



**New Urban Sensibility in Chetan Bhagat's Novels:
One Night @ The Call Centre and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life***

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat, the Indian English novelist has made an overnight sensation in South Asia. His six best-selling novels, namely, *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011) and *Half Girlfriend* (2014) quickly established his reputation as the new urban youth icon of India in less than a decade's timespan. These handful of works are now recognized as authentic representation of the fast changing new urban intelligentsia. Even though Bhagat's perpetual preoccupation with the middle class urban sensibility has often engendered scything criticism from the part of some critics for what they identify as an absolute lack of depth and seriousness in his works, it is exactly the same quality that made him one of the most popular Indian English writers of all time. In this scholarly paper, an attempt has been made to analyze two novels by Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Centre* and *The Three Mistakes of My Life* in the context of his new urban sensibility.

Key words: Urban Sensibility, New Youth, Urban Middleclass, Youth Icon, Popular Culture.





CHETAN BHAGAT, THE NEW URBAN YOUTH ICON

Chetan Bhagat, an alma-mater of IIT, Delhi and IIM, Hyderabad who began his career as an Investment Banker for Goldman Sachs did unexpected in seeking a fulltime career in writing. The new youth icon of India would then go on to publish six best-selling novels in admired by his largely young urban reading public. That *The New York Times* identified him as the “biggest selling English novelist in Indian history” and in Times magazine’s poll for the 100 most influential people he secured 1364 votes that put him above Arnold Schwarzenegger, Warren Buffet and Rupert Murdoch shows that Bhagat reached out to his reading public unlike any other writer in Indian literary history.

His six best-selling novels, namely, *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008) *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011) and *Half Girlfriend* (2014) quickly established his reputation as the new urban youth icon of India in less than a decade’s timespan. These handful of works are now recognized as authentic representation of the fast changing new urban intelligentsia.

Published when he was still working as an Investment Banker in Hong Kong, *Five Point Someone* is an exciting but equally poignant portrayal of life in one of India’s premier educational institutions: dreams and aspirations of the young minds, seldom stories of shattered dreams, love, friendship, ragging and even darker aspects of debatable grading system followed in Indian universities. His second novel, *One Night @ the Call Centre* revolves around a one night’s incidents in a call centre in Haryana where six characters are trapped with their own personal problems with which they struggle and try to sort out. Set in IIM Hyderabad, largely autobiographical *2 States* tells the story of star-crossed lovers who go through great deal of ordeal before they could be married to each other. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* that tells the story of three ambitious young men each of them having their passion set in three exclusively different fields, business, cricket and religion is a critical commentary on the fast changing urban environment. *Revolution 2020*, set in a similar urban environment focuses on the love triangle of three young characters who in the corruptive modern world tries to achieve fame and success. *Half Girlfriend*, set in one of Delhi’s premier institutions, is about the struggle of a young man from Bihar, who with his poor English competency goes through a period of intense stress and depression before he could finally learn to woe his beloved speaking impeccable English.





THE NEW URBAN SENSIBILITY IN *ONE NIGHT @ THE CALL CENTRE* AND *THE 3 MISTAKES OF MY LIFE*

“Connexion” is a call centre in the fast developing city of Guragaon in Haryana. As a workplace where new technocrats of the modern world work round the clock, Connexion is symbolic of the modern technology-driven world. The call centre right in the heart of the city where now massive apartments, concrete structures and housing projects are under construction, work six characters of the novel: Rathika, Priyanka, Esha, Military Uncle, Varoom and Shyam. The novel is an authentic representation of the rising fear, insecurity, anxieties, love, lose, ambition, failure and social pressures faced by the young in the fast changing, highly competitive, and often corrupt new urban environment.

Esha who wants to pursue a career as a model joins the call centre to meet her expense. Despite the fact that she is quite ambitious about her dream she is somewhat diffident about her eventual success as she believes that she would never be able to fulfill her dream as she is short in length. But she is prepare to go any length fulfill her dream thus agreeing to sleep with a man who she believes could possibly help her get some modeling contracts only to be cheated by him when he declares that she could not be a model for her being too short. In this respect Esha is a victim of the modern deceptive world.

Rathika, another female character in the novel is torn between the two sensibilities, the old and new. She works hard, day in and out, so that she could keep her parents-in-law. She finds both the new world and the old oppressive. Her struggle in the life is characteristic of the new urban intelligentsia that is going through a stage of fast transformation.

Shyam Mehra earlier worked in an agency which he left due to low remuneration. He was not satisfied with his life as a mere agent and he has joined in the call centre hoping that, along with the much needed higher payment, here he might also get the opportunity to be a team leader and prove his worth. The highly competitive nature of the new technocratic society implies that most of these characters are trying their hand in various fields. Sam is not an exception and he is a good web-designer too and he develops a highly effective trouble shooting website. Just like him, Vroom also is a good tech-savvy who puts it into a good use that saves the fate of the company threatened by the global financial meltdown.

These characters exhibit nothing that can be called essentially Indian in nature. They could belong to any other nationality characterized by the modern urban values. An erosion of





the traditional Indian values and the emergence of the new is evident throughout the novel. Shyam's denial for a conventional marriage party in his family in order to reach office in time and Military Uncle's unconventional choice to work at an age when his fellow Indians would prefer a quite retired life are few of the examples. Their apparently little world of the Call Centre is cosmopolitan in its organization and way of functioning. Indeed, drinking, dancing, dating and working for foreign companies, among many other things, prove that these characters easily belong to any young, emerging generation of cosmopolitan ultra-modern societies. The business names given to the characters also have a sense of cosmopolitanism: Esha is called Eliza, Rathika is called Regina, Varun is called Victor and Shyam is called Sam.

