

**CHETAN BHAGAT’S ONE NIGHT @ THE CALL CENTER:**

**A MIRROR OF GLOBALIZATION**

Madhavi Nikam

Sudhir Nikam

---

In the twenty first century, one cannot think of any branch of knowledge without making a reference to Globalization, which has influenced language, literature, social sciences, service sectors and whatnot. Literature is a product of the thoughts and interactions of different social, political, economic and religious institutions. As the society changes, literature also changes in the way of expressing its themes, techniques, and the modes of awareness. Today, not only literature in English, but also Indian English literature is influenced by the global changes. Indian English literature in a way is a global product, if we consider it in terms of its use of English as a medium of expression. Chetan Bhagat is such a budding novelist who considers it his responsibility to appeal the young generation in India by writing a novel based on the call center, which is a gift of globalization. Although call center is considered as a boon for India which is facing the problem of unemployment, Chetan Bhagat through this novel is trying to give a message that the Indians, instead of relying on the western countries, should explore own creativities and potentialities. The present paper highlights the influence of call center, which is a child of globalization, on the personal, social, moral, intellectual and cultural relations of the call center employees.

Chetan Bhagat is educated at IIT Delhi and IIM Ahemadabad. Presently he is working as an investment banker in Hong Kong. He has authored two novels- *Five Points Some One* (2004) for which he achieved Society Young Achiever’s award in 2004 and *One Night @ the Call*

*Center* (2005). He is one of the best story tellers of the new generation. G.Swaminathan in his review of this novel comments: “if you want to really have a peep into the new generation, their jobs, life, attitude, values and their dreams please do not miss *One Night @ the Call Center*.”<sup>1</sup>

The present novel explores the predicament of the call center employees. Chetan Bhagat was inspired to write a novel about the call centers by his cousins and sisters-in-law working at call centers, making him wonder how they begin their day when the whole world goes to sleep. The novel begins with a prologue, where the author is traveling in a train from Kanpur to Delhi. In the empty first class compartment, a lady tells him this story with one condition that he must promise to write a book on it. Chetan agrees to this and the lady begins the story.

The narrative is about six persons: Shyam, Vroom, Esha, Priyanka and the Military uncle who work in a call center called ‘Connexion Call Center’ in Gurgaon. The name of their bay is Western Appliances Strategic Group. They deal with customers of home appliances such as refrigerators, ovens and vacuum cleaners and are skilled in dealing with troublesome and painful customers. This call center is about to right-size its staff as it has been in a loss. The only client remaining is Western Appliances Corp. Their shift is from 10.30 p.m. to 6.30 a.m. It is a major shift as most of the calls occur in this time. Since the news of right-sizing hits the ears of the employees, it makes them panic about their job. However, the boss, Bakshi is a selfish and self-centered person who is interested only in his welfare. Infact, he sends the web-site project designed by Vroom and Shyam under his name to get credit to go to Boston.

The novel is narrated through the protagonist Shyam, a call center agent who is a loser. He has potential in him but due to his shyness remains far from success. He hates his job, his highly incapable manager who thinks he is a total loser because of the constant de-motivating from his seniors. The only reason that he is sticking to this job is that it pays good money and working in some other profession will require several times the hard work as he is currently doing. He hates his boss and doing all donkey work, getting no credit for it. When priyanka, his ex-girlfriend gets a proposal from a Microsoft guy earning thousand U.S. dollars a year, Shyam becomes upset. It goes very difficult for him to forget her. His feelings for her are “like vestigial organs. They serve no purpose or value. But they give you a pain in the appendix.”<sup>2</sup> His

possessiveness towards Priyanka leads him towards frustration. About Priyanka's decision to marry a rich person, he thinks "Girls are strategic. They'll talk about love and romance and all that crap – but when it comes to doing the deal, they will choose the fattest chicken"(72). His jealousy leads him to tap the phone of Priyanka to listen the conversation between her and her fiancée.

