said. 'Switch off the TV'

'It's OK,' I said.



My mother gave me a stern glance. I reluctantly shut the television. (59)

Krish's father stoops to such a low level that as soon as he returns home, he immediately touches the TV top to check how hot it is just to know whether it has been switched off only recently. Krish would have tolerated all this torture while he had been a young boy but now he has grown up and fetched a good job too. So he gains some courage to argue with his father and he has decided not to endure his father's authority on his mother or him anymore.

My father went and touched the TV top. 'It's hot. Who watched TV?'

'I did. Any problem?' I said.

'I hope you leave home soon,' my father said.

'I hope you leave the world soon, I responded mentally as I took my plate and left the room. (59)

When Krish asks his mother why she should not leave him rather than bearing all the torment, she simply says that her husband doesn't stay at home most of the time. He either goes to his army mess or visits his partners with whom he tries his harebrained business schemes like security agency. He is always quarrelsome with anyone he encounters with. He picks up fights with customers at the very first meeting making them feel scared. She also tells her son that she has got used to his persecution and she only worries about his son who gets angry and fights with him at the simplest annoyance he causes. Krish by no means spares his father who harasses his mother for no reason.

Krish's father never hesitates to declare that his son's rebellious nature is the result of her wrong parenting.

'I don't want to eat this,' my father said.

'Why don't you say you've already eaten and come?' I butted again.

My father stared at me and turned to my mother. 'This is the result of your upbringing. All degrees can go to the dustbin. You only have this at the end.' (59)

During their combined study at hostel in IIMA, Ananya often asks her boyfriend, Krish about his family but he never shows interest in talking about them and more importantly he avoids the topic of his father. But she loves to talk about her family and how much close she is with her father. Once Krish makes a phone call from an STD telephone booth and his father receives the call. But Krish is reluctant to speak to him. He hangs up and calls again until his mother receives the call. Ananya who has observed this has been puzzled and asks him the reason for his odd behaviour with his father.

'I never speak to my father,' I said

'Why?' Ananya looked at me.

"Long story. Not for tonight. Or any night. I'd like to keep it to myself.' (17)

When Krish asks his mother whether his father is attending his convocation along with his mother, she replies that he has work. He wonders that what more important work his retired father has than attending the convocation of his son. Ananya's parents both attend the convocation to share one of the happiest moments of their daughter with them. But Krish's mother alone attends the ceremony



leaving her indifferent husband at home.

'No, why don't you ask him to?' she prepared to put me on hold.

'Mom, no. I don't want to call him if he doesn't want to come.'

Which father needs an invitation from his son to attend his convocation? Screw him. I said to myself. (41)

Ananya who is present during the telephonic conversation between Krish and his mother is perplexed at Krish's facial expressions. She is very enthusiastic about the convocation ceremony because it is a big opportunity to introduce Krish to her parents who have decided to attend it. She has thought that their families can get along with each other. She is a little bit disappointed when she comes to know that only Krish's mother will be present at the convocation. Since she has loving parents she naturally expects all parents and children will have the same kind of cordial relationship. She is always inquisitive about the reason for Krish's apathy towards his father. Krish never intends to talk about his father and he remains silent whenever such discussion arises.

'Dad's not coming,' I said.

'Why?'

'We have no relationship, Ananya. Don't try and fix it ever. OK?'

'What happened though?'

'I don't want to talk about it.' (41)

Generally children long for the arrival of their father from work. They want to spend more time with him if he is affectionate and caring. But Krish has bitter experiences with his father since his childhood. He loves to spend time with his mother. He helps her in the kitchen and they discuss many a thing joyously. But all their happiness evaporates and panic spreads in the house whenever Krish's father is at home or whenever he arrives home earlier than usual. "I never welcome my father home." (70)

Krish as a child and an adolescent was very studious and docile. He had been so tolerant with his father until he finished his education. But he never forgets the kind of horrible conditions he had undergone all through his childhood and the misery of his mother who is deprived of all kinds of freedom because of his tyrannical father. His promising job has given him the audacity to argue with his father whenever he crosses the border.

