



CHARACTERS @ THE CALL CENTRE IN CHETAN BHAGAT'S ONE NIGHT @ THE CALL CENTRE

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Abstract

What strikes you first about Chetan Bhagat's novels is the fact that this author writes about Indians and for Indians. His characters are young, ambitious and passionate and have the same moral, social and religious dilemmas as many of the young Indians today. At the same time their context and sensibility too is unabashedly Indian. If one examines the studies on attitude and behaviour of youth, all these refer to the context of national transformation from a "traditional" to "modern" society. Bhagat has remained the mouthpiece of Indian youth and representative of India. His writing comes out of his keen observation of his surroundings. As a result his writing is coloured by the sensibilities of modern people and world. No writer can escape from the world in which he or she lives. Taine's theory of Race, Milieu and Moment is very aptly and appropriately allocable in the works of Chetan Bhagat. Bhagat's popularity among collegiate shows his deep understanding regarding college life in particular and modern life in general. The present research paper aims at studying the ways in which Chetan Bhagat has portrayed the Indian Youth with all their dreams, aspirations, traumas, and turmoil with special reference to *One Night @ the Call Centre*. The reciprocal relationship between society and modern youth has also been taken into account to reach to honest findings.

Keywords: Chetan Bhagat, Indian Writing in English, Indian Youth, Spirit, *One Night @ the Call Centre*, Indian Society.



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One Night @ the Call Center is a witty dark novel first published in year of 2005, from Chetan Bhagat, the award winning author of the national bestsellers like "*Five Point Someone*". The story revolves around six people working at a call center named "connexions" in Gurgaon, Haryana. The span of the novel is set in a winter night in outskirts of Delhi, India. Their depressed life seems to take them nowhere. Suddenly and dramatically, things take turn and they confess and confront some aspect of their life they want to alter. A *dues ex machina* (Latin: God out of machine) happens when they get a phone call from god. The book starts with a frame story that tells about author Chetan's overnight journey on a winter night, from Kanpur to Delhi via Train. He sees a pretty girl in his compartment and get happy but the joy stays no longer as the girl gives negative review about Chetan's first book. She tells Chetan that she has an idea for his next book. She has a story. Chetan feels this as "right

thing to kill time” while sitting in a non-stop train for eight hours. The girl put a condition before him that he has to make the story his second book. Chetan denies initially but asks for the glimpses. All he gets is: “six people – at call centre – one night – call from god”. Chetan cannot resist but there was again that condition. He hesitated, but gave a nod. Thus it, the main story, begins.

Bhagat may not be very well known outside of India, but he’s something of a publishing phenomenon in his home country. An investment banker by trade, he has penned three bestselling novels in recent years. His biggest hit is probably *One Night @ the Call Center*, published in 2005 and still in the bestseller charts today. It’s a tale of six colleagues who work together in the outsourcing boomtown of Gurgaon, just south of Delhi. They are mostly smart, relatively affluent young people working their way through messy personal relationships and wondering what to do with their lives. The plot is run-of-the-mill teenage/twenty something fare until a near-death experience and a phone call from God intervene to shake up the friends’ ideas about what is important to them. And the story is so creaky in parts that the telephone call from on high is by no means the most fanciful aspect of the tale. The dialogue is often as cheesy as a plate of *paneer* and some of the characters are just stereotypes with a pulse. But this is a „pop“ novel, not *Ulysses*. What is more interesting is the backdrop to the narrative, the attitudes of the characters to their situation, and what the book’s popularity tells us about modern India. The book begins with Bhagat retelling an incident that happened on a train to Delhi. He meets a young woman who has heard of his debut novel, *Five Point Someone* but is rather dismissive of its subject matter: angst-ridden students at one of India’s technological universities. „If you want to write about the youth, shouldn’t you talk about people who really face challenges?“, the young woman asks before offering the author another story for his second book, a tale about six people and the events of *One Night at a Call Centre*. The central character in the young woman’s story is Shyam Mehra, a wannabe team leader who is also known as Sam Marcy when he talks to the company’s customers in America. In fact, all of the staff has Americanized aliases for when they are on the phones. Shyam’s ex-girlfriend Priyanka, who he still holds a torch for, has agreed to an arranged marriage to an Indian man working for Microsoft in Seattle, much to Shyam’s dismay. Vroom likes driving fast and dating girls, but in reality he only has eyes for Esha, the hottest woman in the company who dreams of being a model but is an inch too small for the catwalk. Radhika is living a confusing existence, a

young woman with an independent income also trying to be a traditional wife in an arranged marriage. Military Uncle is an ex-army man in his fifties who lives alone after falling out with his son and daughter-in-law. Their boss, Bakshi, is a self-serving idiot who spouts management jargons and takes credit for other people's work in the hope of getting a promotion to the company head office in Boston. The company they work for, Connexions has just one client: an American firm that makes computers and consumer gadgets. A connexion provides telephone support, explaining to the intellectually challenged how to make an oven or a refrigerator work. The staff has a low opinion of the callers and of Americans in general. Shyam describes one training session for new staff: „35=10”, the instructor wrote in big, bold letters on the blackboard... “Remember”, the instructor said to the class, “a 35-year-old American's brain and IQ is the same as a 10-year-old Indian's brain. This will help you understand your clients... Americans are dumb, just accept it.” The staff is under pressure to meet targets for the number of calls dealt with and have to be polite even to callers who are ignorant, rude or simply racist. They also have the problem of dealing with American accents. „I will give you just one example – T”, Shyam tells us. „T can be silent, so “internet” becomes “innernet”... T and N merge – “written” becomes “writn”... The third sound is when T is in the middle. There it sounds like a D – “daughter” is “daughder”... The last category is when Americans say T actually like a T... Man, it drives me nuts. And that's just one consonant.

