

Intersections of Gender, Class, and Politics in Anuja Chauhan's Contemporary Indian Novels

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Abstract

*Anuja Chauhan has emerged as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Indian English literature, especially in the genre of popular fiction. Her novels, often labeled as "romantic comedies," carry a far greater depth than the label suggests. Beneath the humor, romance, and witty dialogues, her fiction constructs a layered commentary on modern Indian society. This paper examines the intersections of gender, class, and politics in Chauhan's works, highlighting how she creates narratives that expose societal hierarchies while empowering female voices. Through novels such as *The Zoya Factor* (2008), *Battle for Bittora* (2010), *Those Pricey Thakur Girls* (2013), *The House That BJ Built* (2015), and *Baaz* (2017), Chauhan situates her characters in social and political realities where gender roles, class privileges, and political forces constantly collide. The study argues that Chauhan's fiction contributes significantly to discourses of feminism, middle-class aspirations, and the complex relationship between politics and popular culture in India.*

Keywords: gender, politics, feminism, satire, identity, romance, power

1. Introduction

Contemporary Indian English literature has witnessed a steady rise of popular fiction writers who combine humor, realism, and romance to reach a wide audience. Among these, Anuja Chauhan occupies a unique space as a writer who, while working within the framework of commercial fiction, has consistently foregrounded pressing socio-political issues. Her novels are deeply rooted in the Indian milieu, characterized by Hinglish expressions, cultural references, and the portrayal of middle-class and elite lifestyles. However, beyond their entertainment value, Chauhan's novels reveal subtle negotiations of gender dynamics, class tensions, and political structures.

Her career trajectory as an advertising professional has influenced her narrative style, which is sharp, witty, and attuned to the aspirations of India's youth. Through her heroines—Zoya Solanki, Jinni Pande, Debjani Thakur, Bonita Singh Rajawat, and others—Chauhan presents a distinctly feminist voice, one that challenges traditional gender roles and subverts patriarchal expectations. Yet, her heroines are not detached from questions of class and politics; rather, they inhabit spaces where love, career, and identity are entangled with broader socio-political forces.

This paper attempts to critically explore the intersections of gender, class, and politics in Chauhan's novels, situating them within the wider discourse of Indian popular fiction. By doing so, it highlights how Chauhan transforms seemingly light-hearted stories into cultural texts that document the evolving face of India.

2. Gender Dynamics in Chauhan's Novels

Anuja Chauhan's novels consistently place women at the center of narratives that challenge and reframe the patriarchal constructs of Indian society. Her heroines are bold, witty, unapologetic, and aware of their position in the gendered hierarchy of both familial and public life. Unlike stereotypical female characters in earlier Indian fiction who were often relegated to domestic spaces, Chauhan's protagonists actively participate in professions such as advertising (*The Zoya Factor*), politics (*Battle for Bittora*), or sports management (*The Zoya Factor* and *The House That BJ Built*). This visibility in professional arenas is significant because it redefines the concept of the "Indian heroine" from the passive bearer of tradition to the active negotiator of modernity.

Zoya Singh Solanki in *The Zoya Factor* exemplifies the struggles and triumphs of a woman negotiating between her personal desires and the weight of national expectation. She is introduced as a relatively ordinary advertising professional, but her accidental association with cricket superstition thrusts her into the limelight. What is striking in this portrayal is how gender complicates her journey - while men around her are celebrated for their success in sports and politics, Zoya is often mocked, objectified, or reduced to a “lucky charm.” Chauhan uses humor and satire to reveal how women’s credibility is questioned when their achievements are perceived as coincidental rather than earned. Zoya’s eventual assertion of her agency demonstrates a feminist reworking of the narrative where women refuse to be ornamental additions to male success stories.

Similarly, in *Battle for Bittora*, Jinni, the protagonist, occupies the male-dominated space of Indian electoral politics. Chauhan deftly portrays the systemic sexism that women encounter in political spaces. Jinni’s campaign is framed not only by debates about policies but also about her marital status, appearance, and “appropriateness” as a woman leader. Through these episodes, Chauhan highlights how patriarchal cultural norms intrude upon professional competence, demonstrating the double burden women bear in the pursuit of power.

Across Chauhan’s works, relationships - romantic, familial, or professional - become sites of gender negotiation. The romantic relationships, in particular, reject the trope of submissive heroines. Instead, Chauhan’s female protagonists articulate desire, engage in witty banter, and often challenge the authority of their male counterparts. This negotiation of equality within romance points towards Chauhan’s nuanced feminism, where love is not a suppression of identity but an extension of individuality.

