

Anxieties and Insecurities in Chetan Bhagat's *One night @ Call Center*

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat is a prolific writer of English fiction. His novel *Revolution 20-20* deals with the discernment and issues of young generation of India. The goals, dreams, hardships and sensitivities of the young Indians plays a major role of the novel. The novel essentially centres around the youth who are involved in profession. *One Night @ the Call Center* is a 2005 novel by Indian author Chetan Bhagat. The novel revolves around a group of six call center employees working at a call center in Gurgaon, Haryana, India. The themes involve the anxieties and insecurities of the young Indian middle class, such as career, inadequacy, marriage, and family conflicts. The present paper makes an attempt to discuss the themes of Chetan Bhagat's *One night @ Call Center* as an outstanding master piece of his genre of representing Indian youth.

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat is an Indian author, columnist, screenwriter, television personality, motivational speaker and well known for his bestselling novels, Five Point Someone (2004), One Night @ the Call Center (2005), The 3 Mistakes of My Life (2008), 2 States (2009), Revolution 2020 (2011), What Young India Wants (2012) (speeches and columns) and half girlfriend (2014). It is an on-going debate for the critics to analyse Chetan Bhagat's literary genre of writing. It is a puzzle for the critics why his novels are, widely read over rated. He is a prominent author who has to be studied and judged well and just cannot be ignored as demeaning. Author of ten novels made an open statement that he is not looking for *Booker prize* and said that he wants to reach as many people as he can, through books, films or other media of entertainment. It is a misconception if anyone says that his books are written

exclusively from the male point of view, however he sensitizes the delicate emotions of men and women in broader compass who in turn struggle for identity in achieving their goals. It is pathetic when reviewers call Chetan Bhagat's fiction as trash literature because of its simple English. Rightly pointed out by Ankit Dubey in Quora "Yes, his writing style is nothing compared to an Ayn Rand, a Rohinton Mistry or a Khad Hosseini, but someone who is selling so much must be doing something right"(Dubey Ankit) It is sympathetic that most of the reviewers stamp the literary quality of a novel without even reading it. Aisha Perveen and Tanu Gupta have rightly pointed in their article on "Love and Sex: Frank and Free Treatment in Chetan Bhagat's Novels" that "One of the most important and modern elements imbibed in Bhagat's [...] is the Free and Frank treatment of Sex. He elucidates the importance of sexual inclination and eroticism in life. Bhagat boldly deals with sex realistically and examines sex relations natural and harmonious. He regards sex as a spiritual bond to serve the purpose of the life force and vitality. It is not merely a physical union between the man and woman, but the only way to bless the society with the world citizen."(The Criterion-online Journal, Vol.6, Issue 2, 2015)

Deus ex machina, a plot device

Arvind Jadhav in his article *Representing Metropolitan Youth Culture: An assessment of Chetan Bhagat's Five Point Someone and One Night @ the Call Center*, asserts as, "Indian Youth Culture has not remained 'Indian' as such. Because of globalization in each and every domain youth culture also drastically changed.. (Jadhav 4). At the opening of the novel Chetan Bhagat gives a small exercise to the readers to fill up with three responses. Firstly what one is feared by, secondly what makes one angry and thirdly what is that one does not like in oneself. It is a candid trial of Chetan Bhagat employing magic realism in his novel. In other words *deus ex machina*, a plot device where a complicated problem is abruptly solved by an unexpected intervention of a new character God. God gives them advice on improving their lives, both long term and the immediate danger. The conversation with God motivates the group to such an extent that they get ready to face their problems with utmost determination and motivation. They sit together and sort out plans to get rid of the problems in their lives.

Bhagat's technique of magic realism is successful, because his focus is on the crisis management dealing with the problems faced by the young India in the pursuit of their goals

and career building. He allows the narrative to run in one direction of winning the life through the positive means. Magic Realism has not become monotonous but a purposeful strategy in *One Night @ Call Center*. Dealing with the contemporary subjects, the plot of the novel not only throws light on the magic realism but also on various issues like liberalization, globalisation, social realism, human relationships, feminism and the westernization. Theme of romance is highly convincing. Among the few who have tried magic realism, Chetan Bhagat is the one who have emerged successfully in following Rushdie's trend. If Bhagat were to ever attempt an autobiography, "Thank you Mr. Ex – boss for making me suffer (acknowledgements)". Through the character Shyam, he shows the pain of rejection of love, however this personal feeling is also expressed in his own words as, "I want to thank all the women who rejected me (too many to name here) without them, I would not have known the pain of rejection (XII).

