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## **Globalization, Identity and Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @the Call Center***

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### **Abstract:**

As a result of globalization change in identities has taken place and it has serious social, political, cultural and economic consequences. It is with this problem that Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center* primarily deals. Bhagat's approach can be defined as nativistic in the main, even nationalistic, because his protagonist in the end chooses India over the western world and its glamorous prospects. The young men and women who flit across the pages after a confrontation with their boss, Bakshi, realize that there is a lot of potential in this country which has to be realized and that we can take on imperialism and neo-colonialism head-on successfully. At the Connexions Call Center it is the job of ShyamMehra to train up young men and women to imbibe the American way of thought and accent just to please their clients. They work on those timings which suit the Americans, thereby hazarding their biological clocks. It is MTV and CNN programmes that they are encouraged to see on the television and drink Long Island Iced Tea which are considered to be the right things to do. There is no freedom of thought and behaviour for they are always aping the Americans. Through money, hedonism and entertainment the third world is being demolished and its independent thinking is being subverted because if identity is changed then the victims themselves become their own victimizers. Globalization is destroying the national fabric and the youth, manipulating our identities for the worse.

**Keywords:** Call Center, Identity, Media, Globalization, imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Globalization has meant grafting of western culture on the Indian soil with renewed energy for profit. It is neo-imperialism with another face and look for velvet gloved cultural invasion and dominance. Young men and women behave like their western counterparts and allow their identities and behavioral patterns to be changed. In Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the*

*Call Center* when the group loads itself in the Qualis and zooms off to the exclusive Bed Lounge and Bar at 3:23 am, it is with their mental tensions and their joys and sorrows. Radhika after a misadventure caused by a phoney phone call to her husband gears up to cheer herself up with Fluoxetine, Sertraline, and Paroxetine. After she pops up the pills the conversation turns to anti-depressants. These modish young men begin criticizing and condemning the American tendency to run after Prozac which is similar to the Indian Fluoxetine. The point is that they are a part of a culture that originates from America and infects them. These willing representatives of the Indian youth that is trying to copy the Americans in just about everything concerning lifestyles are paradoxically critical of the same culture. They are comfortable in that borrowed culture and criticizing the West is a part of the style.

Copy and criticize, damn America and run after it, this is the situation as it prevails in the cities. It is all media generated for these young men and women who have never been to America know so much about it through magazines, American films and TV programmes beamed worldwide because of the media. Their minds have been completely lambasted by growth through satellites. This generation in whose hands lies India's future is not willing to give up its artificially acquired lifestyles. They go to the Bed Lounge and Bar because it is snooty and hep. It is the sort of place that is considered upmarket and therefore frequented by the newly rich who run after things American. The entire group of six people who form the core of the novel go there even though they do not have enough to pay for their entry or become members there. They manage to smuggle themselves in because of the Disc Jockey, Jas, who was friend of Varun Malhotra, the same fellow who had picked up an American pet name and was agent Victor Nell at the Western Appliances Strategic Group (WASG) at Connexions. They are offered Long Island Ice Tea by DJ Jas for free. It is the Long Island connection that makes it the right thing to drink. Inside the bar when these chaps were enjoying their drinks their eyes are fixed to the two LCD televisions that were showing MTV and CNN programmes.

Robert Young says that neo-colonialism can be defined as “a general system of a power-relations of economic and political domination”. (Young 44) After independence a new kind of domination started in which the countrymen themselves were participants in their own exploitation. To the neo-colonial a prestige was given and this prestige was appropriated by Indians working in the computer sector for themselves and the young folks later decide to chuck up the comforts of the western world for their own country as it happens in *One Night*

@ *the Call Center*. This is the change that Chetan Bhagat tries to show in his novel—the gradual drift from globalizing materialism and the neo-colonial impulse among middle-class Indians to nativism and nationalism. A resurgent and proud young India is presented before us which is confident enough to take on the subversive tendency within globalization successfully. The growth of young third world nations has been frustrated by the rich occidental countries, represented by the former imperialistic capitalists or the latter day East India Companies in another garb.