Bhagat has shown the characters with their realistic apparels. Burdon of work, tension, frustration are all routine for today's youth. Through the character of Shyam, the narrator, Bhagat has enlivened the picture of youth. Their hectic schedule, stress and tension causes nightmares. As Dr. Sigmund Freud has claimed, people mostly dream what they fear the most. In the very opening of the novel Shyam has seen omen dream in which Mr. Bakshi is trying to sink him by pushing his head in. This shows gruesome image of BOSS in the mind of young people. They are always thought negatively. As Shyam says,

“ I was in the water while my boss Bakshi was in a boat next to me .

He was pushing my head down in the water.” (06)

To give Indian touch, Bhagat has very minutely narrated the situation of home during marriage time. There happens to be noise in the living room. House is full of relatives. The atmosphere is chaotic. Moreover, such atmosphere disturbs the routine of host. And if someone getting late for a job, would definitely disregard the comings of guests too early.

The same fury is expressed by Shyam when his cousin is going to marry his neighbor. Bhagat also mocks at the typicality of Indian women, especially when they get together in any occasion. Shyam narrates the situation,

“ One aunty was cursing her daughter for leaving the matching bindis at home. Another aunt had lost the little screw of her gold” earring and was flipping out.”(08)

The situation and the people give Indian touch to the happenings. This leads to the claim that Bhagatian characters are not only Indian but typically Indian. Another Indian typical mentality is to doubt someone else for his or her own carelessness, particularly subordinate people or people of lower status. One of the aunts screams and worries when her screw of golden earring is lost.

Ignorance is the biggest threat which today’s youth is facing. They are many times, if not always, ignored. They have to recede rear seat. Their dreams, aspirations are not given much importance. As a result they start suffering from inferiority complex. They miss judge the value of themselves. They always feel reluctant and hesitant in doing anything. Unconsciously they start comparing themselves with others. Hence, their existence and being depend on others. Even in comparison they underestimate themselves . To stress this, Bhagat has used the character of Shyam who is a man next door and it seems that he is suffering from the same when he says,

“Every cousin of mine is becoming a doctor or Engineer. You can say I am the black sheep of My family.” (08)

Bhagat has also touched upon the stressed relationship between father and son. Military uncle and his son lives apart physically and mentally. There are many incidents in the novel where Uncle tries to stay in touch with his son but the generation gap does not allow him to do so. Uncle tries to mail some picture that he has taken at a zoo to his grandson. When uncle mailed the photographs to his son, he got reply from his son which shredded him totally. The mail read;

“Dad... you have cluttered my life enough, now stop cluttering my mailbox. I do not know what came over me that I allowed communication between you and my son. I don’t want your shadow on him. Please stay away and do not send him any more emails. For, literally or otherwise, we don’t want your attachments.”(37)

Bhagat's country is not the country within the mind like Narayan's *Malgudi* and Hardy's Wessex. His country is country outside the mind. He is realistic in his vision of life. He has used the current scenario as his background to his fictional world. But his vision is satirical and jovial with rare combination of youth's voice. Bhagat through Shyam, condemns politician for their maltreatment and inhuman behaviour towards poor people. The term Politician becomes humiliating and insulting cause of the people for whom the term has been used. The country is run by the inhuman and insensible people who just aim at self interest. They never care for people interest and betterment. Shyam said the following remark to describe the woodenness and deadly behaviour of politicians.

“Well, Vroom's point was that suicide is a horrible thing and people do it because they are really hurt. This means they feel something. But politicians don't. So, basically, this country is run by the people who don't feel anything.” (47)

To cop up with the modern society, all characters are hankering after money. They are money conscious. They are doing everything to earn money only. They have a high concept of being something. As Arthur Miller's „Death of a Salesman“ states the tag line that; “Personality wins the day”. They all are trying to make themselves like American who, they think, are more practical and money oriented. American culture has high impact on Indian people in general and youth in particular. The best Indian brains nurture the dream of getting the job either in America or England. As Vroom is of the opinion that,

“Americans have the say in the world because they have money...” (184)

Financial crisis is gruesome problem for the country like India. Many students have to opt for job rather than going for further study or higher education. We have bunch of people around us who has killed his educational career to be earning person. Vroom and Priyanka are such characters. Vroom wanted to be Journalist but had to left study as a result he came into the call centre profession by force. Priyanka wished to complete her B.Ed. but had to work for gathering the money for doing B.Ed. . The fruit is frustration and endless calls day and night. As she regretfully says to Shyam,