Thus, gender in Chauhan’s novels operates at two levels: as a critical commentary on patriarchal expectations in Indian society, and as a narrative device to reimagine women as autonomous, witty, and politically conscious individuals.

3. Class Struggles and Social Mobility

Class consciousness pervades Chauhan’s novels, and she often explores how class mobility shapes interpersonal dynamics and social belonging. The Indian middle class, with its aspirations, insecurities, and cultural contradictions, serves as a backdrop against which her characters define themselves. Her protagonists often come from middle-class or upper-middle-class families, navigating the anxieties of “fitting in” among the elite or negotiating upward mobility through love, politics, or professional achievements.

In *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, Chauhan examines the socio-economic anxieties of post-liberalization India. The daughters of Justice Laxmi Narayan Thakur, despite their lineage, must navigate changing notions of class prestige and cultural capital. For instance, Debjani, the protagonist, works as a news anchor and struggles to balance the demands of a glamour-driven profession with her middle-class values of integrity and respectability. Chauhan’s narrative illustrates how class mobility is both an opportunity and a burden—the aspiration to climb socially comes with the fear of losing cultural authenticity.

Chauhan also portrays class difference within romantic relationships as a significant source of tension. In *The House That BJ Built*, relationships are strained by disputes over property and inheritance, which reflect broader anxieties about class consolidation and wealth distribution in contemporary India. By foregrounding land disputes, Chauhan makes an implicit commentary on how material possessions become markers of status and identity in a rapidly modernizing society.

Furthermore, her novels often contrast urban middle-class modernity with rural or semi-urban traditionalism. In *Battle for Bittora*, this tension is evident in the way Jinni’s cosmopolitan outlook clashes with the expectations of her conservative constituency. Chauhan situates her narrative within the larger Indian reality where class is not only about economic capital but

also about symbolic capital the ability to negotiate tradition, language, dress codes, and cultural expectations.

Thus, Chauhan's novels become rich explorations of class struggle, highlighting how individuals strive to transcend economic boundaries while simultaneously grappling with the cultural anxieties that such transitions create.

4. Politics and Popular Culture

Politics in Chauhan's novels is never limited to parliamentary debates or electoral strategies; rather, it intersects with everyday life, gossip, and popular culture. By situating her characters in political contexts, Chauhan highlights how deeply politics penetrates family networks, media representation, and even romantic relationships.

Battle for Bittora is the most explicit political narrative in Chauhan's oeuvre. The novel explores electoral politics in small-town India, exposing the contradictions between personal beliefs and the compromises required by political life. Jinni's campaign is marred by manipulations, power games, and the trivialization of women's roles. Yet Chauhan's humorous style prevents the narrative from descending into cynicism; instead, it critiques corruption and sexism while maintaining a lightness that makes political commentary accessible.

Popular culture is equally important in Chauhan's exploration of politics. In *The Zoya Factor*, cricket, a national obsession, becomes a political metaphor. Zoya's accidental association with the Indian cricket team raises questions about superstition, celebrity culture, and the commodification of women's bodies. Chauhan juxtaposes cricket, a male-dominated sport, with advertising, a consumer-driven industry, to show how both arenas manipulate images of women for political and commercial ends.

Chauhan also draws attention to the intersections of media and politics. In *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, the television industry becomes a site of ideological battle. Debjani's career as a news anchor coincides with the political unrest of the 1980s, illustrating how media is never neutral but always aligned with political agendas. By embedding her characters in these cultural industries, Chauhan critiques the symbiotic relationship between media and political power in India.

Through humor, satire, and romance, Chauhan renders political critique palatable, revealing how politics is not a distant phenomenon but an everyday reality shaping the lives of individuals, families, and lovers.

5. The Interplay of Gender and Class

While gender and class operate as separate categories in Chauhan's narratives, their intersections are crucial in understanding her social critique. Women in her novels often face layered oppressions - not only because of patriarchal expectations but also because of class-based hierarchies. This intersectional perspective allows Chauhan to portray a more realistic and nuanced picture of contemporary India.

In *The House That BJ Built*, women's participation in property disputes reveals how class mobility is intricately tied to gender. Female characters must fight not only for their share of inheritance but also for recognition of their legitimacy as decision-makers in matters traditionally dominated by men. Chauhan highlights how middle- and upper-class families often perpetuate patriarchal norms by denying women economic agency even in supposedly modern households.

