

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Youth's Struggle for Life and Career: A Case Study of Chetan Bhagat's Novel "*One Night @ the Call Center*"

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Abstract

Youth consists of the major chunk of the country's population, say about 55%. They are the future of the country. They know that they have to work hard to achieve their goals, but it is hard for them to lose fun in life during the days of developing their career. Therefore they may resort to find some alternative ways of works to find some time for having fun simultaneously. If the alternative ways end up in disasters they have to either succumb to the existing system of work or to find better alternative career. This sort of youth life sandwiched between fun and career is excellently presented by Chetan Bhagat in his second novel *One Night @ the Call Center*. The story takes place in the lives of six colleagues – Shyam, Vroom, Military Uncle, Priyanka, Esha and Radhika – working in a call center in Gurgaon.

Introduction

New York Times affirmed that Chetan Bhagat is "The biggest-selling English language novelist in India's history". And, *The Hindu* remarked that "Chetan is also responsible for a seismic shift in Indian writing in English". *Timesofindia.com* reasoned that "With the pace of an autobiographical account, the characters are simple people with whom one can identify with almost instantaneously". The *Times of India* addressed Chetan Bhagat as "a rockstar of Indian publishing."

Such a unique novelist Chetan Bhagat published in 2005 his second novel *One Night @ the Call Center*. It almost instantly drew the attention of readers of English fiction. Not so late after its hit into market it got translated into a major Bollywood film. That shows its reception by the novel lovers and

Though they worked hard throughout night being patient at their call-customers and strained more to be creative, their boss stole the credit of their creative hard work and threatened to fire their jobs. Out of pressure the colleagues went out for a brief relief but caught in an accident but learnt lessons from inner call (God) and bettered their lives accordingly. The story indicates the need of reviving the bossy burdensome employment system to allow the youth to flourish more with their creative instincts, not at the cost of their pleasure interests.

Keywords: Burdensome employment system, Boss attitudes, Career building pressure, Alternative searches for works, Youth fun culture, Youth values and morale.

movie viewers. Shashi Tharoor has praised the novel as

"... pitch perfect, his (Chetan Bhagat's) observer's eye keenly focused on nuances and detail ... *one night @ the call center* has struck a chord with India's young – and it clearly has – it is more for its description than its politics, its diagnosis rather than its prescription".¹

The story was in fact told by a young lady to the author while he was travelling in a train from 2.00 am to 7.00 am and the author preferred to tell

¹ Chetan Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Center*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2005 (2009). p. ii.

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the story to the readers through a protagonist Shyam since he seems to be similar to the author. And, the story is also completed in a night by 7.00 am of next day.

The novel narrates the struggles of five young colleagues and an old Military Uncle working in a call center Connexions at Gurgaon, new suburb of Delhi, balancing in between the burdensome employment system and their yearning for better career and life. The author divided the whole novel into 38 chapters and narrated the hurdles faced by the six colleagues who wanted not to lose their fun life while working too. It is important to know the conditions of the call center agents because a major chunk of the youth, say some 300,000 people were working in the industry in India by 2005. They helped the US companies in the sales, service and maintenance of their operations².

Since the story in the novel revolves around six characters which have their own pains, pleasure preferences and aspirations to reach. So it would be better to know them one after another.

Shyam: Hard working, but

Shyam is the main protagonist in the novel. He narrates the story in first person. He is leader of the team working in the call center Connexions in Gurgaon in the night shift from 10.30 pm to 7.00 am. He is sober and does works whatever his boss Bakshi tells him, in fear of losing the existing job. Together with his colleague Vroom he develops a software for an American company in Boston and expects promotion soon after its approval. But to his shocking the software was submitted to the Boston company by his boss Bakshi. Though Vroom, Priyanka and others instigated Shyam to ask Bakshi on the plagiarism he chose to be silent since he was afraid of losing his current job which is essential for his sustenance.

Shyam had been in relationship with Priyanka from his college days. In a college campus

² *Ibid*, p. 7.

fair they exhibited boring stalls and to cover that they used to visit each other's stalls and got drawn to each other in the process. Thereafter they started dating each other. Priyanka used to make cardamom tea for Shyam in her hostel when they were in college. They roamed together important tourist places in Delhi and allowed themselves to have intimate relationship without attaching moral stigma to their affair. Shyam recollected his memories having sex in Priyanka's house and in Qualis. Though Priyanka was proactive in her intimate affair with him she herself told Shyam to forget the relationship and move on. Shyam still has feelings for her though she said yes to a Microsoft employee Ganesh working in the US. Shyam felt jealous which was expressed through his actions like tapping the phone of Priyanka while she was talking to Ganesh. He would like to be worthy of someone like her – someone intelligent, witty, sensitive and fun, someone who can seamlessly merge friendship with love³. And, he wants to be successful too by setting up a small web designing company if Vroom collaborates with him⁴. In the end he gets these two – the love of Priyanka and collaboration with Vroom in starting own firm.