'I don't know why I come to this house,' my father said.

'I was thinking the same thing,' I said.

'Bastard, mind it!' he shouted at me like he did at his army jawans ten years ago. (...) 'He can't be my son. Nobody talks to their father like this,'

'And no father behaves like this,' I said. (70)

Parental estrangement, apathy and neglect are some of the most important menacing factors which influence the psychological and behavioural development of the children and are usually linked with an array of serious harmful effects in adulthood. They include psychological maladjustment,



internalizing and externalizing behaviours, and negative behavioural characteristics of children. Seth Meyers, a psychologist clarifies the reason for the estrangement of youth in the journal, *Psychology Today*;

Sometimes families become so dysfunctional that a family member decides that he can't stay connected any longer to a specific person in the family or, in some cases, the entire family. Typically people who estrange themselves from family tend to be over the age of 18 years, because that is the point when they begin to reach adulthood and have more independence. (Meyers)

Krish's mother is fed up with her husband's tantrums but she is helpless since both she and her son have been dependants on him until her son's clinching a job. She wants to divert herself from the torment of her husband by focussing on her son's wellbeing. She has found her happiness in her son's accomplishments. His father would always look down upon his son's achievements and curse his son that he will bite the dust for not being polite with him. He declines to attend his son's convocation on the flimsy reason that his son has not invited him. So only Krish's mother attends the event where his son receives the diploma. He is ecstatic to see his mother's happiness for he knows very well that his success will be the only medicine that can soothe all the wounds caused by his father's callous behaviour and unconcerned attitude.

My mother was standing and clapping. 'I love you,' she screamed. I smiled back at her. For the last ten years my father had told her that her

son would get nowhere in life. I held up my diploma high and looked up to thank God. (48)

Before falling in love with Ananya, Krish has loved another girl. When Krish tells his father that he is in love with the daughter of an IIT Professor, his father ridicules him making an indirect comment that he has done nothing good at IIT except loving the professor's daughter. Krish pleads his father to go and talk to the Professor since he is going abroad to get her engaged to someone. Surprisingly his father turns his anger towards his wife for not letting him know about these developments. Just like many men who adapt a kind of defence mechanism by directing their strong emotions and frustrations toward a person or object that doesn't feel threatening which allows them to satisfy an impulse to react, but they don't risk significant consequences, Krish's father also diverts his anger to his wife whenever he is going to lose an argument with his son. He is never ashamed of himself to physically abuse his wife in front of his grown-up son. He does not hesitate to slap his son who has attained marriageable age and who procures a very well-paid job in a multinational bank.

'Why was I not informed about the girl earlier?' my father screamed.

'He told me only a few weeks ago,' my mother said.

'And you hid it from me, bitch,' my father said. (165)



Domestic violence, spousal abuse, marital violence, or wife-beating is covert or overt; it occurs in upper or lower class households. The secrecy and shame surrounding the abuse perpetuated the problem and delayed legal protection for women of all classes. Krish's father resorts to verbal abuse as a means of maintaining control and power over his wife. Being a grown-up son, Krish is unable to tolerate his father's pejorative slang addressing his mother. Meena Kandasamy, the writer of the novel, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* in an email says that even stronger women are also not exceptional to domestic violence:

I believed that no man, no husband could lay a hand on me. I was fierce and feminist and no-nonsense. Then, within an abusive marriage, I actually realized that your strength is also what makes you a perfect target for an abuser. (Bhandare)

Krish's father, in spite of being a military colonel, resorts to physical abuse of his wife in the very presence of his highly qualified and abundantly paid son. There is no wonder that he is despised by both the mother and son.

'You are responsible for bringing him up like this,' my father screamed at my mother. I heard the sound of a glass being smashed against the wall.

'What have I done? I didn't even know about this girl...'

Slap.... slap.... my father interrupted my mother. I banged the door as I heard a few more slaps. I saw my mother's hand covering her

face. A piece of glass had cut her forearm. (...)