Next character, Vroom (Varun) a flamboyant person is an ex-journalist-trainee and would love journalism but is here to make money. He is not interested in a call center job. He loves pizzas, drinking, riding bikes and thinking over social and global issues. Varun is called Vroom because of his love for anything on wheel. He is frustrated and stressed because his parents live separately. Because of this tension he cannot sleep at all. All day he lies in bed feeling sick.

Priyanka is an ex-girlfriend of Shyam. She has broken up with Shyam after a long love affair. Fed up of her over possessive mother, she is confused between her likes of her and her troublesome mother. She wants to become a school principal and is saving money for her B.Ed. She is about to get married to an NRI who works in Microsoft whom she has never met. Priyanka's mother is over possessive. She wants her daughter to be married off to a wealthy guy. She becomes happy with a proposal from Ganesh's family: "I am so happy today. Look how God set such a perfect match right to our door. And I used to worry about you so much" (135). Ganesh wants to get married within one month but Priyanka is not mentally prepared for it. Like a typical Indian mother she says, "Oh you don't have to worry about that. I am there to organize everything. You wait and see, I will work day and night to make it a grand event" (136). She feels when families have fixed the match, bride and groom are happy, there should not be a delay. She considers Shyam as "useless call center chap"(138). She never liked Shyam as he is not settled. She wishes priyanka marry someone she chooses for her. Her mother married her dad who was just a government employee only because he seemed like a decent human being. But her sister waited to marry better qualified boys and they are richer today.

Esha, a modern fashionable girl aspires to be a top model. Her lipstick was a thick cocoa "as if she had just kissed a bowl of chocolate sauce." As she has moved from Chandigrl to Delhi against her parent's wish, lives alone from them. After working at night in the call center she

approaches agencies and tries to get modeling assignments. However, nothing big has come her way so far. She sleeps with a forty-year-old designer to get a modeling contract. She had to sleep with him once to get a break in a major fashion show. However, later he tells her agent that she was too short to be a ramp model, as if he didn't know that when he slept with her. She feels an awful guilt and hates herself for believing people who told her that she could be a model. She doesn't get her break and regrets this decision all her life.

Radhika cares a lot for her husband Anuj and her demanding mother-in-law. She has to work all the night after doing household chores. She is much worried with right-sizing as she needs the job to run her family. Radhika has married Anuj after a "Whirlwind courtship" (22) in college. She is her daddy's only daughter but after marriage she has to adjust with Anuj's ultra traditional family. Instead of love, Anuj sends her SMS like: "Show elders respect. Act like a daughter-in-law should. Good night"(94). While talking with Esha she tells that " being a daughter-in-law is harder than being a model"(94).

Vroom gives an idea of playing radio jockey to make Radhika happy. He calls Anuj and pretends that he was calling from a radio show. Then he tells him that he has won a prize, a large bouquet of roses and a box of Swiss chocolate that he can send to anyone he loves anywhere in India, with a romantic message. Anuj's unexpected response is "Yes sure. I'd like to send it to my girlfriend Payal"(162). Radhika comes to know that her husband has cheated her, she takes anti-depressant tablets. She cannot survive without it.

Military Uncle is a retired Army person, an old generation man who lives alone and is neglected by his son and daughter-in-law who are in U.S.. He has a lot of love for his grand son. He is very particular about the time and discipline. He works to supplement the meager pension. When military uncle sends messages to his grandson, he gets an email from his son, "Dad... you have cluttered my life enough, now what came over me that I allowed communicating 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" (165).