Priyanka: Prefers Microsoft for BF, but

Priyanka is ambitious: not only she wants to earn money for her B.Ed. but also expects her fiancé to be successful in his career. She loves Shyam, roams and dates with him and gets into physical indulgence with him even in her own house and in Qualis at a pub. Yet she doesn't attach much significance to her affair and tells Shyam to break up and move on.

Reader tends to misunderstand her that when she is not sure of Shyam to become team leader in the call center she breaks up with him and says 'yes' to an NRI match Ganesh since the latter does the coveted Microsoft job in the US. But there are

³ Chetan Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Center*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2005 (2009). p. 231.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 230.

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biological factors behind her behavior: the well known psychiatrist Dr. Vijay Nagaswami explains,

“One of the most widely held views on the subject of the man-woman relationship are that as long as sex is good, the relationship is an intimate one. Ergo, the most devastating thing that can happen to the cotemporary couple is lack of sexual interest. ... sexual passion, does not last for more than a few months, or at the most, beyond a couple of years”.

So, he advises,

“next time you feel lack of intimacy in your relationship, work on love, trust, respect and the communication patterns in your relationship. This way, even if the sex doesn't get much better immediately, the intimacy will”⁵.

Priyanka should be understood through these lines: She was in constant relationship with Shyam for four years and lost interest in him only for sex. Then she wanted the taste of success in life through her fiancé Shyam. When she was not sure of him she said ‘yes’ to marry another guy Ganesh who was doing a promising career. But at that time she was undergoing an oscillating situation of deciding between love, trust and respect on one side and rich life on another side. This is the reason why she wanted more time than one month to know Ganesh better before getting married to him. Once she came to know that he was a liar who concealed his bald head in his photos sent to her, she instantly got the clarity that she wanted only true love, trust and respect she had been getting from Shyam though he had no promising job like Ganesh. They got together too thereafter.

⁵ Dr. Vijay Nagaswami, *Courtship & Marriage: A Guide for Indian Couples*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2002. pp. 148 & 151.

Thus the relationship issues of Priyanka expose the attitude of the modern Indian girl of having boyfriend to taste the elements of the free culture but of preferring true love and trustful husband only at the end of the day. Ira Trivedi, who studied 500 personal narratives, concluded:

“So someone could be meeting prospective partners for marriage through the arranged marriage process, while dating and mating rampantly on the side. I was intrigued to see how marriage continued to play such a totemic role in the lives of so many of my peers – not just the to-be-wedded, but their families as well.”⁶

The personification of the modern Indian girl observed and recounted by Ira Trivedi could be found in Priyanka; and in her mother also: in spite of knowing her daughter dating Shyam, she prefers Ganesh to be the groom for her daughter. Priyanka's episode makes it clear that urban Indian youth is tending to prefer better career at the cost of moral values also. Priyanka is also an example for the skyrocketing premarital sex in urban areas – an estimated 75 per cent in the eighteen to twenty four-age bracket⁷ (Priyanka had it from about the age of 21 years). This percentage was persisting in Britain in 1984⁸. But ultimately love and trust won her heart and life.

Vroom: Changes GFs like TV channels, but

Vroom is passionate about money and better career to beat Americans and to keep his mother

⁶ Ira Trivedi, *India in Love: Marriage and Sexuality in the 21st Century*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014. p. 5.

⁷ Quoted by Ira Trivedi, *Op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁸ Anthony Clare, *Lovelace: Love, Sex & Marriage Around the World*. London: BBC Publications, 1986. p.18.

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country India ahead of them. Such ambitious Vroom changes his career from news reporter to the better one of call center agent. There, together with his colleague Shyam he works hard and develops software for sale for Americans and expects thereby to develop his career. But as the credit of preparing the software was claimed by his boss Bakshi he was frustrated and hence, in revenge, he blackmailed his boss to listen to his demands. However, he quits his job under the boss and establishes own firm together with Shyam.

Vroom faces relationship issues of his parents and his girl friend's. Since his parents quarrel and get separated Vroom gets disturbed and prefers to get rid of the disturbance by resorting to driving, smoking, drinking and even changing girl friends. He changed three girl friends in a short span of an year like changing TV channels. However he too preferred to stop at Esha like we stop browsing at our interesting channel.

Vroom episode lets us understand that youth enters into multiple relationships out of biological desire and distrust in finding better one to hook up finally. This happens because of two reasons. One, the physical attraction among the lovers fades away after a few months when there are no more stronger valuable attractions than the physical flirting. Two, the close observation of the disturbances that persist in the relationships between their parents and close relatives will not let us to stick to one girl friend finally by being suspicious of them to be like their parents or close relatives. Eventually casual carnal relationships are trending high amongst the youth in the current society.

The final solution is finding the mate who can be trustable. This is why Vroom too prefers to select Esha as his final resort to have her as his true girl friend and fiancée. Thus the youth is facing confusion between flirting affairs and long lasting true love; the confusion vanishes when they stop running after girl friends one after another and wait till a befitting girl appears. In other words, the youth

enters into extravaganza affairs in haste in search of true love only.

