

## CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: BRIDGING THE CONSCIOUS WITH THE CONSCIENCE

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### Introduction

In the times of explorations, experiments and progress like today, it is significant to keep abreast with the latest innovations in the field of management and device strategies to stay afloat in the corporate sector. With the emergence and settlement of multinational companies (popularly known as the MNCs) in India, the employment rate has increased noticeably, which has further added to the literacy ratio. But at the same time, these companies have brought forth a transition in social as well as working culture, here in India. This sudden upsurge of MNCs has introduced a very non-Indian way of working. Almost fifteen years ago when the foreign companies started forays into the Asian market, especially in India, by establishing branches, the most anticipated change was employment opportunities and economic growth. Over the years, both these expectations were met to a remarkable degree to the advantage of the citizens; but this development has brought about a gradual change in mindsets and lifestyle of a certain section of society. This "evolved" way of thinking and living is called corporate culture.

The aspect to be noticed here is that when a certain kind of practice or way of living is given recognition, certain liberties are extended to it, it gains certain acceptability. For instance, if we belong to the corporate world, our social responses will be judged accordingly. Consequently, many things which were previously a taboo in society will be accepted by the same society in a changed context, for example, if it is presented with the tag of "belonging to corporate." This principle has made it possible for the MNCs to introduce a positive change in the thinking of a large part of the Indian society. But the changes they brought in were partial, because there remains a large portion which rejects this liberty of thought. This contributes to the generation gap. Most of the employees in the MNCs are the Indian youth, which is ready to work on any terms and conditions, in order to earn that little extra amount which will fulfill its longing for luxuries, apart from the regular earnings.

When we talk of management strategies, the one approach that the MNCs adopt is to allure the younger generation by providing them attractive incentives (over and above the regular package), training, a taste of working in any other country of the world. To entice the youth to work in other countries, they also provide in their offices here in India the same work culture, ambience and a very liberal environment to work and learn as they get abroad. The MNCs ensure that the work environment is like any other training school but with much more benefits. Initially, it looks alluring, if we look at it from the young employees' perspective, but as they become a part of the organization and experience the working of the system, looking closely into the nitty-gritty of it, they are disillusioned. As time passes, the system brings them closer to the harsh reality of competition and the need to succeed in it. A job that looked very enticing and promising six months earlier when they were "freshers" now begins to be ugly and demanding. Maybe they are not prepared enough to bear the pressure which is unleashed on them as they assume the responsibilities of the offices for which they are recruited. Now this is a common narrative of almost all the companies that have their branches all over India. They do help the nation economically and have contributed to its fiscal development, but they also infuse abrupt change in the social front.

India is originally a culturally rich and socially progressive country. It is a home to people belonging to various ethnicities, religions, beliefs and cultures. Even after such diversity, it has been able to establish one uniform way of running the society, where each religion is acknowledged and every culture is preserved and followed. Indian society is progressive to an extent where certain changes are acceptable only when they do not disrupt the working of it in a very extreme manner, thus making that change least noticeable. But one aspect that it cannot compromise with is its conventions. They are not flexible; their rigidity establishes their stronghold on the Indians. Even though we have welcomed and accepted the reign of MNCs in India, there is a section of Indian society which does not approve of such companies here and further rejects the idea of our youth working for them. Their belief suggests that these foreign companies pollute the minds of our young people, thus corrupting the values and instincts that India and its society is known for.

To a great extent, their concern is valid. To substantiate this point, here is an instance: when individuals become a part of a large office like that of an MNC, they have to sustain there. In order to do that, they do have to be constantly learning and presenting their ideas to their seniors, which will also fetch them promotions and job security in the long run. They have to devise strategies and invent concepts which will accentuate their individualities in the office, thus providing them with their own unique identity, instead of being a part of a group. Such a need to be identified compels the employees to act in a way which is not their own, but which the seniors would understand. This is where compromise with "originality" begins. The irony of the situation here is that we compromise with our original self, in order to be identified as "individuals" at our work-places (the corporate offices), thus losing our individuality altogether. There is a chain of events that follows and brings a transformation in that individual. The stress to excel and be identified leads to losing the "self" and questioning the existence of it.

So, in a way, the current strategies and innovations of the market are affecting our society in a negative manner, as in this scenario an individual has set out to market oneself, turning oneself into modifiable commodity which can be molded according to the desire and requirement of the employer. This requirement has led to isolation and created social distances.