While all the six persons are on a short journey, the Qualis staggers down and into the site of a high- rise construction project. Their cell phones did not work. They visualize their death. They had to stay balanced until someone spots them in the morning. Shyam's cell phone rings without network. It is a phone from God. The God tells that although they receive hundreds of calls everyday, the inner call is important which they cannot hear: "The little voice inside that wants to talk to you. But you can only hear it when you are at peace and then too it is hard to hear it" (227). The God makes a deal with them. He would save their lives on the condition that they reveal their inner voice to him. Varun confesses that he wants a life with meaning. He needs to quit this call center: "Sorry, but calling is not my calling" (229). Priyanka wants to make her mother happy. Military uncle wants to be with his son and grandson. He realizes he was wrong in judging them by his outdated values. Radhika wants to be "myself again, just like I was before marriage, when I was with my parents" (230). She wants to divorce Anuj. Esha wants to give up modeling. She wants her parents to love her again. Shyam wants to set up a small web design company in collaboration with Vroom. He wants to be "worthy of someone like Priyanka one day" (231). God's call makes them realize that they will be happy only if they do what they love doing the most, irrespective of how much money they earn by doing so. Ultimately they must listen to their hearts and forget about what other people tell them to do. They must respond their "inner calling" to lead a happy and fruitful life.

Thus, Chetan Bhagat by presenting a novel on call center, raises questions about the pros and cons of this industry and those who are related to it. The novel shows that as a result of privatization policy, a very few industries give a job security. This leads to the exploitation of the employees. The call centers have to adjust their time with the time of the country with which they come in contact. In India, normally call center employees have to work throughout the night to deal with the western customers. As a result, they cannot get a proper sleep even in the day, which affects their health badly. One of the bright sides of globalization is that Indian youth are getting good job opportunities in western countries. It is a thing of pride that the companies like Microsoft cannot think about their business without taking into consideration the Indian software engineers. Today women are not restricted to the four walls but they have emancipated to show their potentiality. They have various avenues open for their career. Love, however, in global era

has changed its dimensions. It has become more practical and material possession has taken the place of true love. Priyanka loves shyam but cannot marry him as he is not well-settled. Radhika's husband shows a false love to her only because of her handsome salary, however, he develops extramarital affair with another girl. The novel also focuses on how the young people while running after their career, are forgetting their duty towards parents. Through the example of military uncle, Chetan Bhagat touches the clash between the old and modern with the changing atmosphere.

Thus *one night @ the call center* deals with the problems, fears, insecurities faced by the call center employees. Cheten Bhagat realizes that call centers are not all fun and joy as it is believed popularly: "On a different level, I began to think about the number individuals who sacrifice their creativity and skills and join call center merely because of the fact pay packet on offer."<sup>3</sup> These jobs waste the full potentiality of bright, young people, who take them up out of financial compulsion. The book is a message to young people not to give up their dreams for a few thousand rupees. However it does not mean that Chetan is against the call centers. He realizes that these call centers are heaven for under-performers or for those who need money for their education.

Chetan Bhagat feels that, we Indian should not consider ourselves inferior to Americans. We need to believe in ourselves instead of looking up to U.S. Vroom cannot stand two things: the Racists and the Americans. He thinks Americans get to act superior to us "not because they are better people. But because their country is rich and ours is poor. That is the only damn reason. Because the losers who have run our country for the last fifty year couldn't do better than make India one of the poorest countries on the earth" (123).

We as Indians, have a lot of potential. Our youth population is enormous and is growing at a fast rate. Every year more people are educated and more Indians have the opportunity to compete globally. This locked up potential can be given free expression only if the youth have someone to act as their role-model; a person who can organize and guide the masses towards a common goal; some one who can inspire and motivate them for their success.

**References:**

1 G.Swaminathan, A Review of One Night @ the Call Center, <http://www.boloji.com/bookreviews/059.htm>

2. Chetan Bhagat. *One Night @ the Call Center*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2005. All subsequent reference is from this edition.

3. Interview to Raj Lalwani, October 28, 2005. <http://in.rediff.com/getahead/2005/oct/28night.html>

About the Author

Dr. Madhavi Nikam,Assistant Professor, P.G. Department of English, R.K.Talreja College, Ulhasnagar, University of Mumbai.

Dr.Sudhir Nikam, Assistant Professor P.G. Department of English, B.N.N.College, Bhiwandi, University of Mumbai.