Stream of consciousness

The novel starts with the narrative technique of stream of consciousness. It is a book that starts with the incident of his train journey from Kanpur to Delhi which becomes the source of his novel. He meets a girl of mid-twenties to whom he introduces himself as Chetan Bhagat and gets disappointed for her poor response at his authorship. However, they lead a discussion on the representation of the youth in his novel. She comments him to forget himself as 'youth writer'. She criticises him "[...]you are hardly a youth writer"(Bhagat 4). She questions if he has a notion that IIT is all about youth, and that the youth confined only to IIT. Furthermore she comments that, "It hardly represents the Indian youth" (4). He is very curious to know the response of the readers about his novel. When he remarks for feedback, she questions "If you want to write about the youth, should not you talk about young people who really face challenges? [...] IITians face challenges, but what about the hundreds, and thousands of others?"(5). She advises him to get out of the student campus kind of books. She discloses her experience in the call center on the condition of writing the novel for which he readily agrees.

The novel narrated through Shyam's character. Western Appliances Strategic Group (WASG) deals with the customers of home appliances such as refrigerators, ovens and vacuum cleaners. All the youngsters work for this American agency. The book starts with Shyam as the first person narrative who tells the readers about his misfortunes as a call centre

employee. His colleagues have their own woes to share. Some of the characters have their own American names, as the callers from the U.S could pronounce their Indian names like Sam Mercy for Shyam Mehra, Victor Mell for Varun Malhotra, Eliza Singer for Esha Singh, and Regina Jones for Radhika Jha.

Chetan Bhagat is very keen on describing catchy trendy women of the twentieth century. Esha's goal of becoming a model is very clear at the very introduction of her character in the novel, Esha's dress sense is impeccable. "Her sleeveless.....eye – shadow [...] He says, hottest chick at *Connections*" (19). Against her parents' wishes, Esha moves from Chandigarh to Delhi a year before joining *Connections*. Rajani Mevada Suthar observes Esha's character in her article *The Portrayal of Moral Values and Ethics in Chetan Bhagat's One Night at the Call Centre*, about Esha's character as, "Esha symbolizes 'the dim side' of the new Indian career woman of the twenty-first century. In the meantime, it demonstrates to us a vastly compromising demeanor that has come over the present youth. the "hot chik" at the call center. Esha is an upcoming model and was not able to participate in a beauty pageant because of her height. She had earlier made a 'compromise' by sleeping with a designer for a modelling contract and terribly guilty about the misdeed. (MedavaSuthar 11202).

Chetan Bhagat is unbiased in portraying the follies of men and women without any kind of taking sides. The general kind of virtual feelings of an innocent lover's fear is shown as "you-horrible men' looks from girls at other table. (130)". He represents the exploitation of men in the name of love. Twentieth century psyche of girl's mind set is well portrayed, "It's true. Girls go around rejecting men like it is their birth right. They have no idea how much it hurts us [...] men dance around, spend cash, make them laugh, write stupid poems, anything to win them over" (63). Chetan Bhagat is very adept at reflecting the broken heart of a young man when a girlfriend breaks a relationship. Though Shyam and Priyanka decide to quit from their relationship their feelings still linger for each other. Shyam observes how Priyanka speaks to Ganesh. "Women playing with their hair while talking to a guy is an automatic female preening gesture (100)". Very soon Priyanka's happiness turns into frustration when she learns that Ganesh has not given his original photos but modified pictures to hide his baldness, she does not appreciate cheating nature of Ganesh.