### **Objectives of the Research**

There are several means of communicating such scenarios to the masses, but the most potential mode is literature. If we read current literature, we realize that it has been alerting us towards the impulsive transformation of our society, given to the influence of the corporate world. Literature has always been the expression of the contemporary society. The kind that we read today, often called popular fiction, presents an alarming picture but in a very frivolous manner. Writers like Chetan Bhagat, Advaita Kalia and Tuhin Sinha write about young people working in various corporate sectors like BPOs, hotel and hospitality management, software development, etc. Their stories can be called fictions as they depict the reality of such working sectors with the help of various entertaining stories. The contemporary literature reflects the affect of current marketing scenario. It has made life highly competitive where we are constantly chasing success, but just when we think we have achieved it, we realize that "success" has been redefined. So we begin from the beginning. Such a blind, irrational chase has made us forget our reality. It has distanced us from ourselves, making us question our existence. Over the years, we have become shallow and we chase products of instant gratification. This has been the most defining effects of the current marketing strategies. We seek instant gratification offered by objects/products in favor of more subtle gratification offered by social relationships and virtuous living. The result is that even when we live in society, we are still isolated beings, living in a make-believe world of our convenience.

### Main Text and Finding

The adage "Live in the moment" has taken a drastic toll on the contemporary society, especially on the younger generation. Novels of Chetan Bhagat echo this aspect of young thinkers. His novel *One Night @ a Call Center* is a true representation of the inside working of a typical corporate office, a BPO. It traces the lives of six employees working at a call center, coming from various sections of society, the focus being on the challenges they face, their perspectives of them and their struggle to overcome those challenges. The story delves deeper into the workings of each character's mind, wherein the reader can see the way in which that character is strategizing, in order to combat his fears and shortcomings. The novel also reflects the perception of these young people about their values and teachings of the family. It presents the shift that has taken place in the youth regarding their culture, family values and traditions. They do not hesitate in flouting those values if they become a hindrance in their progress. The story is narrated in first person, by Shyam (aka Sam Marcy), who is a team leader of Western Appliances Strategic Group (WASG) at a BPO called Connexions, in Gurgaon. He is amazed at the fact that he is a team leader, as he considers himself to be incapable of leading a team. He has no self-esteem, even though he is a fairly handsome young man. This story also draws our attention to the fact that appearance contributes, to a certain extent, to one's achievements, and that it is not gender limited. Literature is the voice of a society, an expression of people's mind, their thinking and understanding. Chetan Bhagat was told this story by a fellow-passenger on his way from Kanpur to Delhi, and it is considered to be a true story. Except for the proper nouns, the details remain the same. Shyam comes from a middle-class family and the opening scene suggests how a middle-class the family is. He wakes up to a chaotic apartment, full of people, women outnumbering men, in this small two bedroom-hall-kitchen space. He is non-existent in the family, although he is the only earning member, after his father's death—a typical middle-class situation. This fact also suggests that it is very significant to be employed in India and also the fact that these MNCs are a boon to the children of middle-class of Indian society, as they provide opportunities to them at an early age, when they are "fresh-graduates" as their advertisements say.

The other characters in the novel are Priyanka (Shyam's ex-girlfriend), Esha (Eliza Singer), Radhika (Regina Jones), Vroom (Varun Malhotra aka Victor Mell) and Military Uncle (he does not answer calls so he does not have the "other" identity). Then there is Shyam's current girlfriend Shefali and Bakshi who is their boss. Both these characters turn out to be opportunists, using people and their skills to get work done in their ways. So, this is a competitive group of people who sell electronic appliances to people in the US and their organization is under the threat of shutting down, owing to poor sales of the past year. These are testing times for each one of them, especially the major six characters, as their jobs are very vital in their respective lives.

As the plot progresses, we see that each character is dealing with potentially fatal personal problems. But, in order to secure their jobs, they have kept that quandary aside, for a while. This is one of the portions of the story which resonate the realistic aspect of life much emphatically. As we look around, not only outside our social structure, but also within our personal premise, we realize that we have become accustomed to such practice. We keep our professional lives on the forefront, thus compromising with the urgencies of our personal lives. The result is that we are ready to negotiate our values and flout the social norms so as to accomplish our professional targets or to fulfill our dreams and desires. Shyam is with Shefali, even though he dislikes her and is still in love with Priyanka, because she has access to Bakshi and can help him in his promotion. Self-interest is not a vice anymore, but has become a virtue instead. If we are capable of excelling professionally by means of other people, we are artful enough to sustain in any organization or working environment. Similarly, Esha is an aspiring model, but is working at this BPO for the time being, taking up modeling assignments off and on. It is later revealed that she had to please a fashion designer for a night in

order to get one such assignment, but he betrays her and sends some money for the "favor" that she had done to him.