ShyamMehra, who is the narrator in the novel, is drawn towards a Bollywood dance and music item being shown by the MTV as a part of its 'Youth Special' programme. The girl on the television gradually relieves herself of much of her clothing as the song continues. ShyamMehra notices it, nor do other characters miss it. They do not complain because they had become used to seeing contraptions that contain a mish-mash of Indian and American popular dance and music. The problem is less with the lady, stripping of her clothes off and the music that is fusion but more with all this being branded 'Youth Special'. As though such acts are representative of the Indian youth! However, since the writing of this novel such acts as the girl on the television was performing have caught on and competitions that encourage such dances are being organized at the district level. The resistance and annoyance come from ShyamMehra in this entire episode being made symbolic of the youth of this country as though the youth of India practiced all this or was interested in performing in that sort of way for the pleasure of the youngsters. The trouble is that Shyam himself on a different note had deliberately transformed his personality in a hybrid manner that was quintessentially the same as the dance and many of those who live in the villages would not hesitate to bracket both his indulgences and the dance in which clothes were being thrown off, together. The culture within which Shyam had positioned himself had very clearly entered India through the media and its inter-mingling with the Indian popular culture processed in studios, and then thrust powerfully on the masses is the result of globalization. This is hedonism coupled with trans-national big business for many of the agencies involved have their roots outside this country.

The problem is that these people realise that they are being manipulated and exploited by the trans-national forces and yet they allow themselves to be exploited. This is hedonism and entertainment at its worst: a total sell out. Varun Malhotra says "It is not funny girls. Our government doesn't realize this, but Americans are using us. We are sacrificing an entire generation to their coercive call centers. '(Bhagat 199) This is not only lecturing each other in an inebriated state but also laying bare a deep truth that is embedded in their minds.

Throughout the novel these brash Indians make fun of the Americans and call them stupid but they also give in to the fact that these very Americans, whatever their intelligence may be worth, are smart enough to exploit them, make profit out of them. Vroom is unhappy about people being used more to the advantage of the trans-national corporation but he wouldn't quit his job in the call center. While he is angry about the situation he is also a contradiction in terms because knowingly he succumbs to money. He had a nice job in the print media but he joined the call center for money where young talent was being wasted in solving the problems of Americans situated in America and having troubles with their gadgets, or answering all sorts of quaint queries being made either through the computers or through the telephone. This breast beating of Varun after a little dose of CNN and liquor does not make much of an impact because it is hollow and it proves above all else that in a poor country like India money is going to take primacy over all else and that the middle class is willing to make all kinds of compromises. Vroom complains of an entire generation being sacrificed in the name of business that brings in, relatively speaking, small profits in dollars to our country and the major chunk going to the parent companies located outside the boundaries of our nation. This complaint is meaningless because the person who is complaining is himself a part of this dirty enterprise.

Octavio Paz says that “a yogi does not seek to separate his soul from his body like the Platonic mystic; he wants to convert it into a weapon of liberation.”(Paz 172) It is this weapon of liberation which became more and more popular in India with the passing of years and the computer savvy have made full use of it to regain their confidence and to contribute more positively for the building of a stronger India by using mysticism to their advantage. In Chetan Bhagat's novel often computers and mysticism overlap, even coalesce as matching of horoscopes for marriage purposes goes on. What Paz says is brought within the ambit and in harmony with the mysterious, blended smoothly with life as long as it yields financial dividends.

This indicates that the youth of this country knows too much and is convinced of too little, that knowledge is not enough to salvage-that a moral training is lacking somewhere in us and that we as a nation do not have the strength of character to stand against the odds. For all the six characters their affairs, flings, love of goodies and personal well-being takes precedence over the great challenges that confront our nation. They would rather be rich than correct. Vroom's outburst is not taken seriously by his friends who are out to enjoy the evening in the bar, they would rather be happy than true to whatever they profess. Shyam

Mehra dismisses Vroom lightly and in this bit of speechifying sees the making of a politician because the politicians are known for making empty speeches with a forked tongue. The politicians say something and do something else. On the CNN LCD America's war with Iraq was being discussed and Varun Malhotra is quick to notice the American politicians who speak in support of the war. He speaks against the Americans, the very same Americans he had been cozily trying to emulate to rise up in his own society. He is aware of the insecurity that was at the heart of America due to Islamic fundamentalism and state sponsored terrorism. Americans wanted to go to war against Iraq as much due to Saddam Hussein's threat to destroy America as also because they wanted to capture his oil wells. America, in the eyes of these guys, was a greedy aggressor that wanted to rule the world and enjoy cheap fuel to ride high as it has done in most of the post Second World War years.