I saw the tears on my mother's face. My face burned with rage. She had lived with this for twenty five years. I did know why- to bring me up; I didn't know how she did it. I slapped his face once, twice, then I rolled my hand into a fist and punched his face. (166 & 167)

Krish's father goes into a state of shock after being manhandled by his own son and he cannot fight back. He has never expected such reaction from his son. All his childhood, Krish had merely suffered his dominance. The reason for his extreme step is not necessarily because of his unconcern to his girl friend's issue. Probably it is a reaction to his almost two decades of abuse of his mother and him. Never ever he has thought that he would manhandle his father like this. He was a studious child who stayed with his books all his life. He almost seems to have sworn vengeance on his father for all his wrong deeds. After a few minutes he looks at his father vows never to speak to him again.

During Krish's stay in Chennai, he happens to meet a Guruji, a seventy year old sage. When he tells him about his stress due to his worry over his marriage with Ananya because both the families are against it, Guruji probes him further whether there is any other agony for him besides the marriage issue. Then he reveals about the estrangement between him and his father. He narrates the whole episode that has led to his manhandling his father. Then Guruji advises him to apply one word to his life.

'I will give you just one word to apply in your life.'

'What?'



'Forgiveness' (168)

Krish wonders how he can forgive his father for all his wrong doings. He expresses his helplessness in this regard because it is impossible for him to forget his father's callous behaviour and the way he has ruined his mother's life. Moreover he has never loved him.

'I am not saying he did the right thing. I am asking you to forgive him.'

'Why?'

'For you. Forgiving doesn't make the person who hurt you feel better, it makes *you* feel better. (168)

In spite of Guruji's advice Krish's hatred towards his father has continued until Ananya breaks up with him due to his mother's hurting comments on her parents and Krish's unintentional yet unpleasant remarks on Ananya. When he is in deep depression, his father starts showing concern for his son and wants to know the real cause of his son's misery. He flies to Chennai one day without the knowledge of his son and wife and meets Ananya's family and solves the problem. Krish can't believe his father has done such an amazing thing. When Krish asks his father how it is possible, his father simply replies that he is his father and he knows very well what his son really needs.

His eyes met mine, he said, 'Because I am your father. A bad father, but I am still your father. (...) 'I'm not perfect. But don't deprive me of my son in my final years,' he said. (...) The world celebrates children and their mothers, but we need fathers also. (246)

Though the reconciliation of Krish with his father is possible in the novel, it

hasn't happened in the real life Chetan Bhagat. Krish could apply Guruji's one word panacea i.e. 'forgive' to solve his problem, but in real life Chetan Bhagat could not forgive his father. Maybe for ending the novel in a dramatic and cinematic way, he might have thought to bring remorse and realization in Krish's father. In an interview to *Times of India*, Chetan Bhagat reveals that since it is difficult for him to forgive his father in real life, he forgives him in the novel at least. "It was difficult for me to forgive him, but 2 States helped me forgive my father." (Gupta)

Interestingly, all of Chetan Bhagat's father characters have estranged relationships with their sons or daughters. In *Five Point Someone*, Prof. Cherian and his son Sameer has a much stressed relationship which ultimately leads to the suicide of the son. The dynamic, macho and exuberant Ryan too has strong differences with his parents. Even the narrator Hari has a tyrannical father because of whom he has problems related to public speech. In *One Night @ the Call Center* Military Uncle and his son are not in good terms. In *Three Mistakes of My Life*, Ishan is always disliked by his father and they are always in no talking terms. In *Revolution 2020*, Gopal and his ailing father indeed have an affectionate bond but the son's negligence in his studies due to the love failure dampens the prospects of his success in IIT entrance examination and it leads to his father's dejection and finally to his untimely death. In *Half Girlfriend*, instead of father-son relation, the writer throws light on the father-daughter strained relationship which occurs probably due to father's sexual abuse towards his daughter in her childhood. We can only see a caring and loving father in *One Indian Girl* and



again in his latest novel, *The Girl in Room 105*, the father-son conflict is repeated again. Probably Chetan Bhagat is quite unable to come out from the influence of his real life experiences with his estranged father.

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