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The Coolie Work: A Look at ChetanBhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center*

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The seed of Indian Writing in English which was initially sown during the time of British rule in India has blossomed into a beautiful flower in the present time, which is witnessed through the independent status achieved by Indian Writing in English in the realm of World Literature. The writers of pre-Independent times such as Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Mulk Raj Anand dealt with issues like nationalism, freedom struggle, social realism, individual consciousness etc., in a language alien to them. Following this we find that soon after Independence the writers discussed of the unpleasant feelings of the Indians caused by the traumatic partition of 1947 - the horrors and the tragic consequences of this large scale migration, of looting and of merciless massacres. However, Post – Independent writings and recent Indian writing in English is different in that it tries to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Meena Alexander, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. are some who have rightly captured the spirit of the age dealing with issues such as the East - West conflict, multi - culturalism, social realism, gender issues, ecological concerns, magic realism, diasporic writings – in general talking of the bitter and sweet realities of the period. Postmillennial Indian writing in English reflects a sense of awareness of the plurality of the nation transcending the debate on the east - west conflict and portraying a 'New India' with a cosmopolitan outlook - wherein the new generation strives to strike a balance between tradition and imbibed modern values and culture. The expression of such awareness is what we find in Transnational Indian writing in English. Various genres can be found even within the realm of Post-millennial Indian Writing in English, such as Indian chic lit, youth narratives –narratives in corporate world, cric lit, call centre lit, crime writing, murder/mystery, fantasy, graphic novels, etc. dealing with themes such as political rebellions, terrorism, making wealth in New India, narratives of corporate world etc.

The notion of 'New India' based on the nation's economic growth and prosperity clearly defines how India is a 'global player' in the world's economies, especially owing to its success rate in BPO/call centre industry. And thus we find a new genre in Indian writing namely call- center lit, exploring the corporate lives in New India. Southmayd opines,

Call-center lit features a disillusioned urban middle class and the Indian call-centre or multinational, addressing the complexities and doldrums of life within a globalized India of liberalized markets, offshoring, neutralized English, and troubling new hybridized identities. (Southmayd 1)

Some of the authors belonging to call-center lit genre are ChetanBhagat, Neelesh Misra, Swati Kaushal etc.

The Indian transnational office is that which is most often depicted in the call-center narratives bringing to limelight issues pertaining to frustrated labor work and identity crisis in the context of globalization. In this regard, the first work belonging to call –center lit is ChetanBhagat's best-selling *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005). Prior to this, he had published *Five Point Someone* (2004); and later published *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) and *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009). His works generally focus on youth and national development issues.

Globalization as we know means integrating one country's economy with the world economy. One such integration that is witnessed in India is through the proliferation of BPO industry or in common parlance the call centres. And the success rate of this industry evinces the visibility of globalisation in our formerly conventional India. Becoming the "symbol of India's newly globalised workforce" (Tharoor 17) in Tharoor's words, the young and skilled Indians earn and hoard money unimaginable by their fathers and forefathers. However, these young minds forget the fact that by assuming a false or a presumed identity as a 'Westerner' and by adopting a culture totally unfamiliar to him/her, he /she is in-fact losing the true identity as an Indian. By wrongly equating 'Westernization' to the term 'modernization', India and the young generation of India fall prey to these soul-destroying industries which merely use them as cheap coolies. It is this scenario that the paper discusses as portrayed by ChetanBhagat in his best-seller *One Night @ the Call Center*. Bhagat expresses his hostility towards those who exploit the young Indians working in the call centres "giving life blood to this job" by catering to the petty demands of the American clients. Unable to carry the heavy "baggage of globalisation" (Tharoor 18) on their own, the Westerners suck the blood of the productive Indians through their bad Indian Bosses as portrayed through the character of Bakshi, *but* at a cheaper rate. While Bhagat rightly points the tragic flaw of the assumption of western identity by Indians, forgetting the fact that they in-fact attain only the status of a 'subdued coolie identity' during this "ersatz western" (Tharoor 17) transplantation process; he also puts forward the argument that it is this same subdued coolie who actually "schedule the trains" (Tharoor 18).

The novel presents both the professional and personal crisis of the unsecured generation of the cosmopolitan city through the six call-center agents – Shyam, Varun, Priyanka, Radhika, Esha and the Military Uncle. All these characters aptly represent the yearnings of the youth of 'New India' in their denial of the typical Indian value system and embracing the Western identity and values.