The story is that of disillusionment, thwarted dreams, shattered ambitions and pessimism, until one night all the six characters face a life-threatening situation in which they look at their respective lives in retrospect. This exercise reveals to them a very pensive aspect of life's realities and makes them realize that they have achieved nothing, even after disgracing themselves physically and morally. The events that take place in their lives are a reflection of degeneration of traditions and values in the current youth, who do not think twice before acting on their decisions, which are purely impulsive. It is only when it is too late that they understand that they have lost their identities and individualism. Their rebellious thinking has worked against them. It made them lustful, irrational, self-centered, shallow and finally, confused. They lose their original "self" in order to "fit in" and become other people's definition of them. There's no purity left in their core being. That's when they face the colossal identity crisis, and when that happens the reality hits so hard that they are baffled by it and intensely hurt. All this while this generation has looked for instant gratification but has been blinded to achieve their dreams by any which means possible, so much so that they have forgotten how transitory their bliss is. Their myopic view of life places them in a situation where there is a dead-end and less scope for retreat. The six characters in Bhagat's this piece of work faces exactly the same situation. Heartbreaks, deceit, sense of isolation, loss of identity, painful reality check and the fatal accident when their vehicle crashes into a construction site at midnight and there is nobody to seek help from. The accident site is such a desolate area that there are no mobile networks and they fail to reach out for help. It is during these last moments of life that they look back and confess their fears to each other, seek forgiveness and look at life with a much broadened perspective, but alas, they don't have much time left. Radhika confesses that though she had a love marriage, it is on rocks as her husband has an extra-marital affair and that she is extremely hurt and disillusioned with the entire idea of love and the institution of marriage. Priyanka too confides that she does not like the boy she is getting married to and is still in love with Shyam. It is then that Shyam gets a call, from God. As ridiculous as it may seem, this is what happens. It is God speaking to Shyam, in the language that he understands. He speaks Shyam out of his despair and urges him to think about the goodness in his life. He orients his attention to the mistakes he did not make, instead of reprimanding him of the ones he did. God speaks to everybody one by one and guides them to looking at the brighter aspect of their respective lives. He also explains how they could learn from their mistakes and redeem their morality and values.

Who is God? Who was the one speaking on the other side of the phone? Does God have a face, an identity, a shape? Or is it just a figment of our imagination? Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @the Call Center* seeks answers to few such questions. The call from God is the inner voice of each individual stuck in that fatal circumstance. It is only when each one realizes that perhaps they do not have much to live for, that they regret their actions and impulsive decisions, this regret is actually their desire for a second chance. God's call is the confirmation of that chance. It was not God who called, it was their conscience which questioned them and answered their misgivings. It was that guiding power that each one of us possesses but we are too weak within to acknowledge it, especially when we are reveling in the glory of success, materialistic success.

Literature becomes the mirror to such dilemmas and presents it, communicates it to a much larger section of the society. Popular fiction, to be precise, plays a vital role and makes us aware of our environment, both outside and within. The writers are potential "life gurus" who direct us to the right path, thus taking us back to our roots. Their achievement lies in the fact they communicate such profound thoughts in the language that is understood by the reader of every social section, especially the youth. The youth is the most disoriented group, and writers like Bhagat and Kala, steer them to their dreams by suggesting to them to take the right

way and not get lost by deceptive "signposts". If we look at today's novels critically, we will realize that they are highly philosophic in their theme but the presentation is very contemporary, so as to convey the ideology effectively. Contemporary literature has the potential to maneuver the bewildered youth to the acceptable path, without compromising with their values and social norms. The convenient society that they have conformed to is short-lived. Furthermore, it is a part of a much larger society which governs our conduct. Contemporary fiction presents the advantages and disadvantages of such behavior, in the long run. Literature is an alert to the inner conscience. It is entertaining, while having a much higher function of reforming the society by expressing the thought-provoking and equally alarming circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

The new marketing strategies and emerging innovations have increased the pressure on working professionals. The stress they experience has made the mental and spiritual situation of these individuals volatile. They are unstoppable and can go to any extent to survive in this rat race. The new marketing innovations are unintentionally isolating individuals, thus providing a virtual society like social networking sites. Here they have innumerable friends, but would still find themselves sipping coffee all alone. Mobile phones, Facebook, internet, magazines, etc., are means of swift social gratification; none of these has essence in it. Quick money, loose living, intoxicants, shifting loyalties—these are all causes and effects of the stress that our youths, who are eager to achieve much more than what they can handle, face today. Contemporary literature is thought-provoking. It is a sort of moral policing which helps the lost young generation to retreat to its originality by depicting a very crude picture of the consequences of its actions. It addresses the immediate concern of social disruption, and it can further be a watch-guard to a better state of life. It conveys that human life is not about possessing but about being and belonging. Self-gratification is not what brings fulfillment; our happiness lies, as Aristotle says, in virtuous living in the bliss of people around us.