Chetan Bhagat understands the plight of working women "Just that and cooking three meals a day and household chores and working all night (17)". Radhika marries Anuj after a whirl

wind courtship in college. She lives in a joint family with Anuj's tetra – traditional parents. "Trust me, being a daughter in law is harder than being a model, Radhika said (83)". Bhagat also writes how the women are subjected to male domination. When Anuj's mother complains about "I am old, if the pieces are too big they will choke my food pipe. May be Radhika is trying to kill me." "And you're still knitting a scarf for her?"(83)". As a response to this situation Anuj messages to Radhika. At this juncture it is Esha who gives emotional support to Radhika when she gives her cell phone to read the message sent by her husband. "Show elders respect, Act like a daughter in law should Goodnight (82)".

Bhagat depicts how the old people are ignored by their children. Especially the treatment of sons when they go abroad in the pursuit of the materialistic needs. Often the human relationships are replaced by financial and selfish relationships. The best example for this situation is the mail from military uncle's son, " Dad...you have cluttered my life enough, now stop cluttering my mail box. 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 (150).

The entire team experiences a lot of agony (professional as well as personal) that night. They share their pain, sorrows, ambitions, love, personal trauma and the happiness. Vroom and Shyam are shocked to know that their boss Bakshi has cheated them by submitting the troubleshooting to headquarters without crediting them. Bakshi has plans to lay off a lot of call centre workers and so they are all worried about their jobs. At the same time the three young ladies start opening up their woes. Radhika, dedicated to family and profession gets to know about her husband's love interest, Priyanka, engaged to Ganesh understands to know his hypocritical nature, Esha, an ambitious girl turned psychopath revealing some dark secrets of her modelling career. Military uncle missing the love and affection of his son and grandson. At this point of time in the night all the six members plan to go out in the quails for a breath of fresh air. In Priyanka's words "Everyone wanted to get out of his or her miseries, if only for a few moments. I wanted to get away from Bakshi, Ganesh and Connections (173)". Priyanka and Shyam their past college days at the campus fair. During their return journey, all of a sudden the qualis skids. The vehicle rattles and slides down on an inclined path. The accident described as " 'careful' everyone shouted and held on to anything that they

could find around them. The Qualis went off the road into a slush downhill patch. Vroom desperately tried to control the steering but the wheels couldn't grip the ground. Like a drunk tramp, the qualis staggard down and into the site of a high – rise construction project (196)". The cab gets struck up into a construction site and the cab just hanging on pieces of rods. With death in front of them and no one to call for help as their mobiles showed zero range all six were in a fix. They have different ideas like calling police, fire brigade or call center. Priyanka, Shyam and Radhika's cell phones did not work Military uncle's does not have a mobile. Vroom takes out his phone. Radhika understands that they cannot reach anyone in the world. Shyam closes his eyes for a second and visualises his death. Their thoughts go in different ways. Shyam says " Everyone dies one day. I said, just to break the silence (199)". Suddenly a call comes into Shyam's mobile. Esha wonders how the phone rings without a network with a screen display God, God calling. The God opens a discussion with everybody. When Vroom asks God to prove that he is God, the Gods says "The inner call [...] When you are at peace – and then too it is hard to hear it. Because in modern life, the networks are too busy (203)". He also says that he would save their lives tonight but in return he demands them to give something. He says them to think about what they really want and what kind change is anticipated in their life style. He insists them to tell their predicaments. They pour out their disappointments one after the other. Vroom aspires for a life with meaning. Priyanka wants her mother to be happy but she cannot kill her happiness for it. As a woman of independent thinking she feels that her focus should be on her own life and what she wants. Military uncle wants to be with his son and grandson. He further realises that it is their life, and he has no right to judge them by his outdated values. He strongly feels that it is the right time to get rid of his inflated ego and go to the US to confess it out. Radhika wants to be herself again, just like she was before marriage. She wants to stay with her parents and divorce Anuj. She considers it as a wrong decision to marry Anuj. Esha wants her parents to love her again. She does not want to be a dumb model and says "Any career that makes you compromise on your morals or judges you because you are not an inch taller is not worth it (255)". Shyam wants to be worthy of someone like Priyanka one day. He realises and accepts that he is not up to the expectations of Priyanka and does not deserve her. In his words "But one day I'd like to be worthy of someone like her – someone intelligent, witty, sensitive and fun, someone who can seamlessly merge friendship with love (206)". God says that he is