The beginning of the work presents the aspiration of the characters to earn and hoard money – and the right place to achieve this as the call-centre - through which they feel they would get respect and lead a life of luxury. Thus we find ShyamMehra introducing himself as a call –center agent working at Connexions in Gurgaon, and that people talked to him just because he gets a decent salary at the end of every month when compared to his horrible pay earlier. In Shyam's words,

In fact, the only reason people somewhat talk to me is I have a job and get a salary at the end of the month. You see, I used to work in the website department of an ad agency before this call center job. However the ad agency paid horrible money...I saved myself by joining Connexions, as with money in your wallet the world gives you some respect and lets you breathe. (ONTCC 15)

Likewise the Military Uncle supplemented his meagre pension amount by working in the call – center – again to earn some respect from his own son and daughter-in-law. Esha, yet another character aspires to be a model, but ends up in the call-center to fetch a handsome income to make herself the hottest chick by buying expensive clothes and perfumes. Radhika, though staying apart from her husband, works in the call center to save for the future. She says, "I need this job. Anuj and I need to save" (ONTCC 18). VarunMalhotra who previously worked in a newspaper, changed his job to Connexions, in-order to satisfy his material needs, especially "his love for anything on wheels" (20). Priyanka chose to work in the call-center since Shyam, her ex-boyfriend worked there, but who is now engaged to Ganesh, an NRI. Thus we can find that all the characters join the call-center with the aim of settling in a better life – Vroom, Shyam and the Military Uncle waiting to succeed in their entrepreneurial dreams, Esha waiting for a break in modelling, Radhika to save for the future, and in the case of Priyanka (though due to the urge of her mother) to get well settled.

While all these characters join the call-center with the intention of creating an identity of their own, they forget the very factors destroying their Indian identity under the pretext of globalization. For instance, the characters are forced to change their names to Western ones by their Boss Bakshi – Shyam becomes Sam Marcy, Varun becomes Victor Mell, Radhika becomes Regina etc. In this regard Southmayd says,

The goal of the call-centre in *One Night* appears to be the cultural homogenization of its workers: "true" Indian identity is squelched and American mimicry encouraged whenever

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possible, especially through the call-centre's valorization of an Americanized or globalized form of the English language. (Southmayd 8)

Working in the Western Appliances Strategic Group bay, dealing with customers of home appliances, these six agents dealt with troublesome and painful customers with whom they not only faked their name, but also as per the instruction of their Boss Bakshi assume the guise of an authentic American in their communication with the callers. Here Bhagat critiques the rule of the call-centre's demanding their agents to use an American name and Amercanized English. The frustration in using such an Americanized version of English is seen when Shyam is asked to give accent training to the new recruits. He says,

You might think the Americans and their language are straightforward, but each letter can be pronounced several different ways. I'll give you just one example: T. With this letter Americans have four different sounds. T can be silent, so "internet" becomes "innernet" and "advantage" becomes "advannage." (ONTCC 38)

This situation clearly explices the reluctance of the agents in feigning the American accent.

However, inspite of feigning an American identity and culture, the agents are constantly pressurised due to the rumour that the call-center would soon collapse and their jobs would become insecure. Varun informs his colleagues that the Western Computers account was suffering and that the call center might sink any time. He says, "People have told me call traffic is down forty percent. I think they'll cut a lot of staff, or worst case scenario cut all people and shift the client to the Bangalore center" "They'll close this poorly managed madhouse down" (ONTCC 64). Here it is to be noted that inspite of terming the call-centre a 'madhouse', still they are all worried of their jobs. Their anxiety is aroused all the more when Bakshi, their boss, says that they are under pressure to '**right size**'(ONTCC 85). Given a chance, they are ready to save their jobs. For instance, when Bakshi treats Shyam as a Xerox boy, Priyanka taunts him, but Shyam is ready to do anything passively. He says, "What is your problem? I come here, make fifteen grand a month and go home. It sucks that people are being fired, and I am trying to do my best to save my job" (ONTCC 86).

Bakshi, their boss, represents the Bad Indian Boss dumping work on his agents, selfish to the core to meet his own ends by using a jargon which he claims as manager's language. The website manual created by Shyam and Varun , compilation of the call statistics of the previous day, the training initiative program, Xeroxing the sheets, helping in the compilation of strategic documents are some of the examples demonstrating the kind of coolie work that Bakshi the imperialist manager extracts from his agents especially Shyam. However the way Bakshi extracts labour and fools around is by his cunning use of expressions. For instance he advices Shyam to "bring his leadership skills up to speed" (ONTCC 29), the way Bakshi keeps things secret saying "there were some confidential management priorities" (ONTCC 30), claiming himself to be an "open door manager" despite being the opposite, addressing the agents as "resources" (ONTCC 47), and the number of managese expressions used to hint at fixing the systems problem such as, "technology issues" (ONTCC 67), "methodical game plan" (ONTCC 67), "slippery slope" (ONTCC 68) etc. Also when Varun suggests an alternate instead of right sizing people, Bakshi says, " but a seasoned management has to study all underlying variables and come up with an optimal solution" (ONTCC 85-86). Though Shyam and the other agents put up with the managese language of Bakshi, they are irritated and hurt once they learn that Bakshi has cheated them. Shyam and Varun discover that Bakshi had replaced their names in the cover page of the Website manual with his gaining an opportunity to fly to Boston, while threatening the jobs of the rest at Connexions. Varun is infuriated at the cunningness of Bakshi - their fucking bad Boss. He says, "It says it is by the fucking SubashBakshi...Check this out. Mr.Moron, who can't tell a computer from a piano, has done this website and this manual. Like crap he has" (ONTCC 136). Shyam is shocked and hurt at Bakshi's cunningness since it proved Priyanka's, (his ex-girlfriend) mother's phrase right - that he was a 'loser'(ONTCC 128), not 'settled' (ONTCC 98), 'the useless call-center boy' (ONTCC 126), 'not doing well in his career' (ONTCC 131), and in Varun's terms they are not "good husband material" (ONTCC 62), since they cannot compete with the "dimple cheeked, software geek, mini-Ganesh babies" (ONTCC 63). The agents realize that they had underestimated Bakshi's cunningness and managese language. They

