



## The Place of Chetan Bhagat in Modern English Literature Prepared

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“Crisis in Civilization” by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore is a passionate and uncompromising statement of his loss of faith in Western civilization. The composition not only shows his ultimate disillusionment with the British rule in India, it is also an indictment of the Western civilization. Rabindranath writes, “I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today when I am about to quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether.”

Rabindranath, who had started his life as an ardent believer in the benevolence of the European civilization was later disappointed when he came across the disastrous consequences of the English rule in Indian subcontinent. It is with this disappointment the beginning of Modern Indian English Literature is marked, the earliest phase of which is described by H.M. Williams as “Georgian effusions”.

However, over a period of time, those effusions took a back seat with the British denial to grant Indian Independence. Therefore, the new generation that emerged was disillusioned by the West’s failure to keep its heady promises. Three early masters of the Modern Indian English Literature namely Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan laid the foundation of the Contemporary English novel in India by rejecting the Indian values and adapting English Language to the Indian needs by asserting an Indian Identity. R.Parthasarthy declared famously this as a: “Declaration of Independence from English Literature”

It was a creative appropriation of English Language, but a rejection of the world of the existing British English Literature as well. While the triumvirate of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan successfully laid the foundations of the Indian reality and started to look at the Indian perspective and the Indian picture from a post-colonial point of the view, the later generation went further and examined in detail the emerging patterns of the Indian socio-political reality born within and without the geographical boundaries of India. Hence, the arrival of Salman Rushdie, Amitava Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and others who changed the face of Indian English Literature forever. With the persistent stress on the sheer Indianans, these writers have successfully shattered the Western practice of looking at the East as the ‘other’, or sub standard as exposed by Edward Said in his “Orientalism” published in the year 1978.

In such a context of Realism on the background of urbanized setting and cosmopolitan bent of Chetan Bhagat “One Night @ the Call Center” presents itself as a trend setter. Published in the year 2005, this novel is almost entirely different from the likes of those written by the big three i.e Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan and other similar writers. These writers sought to establish a national Indian character in their fiction especially because of their concentration on the crisis of identity problems. Chetan Bhagat – coming after Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Ghosh-finds a ready market for the Indian English Literature. It is but natural that Chetan Bhagat is much bolder than the

masters of the initial years. This boldness is specially found in his characterization. It may be worth recalling that most of the characters painted by the great Indian writers are essentially Indians. For example in Raja Rao's "Kanthapura" Moorthy is an idealist and a supporter of Gandhian 'Ahimsa' and 'Satyagraha', who wants to cross the conventional barriers of caste- so typical of a Post Independence educated Indian. In R.K. Narayan's "Guide", the character of Raju is a total transformation of his role as a tour guide to that of various 'Ashrams' from 'Bramhcharya' to 'Sanyas', that is in keeping with the traditional Indian idea of holiness. The porter boy Munno, in Mulk Raj Anand's "Coolie" points out the reality of the essential Indian social system. Thus, it is very much clear that the "Big Three"(Rao-Anand-Narayan) had their primary task cut out for them-building a national Indian identity. In contrast to all this, Bhagat's characters have nothing essentially Indian about them. In fact, the main characters, the six Call Center Executives -Radhika, Esha, Priyanka, Varun, Military Uncle and Shyam - could belong to any other nationality. In their denial of the typical Indian value system, the emergence of a new India can be located on India which is poles apart from the Indian reality rotted in the much talked about "timeless India" excessively found in the writings of the great triumvirate. Shyam's disregard for a marriage party in his family in order to reach office in time or Military Uncle's decision to join a Call Center at an age when most of the Indians choose to live a retired life are examples in hand. Their own little world of the Call Center is cosmopolitan in nature. The cosmopolitanism does not spring out only as a result of the revealed or unrevealed presence of the customers from USA on the other side of the phones, but it is also in some measures due to the cosmopolitan life style of the male and female leads of the novel. Indeed drinking, dancing and partying at 32 milestone, working for a company headquartered at Boston, dating at 'Mocha Café' with its coloured Arabian lights and at Pizza Hut at Sahara Mall and going to the night club 'Bed' for break, the Call Center Executives may easily belong to young upcoming generation of any ultra modern society - with the exception of the Military Uncle - not because he is not cosmopolitan but because he is not exactly young. Their business names also give the taste of cosmopolitanism, for example: Radhika is Regina, Esha is Eliza, Varun is Victor and Sam for Shyam. Radhika is the only character in which some traits of Indianness or Indian womanhood is found. She works hard day and night to keep her parents-in-law in good humour. Shyam comments on her condition:

"Cooking three meals a day and household chores and working all night.... the dark circle around her eyes" testify to her struggles to be an ideal Indian housewife. However, in course of chances upon the infidelity of her husband Anuj and decides to walk out from her marriage and her in-laws. The discovery is made through a telephonic talk from the Call Center, suitable to the prevalent atmosphere of the composition. Through the microcosmic reality of a call center the novelist takes into consideration to build up a simulated world to showcase the macrocosm of the prevailing reality of the Indian society. The revolt of Radika is the sheer display of the rejection of the traditionally found Indianness in the novels of the Big Three.

