

## The Choreographed Narrative: Recontextualising the Narrative Strategies in Chetan Bhagat's Fiction

**Prasun Banerjee**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Kabi Joydeb Mahavidyalaya

Illambazar, Birbhum

West Bengal.

While working on a write-up for a UGC national seminar on 'popular culture', the word 'popular' has drawn my attention as it is often used to demarcate the ideological difference between those novels which has found a place into the university syllabi and those which may have failed to find their place in the critical discourse but have made it to the best-seller list. The differentiating factor is, more often than not, a matter of critical acceptability and mass popularity. In spite of being acutely conscious of the current critical endeavour to blur this distinction, in this paper I have wanted to re-examine this issue in today's context when the nature of readership and reading strategies have been highly affected by the factors of globalisation and the media culture. And for this purpose I have taken up the writings of such a writer whose rise in the popular fiction circuit has been meteoric -Chetan Bhagat.

Chetan Bhagat burst into the Indian literary scene in 2003 with his *Five Point some One*, a thrilling tale of some IIT students, which shook the nation with its jarring iconoclastic details from the insides of one of India's most prestigious educational institutes, IIT, and with its equally enthralling method of telling the tale that runs at a break-neck speed, yet with a carefree indolence never seen before. Since then the man had found a Midas touch with his next three books-*One Night at the Call centre*(2005), *Three Mistakes of my Life*(2008) and *Two States*(2009)- proved to be the hot picks of the readers not only in the railway wheeler stalls but also in the established bookshops. With his books becoming the 'unputdownable' hot picks of the internet-crazy generation, the creator have secured for himself a place in the entertainment haven of India, Bollywood, writing screenplays of films, frequenting the talk shows and the reality shows. Many of the reviewers, whose notes have been carefully placed on the cover pages of the paperback editions of the books by the author and the publisher to highlight the success of their product, attribute this astounding success of the books to Bhagat's thrilling narrative skills that speak the voice of new-found generation. In his narrative expertise, Bhagat is looked upon as a pioneer of the new form which is perfectly fit to bring about the issues of the multilingual generation.

'..Bhagat has touched a nerve with the young Indian readers and acquired almost cult status' "International Herald Tribune" (*Five Point Someone*, ii)

'Chetan is also responsible for a seismic shift in Indian writing in English' "The Hindu" (*Five Point Someone*, ii)

Considering these observations, I have made an attempt, in this paper, to look into the narrative strategies Bhagat adopted in his fictions vis-à-vis with the factors of globalization and growing media culture. My objective is here to examine Bhagat's status as an artist who, to use John Barth's words, may have created fiction that "reflect and deals", "technically and thematically" the "felt ultimacies" of their age and one who "may very possibly suggest something useable in the making or

understanding of genuine works of contemporary art.” (John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion”1967)

Chetan Bhagat’s arrival in the world of Indian English fiction coincided with a time when the presence of a vibrant media culture and the growth of a corporate structure in the urban and semi-urban Indian society was effecting changes in the reading tastes, especially for the younger generation whose incorporation into the corporate design were only increasing. The speedy proliferation of the internet as the new medium of acquiring knowledge as well as a huge source of entertainment brought in newer discourses of value system both at the personal and the societal level. These changes have resulted in the formation of new cultural codes which again condition the factors of standardising the popular tradition and their representation. This interconnection between mass culture and popular tradition is what Theodore Adorno and Mark Horkheimer have called the creation of a “culture industry”. These Frankfurt School critics theorized that the phenomenon of mass culture has a political implication, namely that all the many forms of popular culture are a single *culture industry* whose purpose is to ensure the continued obedience of the *masses* to market interests.

Popular fictions which, from the time of Shobha De and Anurag Mathur in the 90s, as Dr Sen observes in his paper, have often been conditioned by the factors of commercialisation and commodification at the wake of the arrival of globalisation, were in turn affecting the formation of the “culture industry” with their formal realism and ready-to-entertain attitude. The new set-up required only a new marketing strategy and perhaps a better packaging. Bhagat’s fictions poached upon these new areas of experience under the façade of renewed awareness about unprecedented issues specially relating to the youth, such as lack of proper job situations, claustrophobic educational systems that mar potentialities and above all, the more active rolls of the youth in making their country move ahead. Having been an insider of the same industry, Bhagat, probably, had a better understanding of the pulse of the new generation and have used skilfully choreographed narratives to sell his “product”.(-Bhagat has himself ,time and again, refers to his books as his products in his *Prologues* and in his books)