Similarly, in *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, Debjani's struggles in the television industry cannot be separated from her gendered identity. While her male colleagues are judged solely by professional performance, Debjani is scrutinized for her looks, demeanor, and personal choices. This double bind illustrates how class mobility for women is always contingent upon gendered expectations.

Moreover, Chauhan's narratives reveal how romantic relationships become microcosms of gender class intersections. Female protagonists often engage with male counterparts who are

either socially or economically more privileged. While this might appear as a continuation of traditional class hierarchies, Chauhan complicates the dynamic by giving her heroines wit, agency, and negotiation power. The humor-laden dialogues between couples reveal how class privilege is destabilized through verbal play, enabling women to reclaim authority within relationships.

Thus, Chauhan's fiction demonstrates that gender and class cannot be studied in isolation. Together, they form the axes along which power is distributed and contested in contemporary Indian society.

6. Politics, Gender, and Class: A Triangular Negotiation

The most significant contribution of Chauhan's novels lies in how they bring together gender, class, and politics into a triangular negotiation. Instead of presenting these categories as separate, Chauhan highlights their entanglement in shaping individual identities and societal hierarchies.

For instance, in *Battle for Bittora*, Jinni's political journey is shaped not only by her gender but also by her class privilege. As an educated, urban, middle-class woman, she is able to articulate her political vision with confidence. However, this privilege also alienates her from her rural constituency, which views her as too modern, too westernized, and too independent. Here, Chauhan demonstrates how privilege can simultaneously empower and marginalize, depending on the socio-political context.

In *The Zoya Factor*, the political economy of cricket intersects with gender and class in complex ways. Zoya's transformation from a middle-class advertising professional to a national celebrity exposes her to political manipulations by advertisers, politicians, and media. Her gender identity is exploited in these negotiations, while her class background complicates her ability to navigate elite circles.

Chauhan's triangular framework also reflects broader transformations in contemporary India, where politics, gender, and class constantly redefine each other. Women's participation in politics cannot be understood without examining their socio-economic background; similarly, class aspirations are incomplete without acknowledging the gendered struggles embedded within them. Chauhan's novels succeed in bringing these intersections to the forefront without losing narrative charm, humor, or emotional depth.

7. Conclusion

The fictional world of Anuja Chauhan ultimately underscores the complex entanglements of gender, class, and politics within the evolving socio-cultural fabric of contemporary India. Through her novels, Chauhan succeeds not only in telling entertaining love stories but also in mapping the contested terrains of identity and power. Women in her narratives are not passive figures circumscribed by patriarchal authority; they are dynamic subjects negotiating their desires, ambitions, and limitations in a society where class hierarchies and political affiliations intersect with gender roles. Her protagonists challenge traditional binaries by embodying contradictions: they are modern yet rooted, romantic yet pragmatic, vulnerable yet resilient.

The treatment of class in her novels illuminates the ongoing transitions of Indian society, where privilege and aspiration frequently collide. Chauhan's representation of elite and middle-class characters reflects how economic privilege creates opportunities while simultaneously breeding insecurities about authenticity, morality, and acceptance. At the same time, she does not overlook the struggles of those outside these circles, depicting the subtle ways in which class divisions persist, even in ostensibly liberal spaces. In doing so, she foregrounds the irony of a society that embraces consumerist modernity while continuing to uphold invisible barriers of caste, class, and status.

Politics in Chauhan's fiction further complicates this matrix. Unlike many writers who keep politics as a distant backdrop, Chauhan embeds it in everyday life, showing how electoral campaigns, dynastic power struggles, and nationalist rhetoric shape personal relationships and

individual choices. Love stories in her novels, therefore, cannot be separated from the ideological currents that define contemporary India. Political ambition, corruption, and the performance of nationalism are interwoven with personal conflicts, suggesting that the private and public are never entirely distinct but always interdependent.

In conclusion, Chauhan's novels must be read not merely as popular romances but as critical cultural texts that reveal the nuanced intersections of gender, class, and politics in 21st century India. Her fiction enriches literary discourse by illustrating how everyday stories of love and family are deeply political, reflecting broader anxieties about identity, democracy, and social transformation. Future scholarship can continue to trace these patterns, situating Chauhan within the canon of contemporary Indian literature where entertainment, critique, and resistance intersect.

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