



THE EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER IN CHETAN BHAGAT'S NOVEL: *ONE NIGHT @ THE CALL CENTRE*

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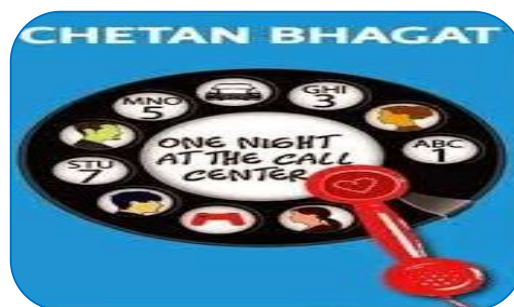
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ABSTRACT :

The East-West Encounter has created a number of evils and new ways of exploitation in the postmodern world. The economic growth is at one side while the encroachment on culture and tradition is on the other. The media, TV channels, internet, etc. have entered in the lives of the common people who are now made 'glocal' citizens of the world. Every worry and anxiety of the Western world is immediately popped up to the kitchen and bedroom of the Indian houses. The lower-middle and upper class boys and girls are targeted for the sale of branded coke, drinks, mobiles phones, shoes, clothes and pizza. The middle class undergraduate/graduate boys and girls strive to get a job at BPO and call centers. They are caught into marketing strategies and further into a cultural trap and they perpetually live the life of hybridity imitating the western ideals. Chetan Bhagat exposes these pseudo-ideals in his novel and presents traumatic experiences of the new generation who works in call centers.



KEYWORDS : *postmodern world , glocal' citizens , mobiles phones.*

1.INTRODUCTION:

Chetan Bhagat's novel *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005) replicates the changing demography of the contemporary Indian life which is swinging between the old and new culture. The economic growth is at one side while the encroachment on culture and tradition is on the other. The media, TV channels, internet, etc. have entered in the lives of the common people who are now made 'glocal' citizens of the world. Every worry and anxiety of the Western world is immediately popped up to the kitchen and bedroom of the Indian houses. The lower-middle and upper class boys and girls are targeted for the sale of branded coke, drinks, mobiles phones, shoes, clothes and pizza. The middle class undergraduate/graduate boys and girls strive to get a job at BPO and call centers. They are trained in American fake accent and culture and then they are recruited at the call centers to work for Multinational Companies (MNCs). Shashi Tharoor in his review of the book points out:

To many, the call centre has become the symbol of India's rapidly globalizing economy. While traditional India sleeps, a dynamic population of highly skilled, articulate professionals work through the night, functioning on U.S. time under made-up American aliases. They feign familiarity with a culture and climate they've never experienced, earn salaries that their elders couldn't have imagined (but still a fraction

of what an American would make), and enjoy a lifestyle that's a cocktail of premature affluence and ersatz Westernisation. (2009:78).

India is a major hub of such call centers and BPOs that outsources for the biggest MNCs of the world. Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata and other metros have such establishments that offer the middle class graduates a greater opportunity to earn money. But the call centers do not remain a paradise of work and source of income after a couple of years, as they turn into exploitation centers. However, the work culture and the place expose the young generation to the newer values and the western culture of eating, drinking, dressing fashionably, etiquettes, dates, pre-marital sex and what not. This kind of western life-style emerges as a threat to the Indian culture and the clash between the cultures culminates into the disintegration of individual and family relations. The youth try to live the hybrid kind of life what Bhabha calls 'mimicry' and rootlessness. The consumerist approach of the young generation creates ripples in the traditional family system of India. The concept of individualism that they borrow from the western world clashes with Indian values and the youth emerges as anti-family, anti-Indian and anti-tradition. The traditional family perception and family values begin to dissolve yielding a place to freedom and open life. The major crisis occurs in case of marriage system when a boy or girl chooses his/her partner without the consent of family members. In the traditional system, the family gatherings, wedding ceremonies, etc. performed as the 'marriage pool' to decide the marriage of the youth. Globalization provides opportunities and jobs equally to the male and female of diversified ethnic identity and the workplaces like BPO, KPO and call centers became the modern day 'marriage pools' where marriages were arranged and performed, even without parents' permission. The social institution of marriage is thus, reduced into an individual one creating ripples in the society.

Chetan Bhagat exposes all these issues and the restlessness of the contemporary Indian youth who work at such a multicultural place where individualism is not sacrificed. However, this does not mean that the novel reflects anti-social views; instead, it is a beautiful admixture of individual and social issues which are reflected through the clash between Eastern and Western cultural ideas reflected in the novel.