It is that better understanding of the nature of the “culture industry” that made Bhagat shift from the chiefly romantic or the strongly feministic, the crudely comic and slapstick forms of the fictions of the 90s, and switch to issues, relatively more relevant and concerning the new generation. As for the narrative, Bhagat resorts to the thriller and the fantastic form. But whatever may be the issue, Bhagat only knew very well, it has to be well packaged for the product to “sell” as a new generation is too much conscious of the brand value of products and how much it offers in a package. That Bhagat looks upon his books as products and takes care to package them in the best possible manner is evident from the very first page of his books. Apart from the fact that the front pages and back pages of the books display carefully picked reviews from newspapers and individuals, which speak highly of the author and his “product”, they contain the picture of the handsome man himself and his e-mail address, enabling his readers to personally bond with the maker, thus adding to the value of the “product”. To intensify the thrill and the charm of the story told, Bhagat’s narratives often tend towards the dramatic. The dramatic element is conspicuous, as Bhagat choses to begin his tales with “Prologues” which either contains the dramatic tell-alls, (as in the *2 States*,) or constitute the most dramatic episode of the book.( as in *One Night at the Call Centre*. His “Acknowledgements” are no less dramatic, which often betrays his frantic attempt of highlighting his “product” as a newer and better

brand. (Such as his claims in the “Acknowledgements” to *Three Mistakes of my Life* that he does not “want to be India’s most admired writer”, he “wants to be India’s most loved writer”, or his providing the readers with a questionnaire in *One Night at the Call Centre*. Again, his chapters in the fictions are called “Acts” and his endings “Epilogues.” Not only the dramatic, Bhagat abundantly draws his techniques from the cinematic form as well. His narrative swings effortlessly back and forth using the ‘flash-back’ technique. His ability to put together details with such lucidity and vividness before the readers, betrays his awareness of the montage. Bhagat’s language, too, that is largely in sync with fast narrative pattern, addresses the changing pattern of the culture industry. His narrative is full of what is called ‘chutnified’ expressions, inter-language code-switching which is common on the internet circuit. Use of expressions like “screw you”, “testosterone-charged men”, four-lettered words, immediately make the American diction-affected generation identify the tone.

Besides this deliberate patterning of the narrative and the diction, Bhagat’s approach towards the issues he addresses, is part of his wonderful choreographing skill. In many of his Interviews, he has made it clear that he writes because he wants his writing to change his country. This pro-patriotic, pan-India sentiment recurs in his narratives and most of his protagonists mouth these sentiments of the maker, which, I think, is one of the main USPs of Bhagat and his writing. In one of his speeches given at the HT Leadership Summit in Delhi on November, 2008, Bhagat said:

“...I am no leader. At best, I am a dreamer with perseverance to make dreams come true... A lot is wrong in my country. There are too many differences. The question is not who we blame for this. The question is how do we fix it? Because to do anything great, you have to become one first. Two generations ago, our forefathers came together to win us Independence. It isn’t like we didn’t have disputes then. Religion, caste, community have existed for centuries. But Gandhi brought them all together for a greater cause – to get the country free. Today, we have another greater cause. To get India its rightful place in the world.” And it is the avatar of being a new Gandhi that Bhagat has wanted to don in his narrative to bring about the Change, which often makes him preach or switch into the didactic mode

But ironically enough, Bhagat’s narrative often exposes that this pro-patriotic sentiment is a mere marketing strategy to attract his readers, and his narrative often falls prey to the discourses it disrupts itself. As in *One Night at the Call Centre*, the strongest critique of the American hegemony, Vroom and Shyam, themselves establish them when in order to escape the trap they seek to open a software company which is dependent on overseas customers for survival. Or, the passionate cricket coach, Ishaan, who so much loves the sport in India and hates the Australians, needs an Australian to recognise the work that he is doing for his country. With their professed dream of taking their country forward, his characters speak a largely Americanized English, prefer an American lifestyle and look towards the abroad as their potential dream-place. Besides that, the visions of Bhagat and his narrative are very restrictive. The woman on the train in *One Night at the Call Centre* urges Bhagat to write about the country’s youth who face a new challenge, but which segment of the youth is Bhagat talking about? Bhagat uncritically identifies the problems of the call center professionals or the IIT-ians or those who work at the corporate houses as symptomatic of the youth of the entire country! The ideological position of his narratives is thus extremely deceptive.

Therefore, I want to conclude that Bhagat's narrative do "reflect and deals" neither "technically and thematically" the "felt ultimacies" of our age, nor does he evolve any "replenished" form. His stance rather marks a continuation of the tendency of Indian popular fiction to be conditioned by changing factors of commodification which was an aspect of globalisation. Elitist in its readership, marketed to a mass public, it sought to represent and often validate the ideologies of the culture industry by playing upon stereotypes and projecting desires that new capitalism sought to circulate. Growing in readership because of the speedy proliferation of English education in the new globalized set-up in India, it seems to share both the boons and the spoils of globalisation. And to talk about the impression it makes, I quote one of his observations made by Hari, the author hero of *Five Point Someone* about the Hindi movies: "I know these... are real crap, but they do kind of take your mind away from the crap of real life like nothing else." (*Five Point Someone*, 37)

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