In short, they hate America because of its over-whelming power and domination in the world, and are without any compunctions willing to work out of choice for an American company based in Boston and contribute to America's prosperity. There is an unconscious love-hate relationship with America and it is this relationship that makes out the core of globalisation as it exists in India. Esha was plainer about the facts of life. It is not CNN that bothers her but Varun's contradictory self-righteousness. She says that call-centers were good for them because all of them drew fat salaries and worked in a temperature-controlled office with thousands of others. She attributes Varun's prejudices against his work place to his bad relationship with Bakshi, the boss, and not to any higher altruistic crises within. Vroom is tangential in his reply which is much broader than one might expect it to be. Vroom wants to go to America and it is this lack of opportunity to travel to America that makes him adopt an anti-American attitude. He says that Bakshi is a bad boss and so are Americans and CNN. In his opinion the Americans were a scared lot and it is out of this fear psychosis that prevails in America they were anticipating that sooner rather than later they would bomb Iraq.

Those who worked at the Connexions Call Center had tried to change their personalities as much as they could and in the process their identities had also changed in the expectation that they would earn big money and become respectable people—may be get employment in America and be able to face international competition successfully. But often the experiences of these young men and women were to the contrary because out sourcing was cutting down American jobs and the Americans didn't like the idea of losing to the Indians which they had in the rapidly growing field of computers. In the Silicon Valley forty per cent Indian work force predominated the scene at the time of writing of the novel and had clearly outdone the

supposedly unbeatable whites, purchased companies and floated new ones. But racism was resorted to by many Americans who envied these young talented people. Those who had won against the Americans became especially targeted, more so by the white losers who knew how well trained and educated the labour was. In this connection it may be pertinent to quote the conversation of a white customer with Victor or Vroom.

'Who am I speaking to?' the voice on the phone became agitated.

'Victor, sir.'

'Tell me your fucking name. You're some kid in India, isn't it?'

'Sir, I am afraid I can't disclose my location.'

'You're from India. Tell me, boy.'

'Yes sir. I am in India,' Vroom gave in.

'So what did you do to get this job? Fucking degree in nuclear physics?'

'Sir, do you need help with your cleaner or not?' Vroom said.

'Ç'mon on, 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?'

'Excuse me, but I want you to stop talking like that.' Vroom said.

'Oh really, now some brown kid will tell me what to do—' (Bhagat 117-18)

It is abundantly clear that the phone caller is aware of the talent which Indian young people have and also conscious of the fact that these folks possess fantastic qualifications, often too big for the positions they hold but he would not treat them with respect due to the colour of their skins if not anything else. To run down India and Indians he attacks the general poverty of the country, chooses to play up its dustiness. Indians can't be better than the Americans for reasons which may not be relevant to the point. They are identified with poverty and it is this poverty which is supposed to give them their identity in a globalizing world.

Issues regarding identity, nationalism, consciousness, culture, exploitation, globalization and racism become important with the raising of social and political awareness among those in the group who were more sensitive and aggressive than rest of them. They realize that transnational companies and corporations were multi-dimensionally destroying the youth of India, a category to which they belonged unexceptionally, and that the new

found prosperity was actually a glamorous form of exploitation. They were being Americanized and Europeanized so that they may see themselves and all things Indian as inferior and poor, lose all respect for whatever India stood for. When various factors discussed above combined together, a very negative ripple effect was generated and the sufferers were under a psychological, economic and social burden which appeared insurmountable. The youth found themselves at the intersection of various cultures and civilizations, confronting the clash of civilizations on a very wide economic plane in which political domination was implicit. It was this feeling of being dominated which brings in political, national, cultural and economic consciousness among them and they are also cognizant of the fact that some among them were on the opposite side, working against the larger interests of their brothers and sisters as it always happens. They wouldn't care if people who share their skins were trampled upon as long as they were beneficiaries. This means that those who wish to stand upright against the forces of exploitation and domination must confront a fractured lot among themselves and then take on their enemies who have spoiled their future. The Indians share their social identities as highly paid workers in the computer and media industry but a handful of them play foul against others to improve their chances in the profession and prosper quicker and higher. Life is strange, truths are never given to us on a platter but have to be constructed.