The point of crisis in form of looming pink slips is fabricated through subtle and intelligent touches of the narrator. Since the very beginning the atmosphere of slow down and fear of insecure job have been created by the novelist. He makes the reader aware of the crisis in their professional lives of the characters of the novel, as they fear that they are sure to lose their jobs since the business is low in their Call Center office. However, the novelist makes a brilliant shift from the professional crisis of the characters to the crisis in their personal lives. Shyam's affair with Priyanka has been almost ended in whimper, leaving soul shattered Shyam struggling hard to get over the mental depression. Priyanka is bogged down by her extremely possessive mother, who hastily decides her daughter's wedlock with an NRI. Esha, who inspires to be a model, finds her dreams shattered when she agrees to sleep but rejected as a model, which leads her to an attempt to commit suicide. The Military Uncle is not accepted by his son and daughter-in-law and he is forced to stay away from his grandson. The website developed by Victor and Shyam has been stolen by their boss Bakshi, who has taken the credit of developing the website which is going to be really very helpful in increasing the business of the company. Beautifully

interwoven professional and personal crisis builds up pressure cooker like situation in the climax of the novel, that reminds the reader some of the most disturbing moments of the modern Indian social life. "A recent phenomenon in the Indian National life would be the financial slump, when the professional crisis of several Indians precipitated individual crises in their personal lives."

Desperate in their effort to overcome the pressure the executives opt to visit a night club that is going to be a temporary escape from the disturbing events of the night. It is during their journey back from the night club all sorts of confusions take place. First, Vroom feels nauseated as a result of excessive intake of alcohol; second they break the window-pane of a restaurant which causes a burglar's alarm to ring and most importantly, the Qualis in which they are travelling skids, crashes into a construction site and hangs precariously over a grid of iron rods. This is the height of the climax in the novel with death staring at their faces, the panic spreads as the rods begins to yield slowly. To further complicate their predicament they find to their horror that there is no network coverage in that place, which simply means they are not going to take any kind of help from the outside World.

This section of the novel unfailingly takes us to the pages of William Golding's "Lord of the Flies", where some British teenagers marooned from the modern civilization of their ultra modern life-style, and in spite of using state of the art gadgets like mobile phones and laptops, the six Call Center employee, none find themselves completely at the mercy of nature. The all enveloping utter darkness adds to the sense of doom. The novelist superbly fabricates the situation of calamity. First catastrophe in the professional crisis, then the individualistic crisis and last and final is the crisis of death. Here intention of the novelist seems to make his reader aware of the illusion of the Meta narrative and to bust the myth of scientific progress. Here, the novelist touches the post-modernist ideas of his contemporary world - a feature that is not to be found in the writings of his predecessors. If William Golding's "Lord of the Flies", is the picture of the predicament of the human race under the shadow of cold war and the possibility of devastating Nuclear War, "One Night @ the Call Center" by Chetan Bhagat shows the predicament of the mankind in the Post-Modern consumerist social set up. It shows the real value of the human kind, shorn off all its artificial embellishments. The blurring of the distinction of the so called grand and popular literature is another post-modernist quality of "One Night @ the Call Center". When all hopes are lost and there are but a few minutes left for the end of the six Call Center employees, Bhagat introduces the technique of "deus-ex-machina" in the form of telephone call from God.

In Western literature the employment of the "deus-ex-machina" is practiced since time immemorial. The Greek Masters used this and Shakespeare also made use of it in several of his plays. In modern fiction Michael Crichton's "The Andromeda Strain", is one of the most notable examples of use of "deus-ex-machina". Although, Bhagat's way of using "deus-ex-machina" is a little different with a touch of a little novelty. When the vehicle hangs precariously on the grid of iron bars, the people trapped inside the car wondering if the vultures will find out their bodies after their death, which seems imminent. However, it is at this point that Shyam's mobile phone rings, in spite of the non-availability of network in that areas. To add to their surprise, the display of the phone tells them that the caller is none other than the Almighty, Omnipresent, Omniscient God.

They were already almost scared to death, now they start gasping, when God promises, "Bye now. Remember, I am inside you when you need me."

The entire incident involving God may be a new device in literature but a movie lover recalls "Bruce: The Almighty" where God does the same act for the survival of the male lead of the movie as he uses the modern device to contact the hero. Chetan Bhagat loves telephones. Every novel written by him has telephones playing decisive role that may change the entire course of action. Soon after the incidence of God, the six people save themselves not only from death but also from professional and personal crises. The business at the Call Center is saved. Priyanka reunites with Shyam and Radhika walks out of her infidel husband and starts living with Esha, who quits her modeling aspirations and works for an NGO,

apart from continuing in the Call Center. Vroom and Shyam fulfill their lives ambition by opening their own web designing company and Military Uncle goes back to USA where his son makes amends with him. All this may appear like wish-fulfillment- with the insertion of God in the novel out of nowhere, the novelist shatters the conventional rules of rationality. The girl in the train who is God says (before revelation), “Just like life, rational or not it just gets better with God in it. I reflected on her words for few moments. She became silent. I looked at her face. She looked even better in the light of dawn.”

Thus in its avowed contrast to the new age application of reason and logic, the novel „One Night @ the Call Center“ appears as much Post-Modernist as those of Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho, where such contrast can be easily located. For instance, it is little outlandish to observe how Coelho in his novel “The Zahir” encourages things like occult sciences through the character of Mikhail, a young man from Khazakhstan. In his effort to rise his voice against the erstwhile communist rules Mikhail denies the scientific truth and accepts the myth of the charmed tree in his village - a brief against which the communist rulers of his country campaigned actively. In the real sense, Mikhail stresses upon the importance of what he calls “accommodator”- the giving up point.”

This appears to be an intelligent and smart way of denying the importance of accumulated scientific and rational knowledge acquired civilization across the globe, and replacing them with the irrational, occult and supernatural. Thus for those finding fault with the Post- Modernist ideas provide handy weapon: the opposition to the principles of logic and reason; which built up the foundation of modern human civilization and progress. One may justifiably disagree upon such opposition, alleging that it betrays the cause of the —Enlighten as famously suggested by Jurgen Habermas in his essay titled “Modernity-An Incomplete Project.”However, no one can deny the fact that with such opposition, Bhagat’s novel becomes a part of the global Post-Modernist Literature-traversing a long way from the age of Rao-Anand-Narayan Triumvirate.

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