amazed and pleased to know the awareness levels the six people to know what they want in their lives. As a response to their aspirations in life, God gives them the four secrets of success. The four things a person needs for success are, medium amount of intelligence, a bit of imagination, self-confidence, failure. In His words, “[...] to be really successful, you must face failure. You have to experience it, feel it, taste it, suffer it. Only then can you shine (208)”. He even draws the comparison between India and America and says that America may have many things but not the happiest people because the country is obsessed with war. Talking about their plan of retorting Bakshi, the God says that He is the ultimate boss and not Bakshi. Radhika expresses to the God that He will not be with them always. He explains His system of working as, “You see, I have a contract with all human beings. You do your best, and every now and then, I will come behind to give you a bonus push [...] I am inside you when you need me (210)”. God asks them to follow their instinctive paths and also alerts them to teach Bakshi a lesson.

The God and the six people bid goodbye and within six seconds they come out of the pit and be on the road again. Everybody experience that it is a personal call. Towards the end of the novel they take certain resolutions like Shyam and Vroom decide to become web designers. Priyanka dumps her fiancé and decides to marry Shyam. A lot of change is brought after the God’s interaction with them. Shyam understands that it is impossible to forget Priyanka. He is shocked when she says that she wants to marry him. When he asks her the cause of rejecting Ganesh is his baldness, she asserts that inner beauty is rather preferable than external beauty. In her words “He might be fine in most ways, but the point is, he lied. And this gives me a clue about the person he is. I don’t want to spend my life with a person like that (244)”. When she says that she needs some more love, and it is a basic need, he does not readily agree to her reconsideration of marrying him instead asks if it is a sympathetic decision. He says “I am not your spare wheel (246)”. The next day he confesses to Vroom, Esha, Radhika and Military uncle that he denied Priyanka’s proposal only because he needed to get some respect in his life. All of them travel to Priyanka’s house on learning that Priyanka’s mother was hosting Ganesh’s family for breakfast. After reaching her house Shyam’s love is expressed as “You are already in my pocket – of my life, my heart, my mind, my soul – please come back (250)”. Priyanka decides to work at connexions, focus her career by doing B.Ed. She also determines to face her mother’s fake heart attacks and say no

to Ganesh. The novel ends up with the philosophy of life through Shyam's words "But that is what life is like – uncertain, screwed up at times, but still fun (252)". Shyam considers himself an achiever because of his abilities, saving lots of jobs at the call center, teaching a lesson to his boss Bakshi, starting his own company, and even finishing the book. In his words " I can do whatever I really want [...] God is always with me and there is no such thing as a loser after all(253)". Bhagat questions about the God's call and the presence of reality in the story. The other side of the novel if considered as a personality development course on soft skills with a message of inner call to all the Indian youth with the relevance of rational and scientific explanations as an engineer of twentieth century Bhagat has an option of "[...] And from that point on, whatever God said, you can substitute as if Military Uncle said it. He told them about success, the inner call and all those other things "(256)". However, Bhagat prefers God's call rather than Military Uncles' because "*Just like life, Rational or not, it just gets better with God in it (256)*". Avtar Ram and Talan Kumar rightly observe the extraordinary creative skill of Chetan Bhagat as, "First time in the history of Indian English literature, Chetan Bhagat introduced God as a cozy friend with mobile phone in his second blockbuster novel *One Night @ The Call Centre (2005)* phone call from God is an additional element in his works. No novelist has presented God using mobile phone to guide his devotees in the crisis" (Avtar and Talan).

Conclusion

Chetan Bhagat not only depicts the predicaments of young India but also the plight of women in the Indian families. His women characters are not docile to watch at the injustices going on in the form of domination be it women against women or men against women. Chetan Bhagat is very keen observer of the present day youth when it matters to the man-woman relationships too. He reflects the youth psychology that a marriage between two souls and that there should exist a congenial understanding between both the genders. He does not hesitate to talk about the aspect of pre-marital sex in his novels. He is least bothered if critics brand his novels as porn novels or campus love stories.

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