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understand that Bakshi is “like a blind snake: you feel sorry for it, but it still has a poisonous bite” (ONTCC 139). It is God’s call which makes them realize that “A bad boss is like a disease of the soul” (ONTCC 207).

While the Boss controlled the agents on one hand, the American clients humiliated the agents on the other hand. The agents had to steer clear the silly or mean doubts of the American customers such as: defrosting fridge or operating electrical appliances, etc. in the politest way possible however psycho the customer may be in his queries. However, the agents remained patient with their silly clients since they are instructed to remember the rule “35=10”, meaning “the thirty five year old American’s brain and IQ is the same as the ten year old Indian’s brain. “ American’s are dumb, just accept it” (ONTCC 46). But at times the American customers treated their counterparts extremely inferior reminding the supreme power they hold in their hands and the cheap labour that the Indians do for them. A standing evidence to this is found in the text when Varun is ostracized by an American client for being an Indian and belonging to India. Varun is hurt when the American questions him, “C’mon son, answer me. I don’t need your help. Yeah, I’ll change the dust bag. What about you guys? When will you change your dusty country?” (ONTCC 109)

Throughout the text, we find the characters realizing now and then the fact that the job sucks their labour at a cheaper and humiliating rate, yet they do not display their guts until God opens them up to the ‘inner call’. Thus we find Varun commenting on Shyam’s passiveness at a time when he can’t take on Bakshi as, “Giving your life blood to this job” (ONTCC 71). Shyam himself says that Bakshi was “bent on sucking every last drop of my blood” (ONTCC 128) Similarly Varun’s comment that, “Okay, I will shut up. That’s what a good call center agent does right? Crap happens around him and he just smiles and says how can I help you?” (ONTCC 151), and his statement, “Yes, this salary has hooked me. Every night I come here and let people fuck me. The Americans fuck me with this, in my ears hundreds of times a night. Bakshi fucks me with his management theories, backstabbing and threats to fire us. And the funny thing is, I let them do it. For money, for security” (ONTCC 172). These clearly depict the exploitation of Indian labour by the various people in the BPO hierarchical structure (i.e. the Americans and the Bad Indian Boss respectively). However, the characters are also aware that the Americans will not blow up the Indians as is seen from the conversation between Varun, Priyanka and Radhika,

“I don’t think they’d blow up China’, Priyanka said. “They need the cheap labor”

“Then I guess they wont blow up Gurgaon either. They need the call centers”, Radhika said. (ONTCC 185)

The paradox in this situation is that despite knowing that the Americans are using them and that they are sacrificing their lives to these air-conditioned sweatshops, yet the characters are not willing to quit it, since the sweatshop gives them money to keep up with the modern lifestyle.

The introduction of the technique of *dues-ex-machina*, in the form of telephone call from God solves the professional crisis and in- turn the personal crisis of the characters, by suggesting four ingredients necessary to evolve as a successful person. Following this, Vroom encourages his colleagues saying that the Indians are no less than the Americans, that they should not have taken up jobs just for money, since even though “the call –centers pay more, the exchange rate is in favour of Americans...there are jobs that define me, make me learn or help my country” (ONTCC 203-204) When God reveals the truth that they are all “capable people” (ONTCC 204) and that the Americans are not the happiest people on earth , the Eureka moment comes. It is then that the characters decide to save the job at the call center from the moron Bakshi. Varun makes the entire Connexions realize that the smartest and strongest people of India were labouring the entire night for the white morons to run their lives and that “Bad Indian Bosses and stupid Americans were sucking the life blood out of our country’s most productive generation” (ONTCC 226). And thus they start **Operation Yankee Fear**, scaring the Americans of a new computer virus that will take their country down and that the only way to be safe was to keep calling them- which meant an increase in the incoming call traffic in the call - center and preventing the mass layoffs. Their idea works and proves Americans as “the biggest cowards on earth” (ONTCC 227). This in turn brings us to the inference that Indians run the real show. Southmayd comments on how the characters eventually win over the Americans. Shee says, “Despite the vitriol

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directed towards the call-centre in the novel, its survival is conceived as a positive outcome because the Indians have wrested control of it from their American bosses, stemmed the threat of mass layoffs, and gained a sense of psychological mastery over the American callers” (Southmayd 18). Thus Tharoor’s statement proves true that “If what India is doing is providing coolie labour, then today the coolies are scheduling the trains” (Tharoor 18).

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