

Ethos and Isolation: A Postmodern Youth Sensibilities in Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center*

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Abstract

It is quite apparent that Chetan Bhagat is one of the most famous postmodern Indian English writers. He has a unique place in the minds of readers, particularly young readers who are the key concerns of his writings. Edmund Fuller opines that in our age of science and technology we don't suffer not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin but from inner problems like a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in our way of existence. Chetan Bhagat also has focused the same in his fiction. Most of his characters are from a middle-class family who is struggling to carve their own identity. Alienation, anxieties, and insecurities of the rising Indian middle class, including questions about career, inadequacy, marriage, family conflicts in postmodern India, and the relationship of the young Indian are the key issues handled in his fiction. The present article will discuss and analyze the aspects of ethos and isolation of the young generation portrayed in the novel *One Night @ the Call Center* by Chetan Bhagat.

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat is a well-known Indian author, a noted columnist, Bollywood screenwriter, and motivational speaker born on 22 April 1974. Apart from two non-fictional works, he has compiled six novels like *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States* (2009), and *Revolution 2020* (2011), *Half Girlfriend* (2014). Most of his novels are adopted in Bollywood movies. He is an icon of new India and he has an enduring name in the ground of postmodern fiction. Though his name is not unlisted for any great award, his novels are bestselling and very popular among the students. While portraying the harsh reality of the common people's life, Chetan Bhagat has retained the humor in his work. His fiction explores postmodern sensibility in which all the protagonists have been broken off from the spirituality and intellectuality in their day to day life. According to Bhagat, the novel is a perfect device to teach and to delight. Thus, his work not only depicts the harsh reality of life but offers moral messages, spiritual guidance, and technical suggestions also

The terms of Ethos and Isolation;

The term of ethos is defined and interpreted as following

- 1) M.H Abrams defines the concept of ethos as a person's overall disposition or character. (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*)
- 2) Ethos means moral ideas and attitudes that belong to a particular group, society or person (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

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(*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*)

The term of isolation

- 1) Isolation means the condition of being alone, especially when this makes you feel unhappy. (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*)
- 2) Isolation means the state of being separated from other people or a situation in which you do not have the support of other people.
(*By Macmillan Dictionary .com*)
- 3) Isolation means the act of separating someone or something; the state of being separate. (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

Discussion

One Night @the Call Center is the second debut novel by Chetan Bhagat published in 2005. The story of the novel revolves around a group of six call center employees working at the Connexions Call Center in Gurgaon, Haryana, India. After narrating the story of hostel mates at IIT, Delhi, and the education system, Bhagat shifts his focus to the developing call center culture in India and the young generation involved in it. *One Night @the Call Center* not only narrate experiences, dreams, pains, and exploitation of call center employee but also offers a vision to the young generation who has certain goals in life.

The entire action of the novel takes place in a single night. The Night from the title of the novel has so many symbolic interpretations itself. The novel is divided into three parts: (i) Prologue (ii) Chapters 1-38 and (iii) Epilogue. In the prologue, the author narrates the origin of the novel on his journey from Kanpur to Delhi. During the journey, Bhagat meets a young pretty girl who asks him about the topic of his second novel and remarks that he knows very little about the suffering of the youth except IIT mates. She says,

“Just look around you. What is the biggest segment of youth facing challenges in modern India?”
‘Not those, Mr. Writer. Get out of the student campus of your first book now.’”

(*One Night @the Call Center* p-5)

Here she offers him to tell him a story on condition. Her condition is the writer should promise her to convert her story into a novel. He is confused to make a blind commitment but she is firm on her condition. He then asks her for any clues or glimpses. She tells six people - at a call center- one night-call from God. Bhagat is hooked, and tempted by the phone call from God and gives the promise. This is how the main story begins. Shyam Mehra (alias Sam Mercy) is the protagonist of the novel who is one of the six call center agents who are working at ‘Western Appliances Strategic Group’

(WASG)ofConnexions Call Center in Gurgaon. He has narrated the story of the novel which takes place in a single night.

Alienation, anxieties, and insecurities of the rising Indian middle class, including questions about career, inadequacy, marriage, family conflicts in postmodern India, and the relationship of the young Indian middle class are the key issues nicely touched by Chetan Bhagat. Shyam, the protagonist of the novel, is introduced as he is getting ready for a job when his house is full of relatives for his cousin's marriage. He wants to analyze the dream of nightmarish brutality of his boss Mr. Bakshi, who submerges Shyam's head in the Indian Ocean, but he doesn't have the time. Some of his aunties are busy beautifying themselves. They don't allow Shyam to use his bathroom. To give Indian touch, Bhagat has very minutely narrated the situation of the home during marriage time. There is no food in the kitchen as everyone is to eat out at marriage. Shyam describes;

“I waved goodbye to everyone,
but no one acknowledged me.
It wasn't surprising; I am only cared for so much.
Every cousin of mine is becoming a doctor or engineer.
You can say I am the black sheep of my family.
Though I do not think that expression is correct.
After all, what's wrong with the black sheep- don't
people wear black sweaters?”

(One Night @the Call Center p-15)

Shyam's presence in the house is not acknowledged by anybody. Working at the call center is a prestigious job for them as his cousins are doctors and engineers. So he considers himself as a black sheep of the family as he can't earn properly. Shyam represents 300000 BPO employees in India who are working day and night. They are treated as resources and not by their names. Everyone has a pseudo name that suits American accents. In W.H.Auden's words, they are 'Unknown Citizen' who is identified by their pseudo names or Id numbers.