2. THE OPENING OF THE NOVEL

The novel opens with a 'prologue' which serves as the frame narrative to the main plot of the novel. There are two plots that run parallel in the novel: the first depicts the author and a young girl who travels by train from Kanpur to Delhi and the other is the youngsters' struggle at the call centre. The author is very conscious about his status as a writer of his first book *Five Point Someone* (2004) and when the girl remarks that the book is 'Just all right....okey okey types' (2005:3), the author's pride is hurt. She criticizes the book as it does not represent the youth of India in general. It is a story of the elite educational institute and hence did not appeal to the sentiments of the common youth. As stated earlier the author is quite self conscious who expected a better compliment but instead he received a cold response from the girl, who was actually representing youth of modern India. Later she explained her viewpoint that IITians 'hardly, represent the Indian youth.' (2005:3) During their discussion, she offers him to tell a wonderful story of the young people in India who work in a call centre and puts a condition to write a book on them. The author hesitatingly accepts her condition and listens to her story. The plot and even the narrative technique are also prescribed by her and she insists on him to write the story in the first person point of view. Thus, the plot and narrative technique are already supplied to the author, but the most important event of the story is the introduction of the *Dux Ex Machina* in the form of a phone call from God himself.

There was another challenging aspect in the novel that was the specified treatment given to temporal dimension of the novel i.e. the complete story occurs in a single night. Thus, it was a challenge for the author to depict the novel in such a specific temporal dimension of one night. He accepted the challenge and researched for six months by visiting various call centers and began his narrative choosing Shyam as his narrator.

Though the novel actually opens with the prologue which constitutes the outer frame of the narrative, the inner frame of the narrative begins with an excerpt taken from the climatic chapter

29(2005:220-224). It serves as the exposition to the inner frame of narrative which is full of metaphysical ideas where the characters are under tension due to some kind of fear and they talk about their dark future. The idea of impending death due to some crisis is their main concern. After the excerpt from chapter 29, the first chapter begins with the nightmare of Shyam, in which he experienced death as his head was pushed down in water by his boss, Bakshi. The idea of fear introduced in the earlier chapter has been continued in the opening of the first chapter of the novel. The first chapter is devoted to the family background of the narrator and the protagonist, Shyam who works at Connexions Call Center in Gurgaon. The first chapter consists of the narrator's introduction and his attempts to establish a conversational rapport with the readers. He directly talks with the readers and he is aware of his status as the narrator of the story. Thus, the narrator, like the author in the frame narrative is self conscious. He often takes the readers into confidence to share certain secrets with them. The second chapter deals with the exposition and introduction of all the important characters in the novel. Their journey from Delhi to Gurgaon for the duty at call centre is depicted and each character is introduced in detail in a linear manner. The vehicle Quails goes from place to place to pick them up. After picking up Shyam, the vehicle reaches to Military Uncle, a fifty plus year old retired army officer who is thrown out by his son and daughter-in-law. Then they pick up Radhika Jha, a married woman, and then Esha Singh who aspires to become a model, and then they move to Vroom i.e. Varun Malhotra who prefers to ride on his bike rather than to go by Qualis. Finally, they picked up Priyanka, Shyam's ex-girl friend, whom he had recently broken up. During their discussion another character Shefali, Shyam's 'semi-girlfriend' is also introduced who meets him at the call centre.

3. THE CRISIS IN THE NOVEL

The initial crisis of the novel seems to be the fear of unemployment among the workers at the call center at Connexions as their call volumes are dropping suddenly. The new technology and the trouble shooting websites have affected the work at call centers. The people working at the call centers in India are suppressed and they are continuously exploited by the Americans and their Indian agents, who supervise and dictate the young generation of India. They offer good salaries but the kind of torture and exploitation of the call centre youths can be paralleled with the history of slavery system.

There are number of issues that destroy their humane aspect. First of all the call centre boys and girls work in India but actually they work for the companies and people residing thousand kilometers away in the USA. So they have to work according to the time-schedule in the other half globe. There is the first clash between the Indian time and American time. Secondly, they have to follow the accent of the American and also follow their culture, customs and festivals. Thus, the call centre workers have to live perpetually in a virtual world. There is also a clash between the real world they live in and the virtual world of the USA for whom they work.