“ I could have done my B.Ed. right after my college. But I wanted to save money first... .So until then, it is two Hundred calls a night, night after night“ ”(165)

Bhagat has also depicted the life at BPO. It is not as it seems to be. They have to bare a lot. Ill words from the caller, dump calls, stressed calls, system error, are frequent and usual. Subhash Bakshi is the manager of the call centre. He is a demanding boss while at his end he is almost non – productive for the call centre. Under his management, “connexions” is facing a downfall and people are afraid of being fired at anytime, or on a bigger extent the whole company could be shutdown. He is emotionless and senseless according to his juniors, whom he refers as “resources” rather than agents or executives. Bakshi is a disaster at using computers or coming up with new ideas. On the other end, he’s quite a master in passing his work onto others in name of “exposure.” He loves to use long and complicated management jargons. He also visits pornographic websites on duty and horrifies employees by frequently speaking about “right sizing.” He is, by author, portrayed so mean t hat he forwards Shyam and Varun’s work website development as of him and even copies that mail to both of them, and gets a transfer to Boston upon that base. Bakshi is also a coward as when WSAG team frames him, he can’t defend himself and grants all of their, actually improper, demands at once. The bossism of Bakshi adds more gruesomeness to the atmosphere. Bahshi is such character to whom the team dislikes the most. As Shyam narrates his look in the following manner,

“ The oversized face resembled the Ravan Cut-out at Dusshera”(19)

Here Bakshi is compared with Ravan who is an evil looking and evil doer. When Shyam goes to Bakshi to talk about the problem they are facing because of system error, Bakshi diverts the talk by tempting Shyam for promotion by showing him growth chart. This general corporate practice is being emphasized. Chetan Bhagat also touches upon the major socially and mentally burning issue of existentialism. In the era of throat cut competition, it is very difficult for the people to survive. As a result the feeling of insecurity results in depression and suppression. They constantly strive for their survival. In earlier times, the concept of existentialism was more philosophical or related to quest for self and identity whereas in modern era it has to do with social survival and mental peace. The entire country is trapped in the pawn of social evils like corruption, exploitation, manipulation and maltreatment. With piteous and tensed mind Chetan Bhagat has shown the pity of modern characters in modern world. Esha takes sleeping pills to get rid of mental pain, Vroom rides his bike at the optimum to relax mentally. And it is but obvious that mental pain is more painful than any other. As Esha says when asked by Shyam,

“Mental pain is more gruesome and unbearable than Physical pain.”(154)

Indian youngsters turn towards pop culture. They frequently visit bar, club and consume wine in excessive form to be detached from themselves and the world outside which affects and brings chaos in the world within. Bhagat has presented bear bar where Shyam, Vroom, Priyanka, Radhika and Esha frequently visit and try to lessen their stress. To stay with the glittering world of fashion, one has to be rich enough to afford the luxury of the life. It is not everybody's cup of tea to live the lavish life. Shyam once comments that there are many stick-thin and zero figure models who seem to be pale-complexioned. This is a bitter satire on tempting modelling world. Models have to look after their outer beauty intensively and extensively as result they abundantly use cosmetic and beauty products. Ultimately it harms their charm and becomes dismal and pale. In *One Night @ the Call Centre* Esha is health and diet conscious as she is keen to be successful model. She does not take high celery food and maintain her figure in order to look attractive. Low salary or less remuneration is a universal problem. Employees are not paid enough wages which they ought to be paid. They are exploited in many ways in the name of recession and competition. As a result they have to undergo financial crisis and other issues related to money. They feel more disappointed when they compare their wages with the wages of countries as their wages are not even one third to them. Regretfully Vroom claims,

“We get paid well, fifteen thousand a month. Fuck, that is almost twelve Dollars a day. Wow, I make as much a day as a US burger boy makes in two hours. Not bad for my college degree. Not bad at all.” (103)

Here Bhagat tries to bring out the disparity between India and foreign countries in the terms of wages provided to the workers and employees. In India students have to struggle a lot to earn money even after getting higher education. In India employees have to sweat themselves to earn money whereas in foreign countries people get enough amount within well scheduled time.

Thus, For a „pop“ novel, this book has a big underlying theme: nationalism. What *One Night @ the Call Center* is really about is a call to arms to India and to the young people within it. Having had to suffer the country being screwed up by politicians for 50 years, the potential

of the nation and its people is finally being allowed to flourish. That potential shouldn't be wasted, we are told, by the brightest young people working in a soul-destroying job, dealing with morons on the line from America and even bigger morons up the management pecking order. That kind of sentiment – follows your heart and don't let the bastards grind you down – is, of course, rife in Western popular culture, too, most recently exemplified by the film *Revolutionary Road*. But it takes on a particular twist in a country finally starting to assert itself in the world after decades of being a basket case. So when he talks to God, Vroom says: „I should not have taken up a job just for money. Call centres pay more, but only because the exchange rate is in the favor of Americans. They toss their loose change at us. It seems like a lot of rupees. But jobs that pay less could be better. There could be jobs that define me, make me learn or help my country.“

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