'Thank you. My friends, I am angry. Because every day, I see some of the world's strongest and smartest people in my country. I see all this potential, yet it is all getting wasted. An entire generation up all night, providing crutches for the white morons to run their lives. And then big companies come and convince us with their advertising to value crap we don't need, to do jobs we hate so that we can buy stuff—junk food, coloured fizzy water, dumbass credit cards and overpriced shoes. They call it youth culture. Is this what they think youth is about? Two generations ago, the youth got this country free. Now that was something meaningful. But what happened after that? We have just been reduced to a high-spending demographic. The only youth power they care about is our spending power.' Vroom said, and even I was amazed at the situation every agent gave him.

Vroom continued: 'Meanwhile bad bosses and stupid Americans suck the life blood out of our country's most productive generation. But tonight we will show them.....' (Bhagat 242)



That the identity of the youth of this country has been seriously interpellated by the Americans is no secret, not even for the youth of this country, who have been most seriously affected. There is this realization that their identities have been tampered with by the proliferation of American culture and demands made on them at their work places. They are expected to think American and act American too. All this is unnatural and it makes them feel uncomfortable and exploited because the reality back home is different. It is like trying to fit and shove a square peg in a round hole for the sake of money and to give the impression that they are doing all the right things for giving a better impression in the society. There was a time when the Yankees were appreciated but after 1991 long years have passed and a reaction has set in which Bhagat was quick to recognize because he himself represents this generations and has been a part of their kind of identity politics.

There is a streak of patriotism in Vroom and it is the television that provokes and coaxes it out of him. They regret that they have to work till they are exhausted all night but on second thought Priyanka says that if people have to work all night at call centers, the doctors, the hotel staff, pilots and factory workers have to do it as well. All this discussion takes place because the TV keeps on provoking them. Whenever they say something it is from the TV that a statement comes back on the rebound as it were and then again the conversation takes a turn that invariably is laced with their own personal experiences and those that they work with inside the e-bay at the Connexions Call Center. The strong presence of the media can be gauged from the fact that all through the conversation they keep on looking at the TV screen or continue to gesture towards it. The American politician and the vulgar dance that is shoved on their faces as being symbolic of the youth, leads them in that drunken state towards the challenges that confront the nation.

All six of them are drunk and it is in this state of drunkenness that the media brings out their true selves. If they are in love with their posh lifestyles, they also suffer from a guilt about being too much in love with their comforts and luxuries. Their conscience also pricks them into worrying about the sad state of things that need to be done. They indulge in flings but flings also provoke them into bothering about what they ought to be doing with great enthusiasm to promote building of infrastructural facilities. The anger makes them foresee that once the infrastructural facilities are provided adequately the youth would find jobs. The big salaries that come to them makes them feel uncomfortable because there are others who are terribly underprivileged compared to them. They, in that intoxicated state, imagine that it would be much better if they worked towards the progress of their own country because their

labours at the Connexions Call Centre were mostly helping fill up the pockets of shrewd businessmen sitting in Boston. When they get realistic they are disgusted by the trash and senseless pursuits that are going on all over the country:

‘So like, there is so much to do. We should be building roads, power plants, airports, phone networks and metro trains in every city like madness. And if the government moves its rear-end and does that, the young people in this country will find jobs there. Hell, I would work days and nights for that- as long as I know that what I am doing is helping build something for my country, for its future, But the government doesn't believe in doing any real work, so they allow these BPOs to be opened and think they have taken care of the youth. Just as this stupid MTV thinks showing a demented chick do a dance in her underwear will make the program a youth special. Do you think they really care?’

‘Who?’ I said. ‘The government or the MTV?’(Bhagat 201)

The reality is both sick and boring, and these sad facts of our lives lie heavily on them. When they can't take it anymore being helpless players in the national affairs they damn the government and the MTV, pay their bills and decide to return back to the call center. On the way back they see a thirty foot wide metal hoarding of a Cola company and a Bollywood actress looking at them invitingly with a bottle in hand. This is the senseless seduction of America in the name of America and it works much to their profit and our dismay. It is the media in the broader sense which has pulled a fast one on us and introjected American culture into ours. It is this culture that the six characters revolt against in the end and by their example sow seeds of a renewal and *desi* revival with a touch of the nativistic. *One Night @ the Call Center* hit the stands in 2008 and much water has flown under the bridge and a trend similar to the one that we see in the novel has become the fashion with a difference among the youth. Patriotism and indigenization have become the new catch words and they reflect a changing thinking for the better.

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