They face another crisis in their life which erases their identity i.e. they have to change their names and take the ones that seem American. Due to the agonies of changing culture, language, accent and even the name they suffer depression and rootlessness. For instance, most of the important characters of the novel take American names at the Call Center such as Shyam Mehta is called Sam Marcy, Radhika Jha is agent Regina Jones, Esha Singh is agent Eliza Singer and Varun Malhotra is called agent Victor Mell. The idea of changing name is to make the American clients convenient to call the names. Thus, the youth has been defaced and uprooted from their culture and identity. They are treated as slaves to the bosses like Bakshi, who act as the Indian agent who exploit the youth in India. The element of rootlessness is operant in the novel but the people are not conscious about it. They too enjoy their American names. Shyam is not at all affected by whatever name he is called. There are seven name stamps given to him in the novel: Shyam, Sam, ID, Black sheep, Mr. Conscientious, Eddy Teddy and Mr. Xerox boy but he does not care for his 'self' until the miraculous event brought changes in his life. The young generation of call centers is aware of their individuality but not aware of their human rights. They protect their individual rights and enjoy life the American way, but they are constantly under pressure of work and fear of 'layoff' and joblessness.

Fear, grief, frustration and anxiety are their constant features and they are unable to cope up with them as they are defaced and humiliated to work according to the terms of American way unaware of Indian labour law and their constitutional rights. They are made to work at unusual hours and paid around 15 thousand rupees a month. Though the salary is comparatively good, but it is very less according to the economy and standards of American companies which earn a lot of money by outsourcing the work to India. By American standards, a call centre agent/worker earns 12 dollars a day which amount is equal to US burger boy's income in two hours. Thus, there is a disparity and discrimination in the standards of American companies.

4. DISCRIMINATION AT WORK PLACE:

The class and racial discrimination is also reflected in the novel. The establishment of separate toilets for the executives and the workers is an indication of the class system till operant in the capitalist's minds which is manifested in their establishments of such institutional discrimination. Racism is also experienced by most of the call centre workers during their transactions with the American clients who used to abuse the agents, some flirt with the girls while others literally passed 'racist' remarks. For instance, Vroom is called a 'brown kid' by Mr. Fox and also abused him and his country when he says:

I don't need your help. Yeah, I'll change the dust bag. What about you guys? When will you change your dusty country? (Bhagat, Chetan 2005:121-122).

He remarks about the country and Vroom's 'brown' origin which reflects his racial attitude. Most of the call centre workers experience such events every day. The author also exposes the globalization process and the policy of the multinational companies to attract young people around the world calling MTV programs as youth culture. The MNCs have addicted the people with pizza, cake, mobile and MTV but their hidden agenda is to sell their product and reap monetary refunds.

5. CONCLUSION:

The novel begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue. The epilogue consists of a probable option of excluding the element of God i.e. *Duex Ex Machina* from story which presents Military Uncle as the savior who guides the young people and helps them to come out of danger. However, the author does not accept the option and introduces *Duex Ex Machina* in the narrative. His idea seems justifiable as Military Uncle does not emerge as an individual throughout the novel. Moreover, he represents the old generation who always repents for their conservative ideas and intolerance. Therefore, his role as the savior does not fit in the narrative. The Epilogue brings forth another interesting element that conjoins the frame narrative with the inset narrative. The girl in the frame narrative is identified as Esha by the author, but she refutes her identity either as Esha, Priyanka or Radhika. The author finally identifies her and falls on the knees. She knows the whole story which means she is none other than the God Herself. Thus, the framework narrative is in fact, a dream of the author created the inset story, in a beautiful manner.

Thus, the novel focuses on the paradox of globalization that the global things are made local and the local made global, but in the process man is displaced from one state of mind to another culminating into chaos, identity crisis and anxiety. This phase of anxiety has caused loneliness and frustration among the newly emerged IT sector that is booming day by day in India. A new class, having dual identity, has emerged who stays geographically at one space but thinks, and acts according to the other distant geographical space. The values, culture, life style, the festivals etc. are imported through internet from one space to the other creating a kind of virtual reality in the society. The emergence of IT Hubs, BPOs, Bars, 24 x 7 hotels, pubs, medical stores, malls, Cineplex, etc. are the harbingers of this new culture that have tormented the lives of the metropolitan cities in India. It has resulted into a clash between traditional and modern values of life in India. The Westernisation is growing day by day and it has established its own culture i.e. what Shashi Tharoor calls 'subculture'.

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