Esha: Goes immoral for career, but

Esha is ambitious to settle herself as a model and hence she leaves her parents in her native Chandigarh for Delhi to try her luck constantly. She puts in many efforts towards achieving her goal. She makes up herself to look hot, wears navel ring, sprays costly perfume and keeps on making every trial during the day while working in the call center during the night for salary for survival. She doesn't mind to sleep with a middleman in an attempt to realize her dream career as a model. But when he ditches her saying that she is short for becoming a model and couriers her some money in compensation for sleeping with him she bursts into tears and decides to leave the desire unfulfilled since she considers it to be wrong decision when her so called immoral act also doesn't work. Thereafter she starts responding to Vroom who finds her to be true girl friend.

This Esha episode makes few things clear: one, urban girls are preferring glitterati careers and for achieving their dream careers they do every effort working hard day and night and they don't even mind to lose their character also behind the curtains in the process of seeing themselves in their dream world. But it is very hard to shine in the showbiz field and there are predators in it. However, the young girls know their morals too and hence are not ready to ruin their lives after knowing the unsurpassable threats at a certain point of time and real situation.

Radhika: Has pre-marital courtship, but

Radhika, after having a brief period of pre-marital courtship with Anuj, marries to him and lives faithful life treating post marital life as a noble responsibility. She works hard in the house during day time serving her husband and mother-in-law and works in the call center during the nights. Though her mother-in-law complains against her and her husband scolds her, she doesn't mind and knits woolen cloth for her mother-in-law. But when she comes to know that her husband is unfaithful and loves another girl Payal, she firmly decides to divorce her husband.

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Radhika episode is a clear example for understanding the true nature of girls passing through various stages of life – pre-marital and post-marital lives. They don't mind to have sex before marriage once they confirm a boy for their further life. They remain faithful to the husband and family but they are dared enough to divorce their husbands if the latter are found to be unfaithful. This is the reason why the divorce rate in India is raising high in the recent decades.

Youth: Adventurous, but

Out of fashion and frustration youth in this novel is found to be leading adventurous life which is not conservative-appreciative. Young boys and girls smoke, drink, bunk duties, roam around places, visit clubs and pubs and have pre-marital sex. All the five young protagonists in the novel are portrayed as resorting to all of these vices defying their parents' advices.

The adventurous life of the youngsters is the growing trend in India. Various surveys reveal it: more than 56% of youth in India has no problem with pre-marital sex and 31% of young women of small-towns also agreed to having dated before marriage. Yet more than 64% of the youth prefer their partners to be virgin for marriage. The youths of Jaipur and Kota were found to be ready to defy their parents in personal and career matters but they were also open to the institution of marriage.

The contradictions that emerge out of these numbers about the Indian youth are explained thus by lifestyle expert Rachana K. Singh: 'Indian youth is juggling two value systems. We are holding on to the old value system we inherited, but exposure to Western culture has changed many perceptions. It's a tough period of change'.⁹

The youth becoming so adventurous can be understood to be becoming less conservative and less

⁹ Ray Titus, *Yuva India: Consumption and Lifestyle Choices of a Young India*. Gurgaon: Random House India, 2015. pp. 77-79.

'God fear': over 70 per cent of them don't find their religion to be contributing to their social and cultural identity. "A full 77 per cent of the Indian youth respondents in the survey (The Speaking Tree – IMRB 2011) preferred to identify with spirituality over religion. ... majority believed in a more secular ideology in celebrating religious diversity".¹⁰

Yet, the youth is sure and ambitious about developing their own career, instead of wasting time in the hope of getting Government jobs. About 80 per cent of the young men and women show keen interest in starting their own ventures at some point in their lives.¹¹ The prime characters in this novel too are found to be striving for developing their independent careers. Once they settle their careers successfully they will be received well by the society forgetting their past adventurous life. Therefore, the author advised, through the God call, the youth to listen to their inner call (divine element) to guide themselves in a right path to achieve their goals and live better lives. God guided the youth:

"There are four things needed for success. ... One, a medium amount of intelligence, and two, a bit of imagination. ... The third thing is self-confidence. ... The fourth ingredient is ... failure. ... For once you taste failure, you have no fear. You can take risks more easily. Then you don't want to snuggle in your comfort zone any more – you are ready to fly. And success is about flying, not smuggling".¹²

The youngsters then realized that they can overcome their existing problems and design their successful life and career by listening to their inner

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 46-47.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 61.

¹² Chetan Bhagat. *One Night @ the Call Center*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2005 (2009). pp. 232-233.

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call (from God) and following the four things in the process.

Conclusions

Youth knows the importance of employment and entrepreneurship as the means of career life, but during the period of developing the career also youths want to taste the life – love, food, entertainments, etc. When the burden of building their careers is found to be more at the cost of their life, the youngsters try to find alternative ways to get through the employment and entrepreneurship for the sake of having fun. If they are caught while implementing the alternative ways at the place of their employment, they have to succumb to the existing system of employment though it is burdensome. Therefore, the author Chetan Bhagat indicated through God’s call how the youngsters need to be dared enough to deal with their existing problems (with bosses) also with a knack. And the youngsters too need to listen to their inner call how it directs them to be dared enough to be entrepreneurial and to be truthful to their life partners.

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