Shyam loves Priyanka, his colleague in the call center but can't marry her as Priyanka's mother is in search of a well-settled boy for her. Priyanka's mother hates Shyam as he works in a call center. Shyam is being cheated by his boss Mr. Bakshi also who promises him to appoint him as a team leader. Mr. Bakshi tries to get them all credit for the website manual prepared by Shyam and Vroom by spending six months.

Priyanka is the heroine of the novel and ex-girlfriend of Shyam. Priyanka wanted 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"

(One Night @the Call Center p-165)

She wants to open nursery school but without cash, she can do nothing so she suffers at the call center. Her mother always bothers her for selecting a well settled and suitable life partner for her. She never accepts Shyam as he works in the call center. She says,

“She said she has never liked you.

Because you not settled, and because since the day

I started dating you I have changed and

become an unaffectionate and cold person.”

(One Night @the Call Center p-130)

Priyanka is quite a bold girl. Once she played the role of CBI agent when she notices one Mother-in-law is insulting and cursing her daughter- in -law for having twin daughters. Priyanka becomes furious and warns her not to harass her daughters-in-law. To stay with the glittering world of fashion, she takes a drink and prefers vodka. Once in a date, she forces Shyam to make love in a confined place of quails four-wheelers. Like any other Indian girl, she is happy at her engagement with an NRI boy Ganesh(Mr. Microsoft). She celebrates this good news with her colleagues but when she notices his cheating and hiding bald, and giving her an altered photo, she rejects the proposal of marriage. And love birds are reunited but decide to marry after two years as the career is their main focus.

Vroom is another most important character in the novel. His real name is Varun Malhotra or agent Victor Mell, however, everyone calls him Vroom because he is fond of anything on wheels. He wanted to become a journalist but as his family gets disturbed and he has to join the call center. Vroom’s father is a businessman but he has parted from his wife for his secretary two years ago. So Vroom and his mother are living separately and Vroom has to earn money for maintaining the high standard with his friend circle. Vroom represents the modern youth of India who is fond of wearing branded clothes and shoes, joining clubs and night bars, smoking cigarettes, and using the internet excessively. Driving bike rashly is his solution to stress. It becomes unbearable for him to speak politely at the customer’s irritated and foolish questions. When he is mistreated

by an American, the readers realize his true temperament. He says;

“Why do some fat-ass, dim-witted Americans get to act superior to us? Do you know why?

Vroom continued, “I’ll tell you why.

Not because they are smarter.

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 years couldn't do better than make India
one of the poorest countries on earth.
Great job, thank you, dear fucking leaders."

(One Night @the Call Center p-110-111)

The face of urban fashionable girls in the novel is Esha Singh or agent Eliza Singer. She aspires to become a model or actress. She moves to Delhi from Chandigarh against her parents' wishes. She wears sleeveless fancy tops and skirts. Her earrings, lipstick, and perfumes are costly. Her passion for navel-ring pretty makes her get her tummy stapled. She joins call center to earn a regular income to help her to approach various agencies and get modeling assignments during day time. She is ready to do anything to maintain her figure. Her short height is the biggest on her way to becoming a model. To reduce stress, she goes to a disco and drinks vodka. An aspirant model that leaves her home town and parents to do something extra-ordinary in her life is very difficult in this age competition. Instead of applying a bandage on her leg, she tickles her wound as she doesn't want to stop the pain. She says, "Mental pain is more gruesome and unbearable than Physical pain." (154) Esha's deployment is noticed in the following words

The guy I slept with- forty-year-old designer. —
He told my agent later I was too short to be
a ramp model.....and that son of a bitch sends
some cash as compensations afterwards...||

She further says —

I hate myself, Shyam. I hate myself.
And I hate my face and the stupid mirror
that shows me this face...
can I get my face altered? (142-143)

The pain of guilt is intolerable for her. This guilty conscience makes her reject Vroom's proposal.

Radhika Jha, or agent Regina Jones is a representative of a middle class married woman that works to support the family. She lives in a joint family which is too traditional but Radhika accepts it for her love for her husband. She says,

"I need this job. Anuj and I need to save money." (18) However, Radhika is worried about her relationship with Anuj so Vroom decides to play the role as a Radio Jockey and asks Anuj about his special person. Everyone is shocked when they listen to the name of his modern type girlfriend Payal now Radhika becomes

extremely sad. Radhika's indignation is out of control now. Already she is a patient of migraine. She eats tablets excessively. It collapses her physical as well as mental health. Now I can't live without pills.

Military Uncle is a retired army man who lives away from his family. He is the oldest man in the novel. He works at Connection because his pension might be meager or to kill the time. He loves his grandson very much but once he was warned by his son not to disturb his son and family through his mail address. He says, "I want to be with my son and grandson. I miss them every moment." He wants to re-establish relations with his family.

Conclusion

Thus, while depicting the life of call center employees, Chetan Bhagat has explored the harsh reality of Indian youth. Everyone has his aspirations as well as problems also. These characters are the representative of Indian young generation who wants to make their way in this age of competition. Metropolitan youth culture, cross-cultural issues, broken interpersonal relationships, rising individualism, condition of women, generation conflicts, and influence of foreign culture are the aspects touched by Chetan Bhagat.

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