The casual attitude towards love, sex and marriage marks a break with the conventional values of the Indian society. In the love among the characters we get a new equation of romance as the characters who loved each other decide to break and live alongside each other as if the past never mattered. This is in absolute contrast with the popular Bollywood melodramatic romance that to a large extent shapes the romantic fantasies of the Indian young population. But this is not to suggest that these characters are quite comfortable with the new sensibility. The emerging urban sensibility, inevitably, poses its own challenges, conflicts, struggles and anxieties to the characters. The character of Rathika is particularly matter of interest in this respect. Rathika is portrayed as a woman who struggles to define herself in the changing urban environment: she should simultaneously cater to the needs and demands of both the new and the old represented by the corporate circle she is a part of and the family, respectively.

Increasing urbanization has surely opened new hitherto unknown opportunities to before women. The old patriarchic gender values are fast receding and gender relations and roles are no longer seen through the old spectacles. Instead women play increased role in the society especially in the corporate service sector. This is also true of the new corporate environment the characters a part of. Female characters are seen as making their own choices in life and career. Breaking from the conventional female roles in the Indian society, female characters in the novel are seen as working alongside with their male counterparts, sometimes outperforming them. The more democratic and inclusive gender relations characteristic of the new urban sensibility even allows the characters like Rathika and Esha work in night shifts.

Chetan Bhagat's third novel, *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is also set in an Indian city. This time, Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Like other novels by Chetan Bhagat, this one also tells the





story of young middle class urban characters. Govind has committed three mistakes in his life that changes his and his friends' (Ishan and Omi) life. Each of the characters show some elements of rebellion as well as a strong will and ambition as typical of urban life portrayed in Bhagat's other works. And the titular three mistakes of Govind partly come as a result of his new urban sensibility.

In Govind, the narrator of the novel, we get a supreme example of the new ambitious, urban youth. Despite the fact that Govind's parents wanted him to be an engineer, he follows his heart to pursue a career in business. Maddened by his ambition to make a quick buck, in a less thought out decision he chooses to invest an incredibly huge amount of money to own a shopping mall in the city. Shopping mall, the supreme symbol of modern urban consumer society, that Govind wanted to own can be taken as symbolic of his corporate ambition. Anyway, the ambitious investment he makes soon turn him bankrupt as the shopping mall is reduced to rubbles in 2001 Gujarat earthquake.

The second "mistake", as he calls it, committed by Govind also stems from his middle class sensibility. In this case, not ambition but sexual promiscuity. The physical intimacy that he develops with his friend Ishan's sister causes a rift in mutual relation between Ishan and Govind. The second mistake committed by Govind invites our attention into the matters of increased sexual liberty which is a part of the new urban sensibility.

What is most noticeable about much of Bhagat's characters, as in this work is the individualistic and rebellious pursuits of the characters. Ishan passionately follows his career aspirations as a cricketer. Govind is perhaps the supreme example for the rebellious urban youth. Against the will of his mother, he takes the drastic step to drop his studies midway to pursue his ambition in business. Whether or not he succeeds in his business pursuit, the strong will and boldness with which Govind took his decision is in absolute contrast with conventional Indian practices. Chetan Bhagat seems to be absolutely conscious of the fact that the individualistic ambitious pursuits of the new young often comes in odds with the interests of the parents. In the novel he goes to the extent of suggesting that "humanity would not have progressed if people listened to their parents all the time" (103).

The rebelliousness of the urban youth is especially true of Omi, Govind's friend. Omi's father, a priest in a local Hindu temple, wants his son follow his footsteps. But Omi is disillusioned with the conventional Hindu faith which he found is devoid of divinity: instead of the temple, he seeks divinity within his own self. Govind does not see God in the temples nor does he feel divinity in the customs and rituals devotedly adhered to by his





parents and relatives. Instead, in line with the Hindu concept of the Atman, the divine within, Govind searches the God in his own self. In the still hours after his hard works, he does see God. Even though he refuses to visit the temple, he does not disrespect God, instead he worships the God in his inner temple.

The rather mystical experience of divinity as experienced by Omi in his urban environment forms a parallel to the ever increasing influence of Rumi, the mystical poet in the contemporary urban, cosmopolitan American society. The increasing influence of Rumi in the contemporary cosmopolitan society is often read as a result of increasing obsession of the new youth with the self. Omi's break from the temple essentially marks a break with the tradition and family and his ability to find divinity within his own self is symptomatic of the increasingly rebellious and iconoclastic individualistic pursuits and cravings of the modern life.

The relatively liberal and inclusive outlook characteristic of the new urban intelligentsia has also ushered in a society in which religious and caste boundaries are fast eroding. Bhagat draws a contrast between the religious outlook of the older and new generation in the society. The older generation represented by his Mama and Uncle exhibit an intolerant and communal outlook while Omi does not subscribe to their religious fanaticism. During the controversial Ghodra incident and following communal riot, Omi even mortally fights his fanatic uncle and other rioters to save Ali, a Muslim boy. The trio, Govind, Ishan and Omi who belong to two rioting religions, is symbolic of the new secular outlook characteristic of the new urban life.

In his choice of characters, setting, events and even vocabulary, Bhagat's novels exhibit the new urban sensibility. Bhagat's preoccupation with the middle class urban sensibility has often engendered scything criticism from the part of some critics for what they identify as an absolute lack of depth and seriousness in his works. A critic has to be balanced in his critique. Hence one should not get too much carried away by the celebration of Bhagat's, as any other's works. Nor should one lose one's critical eye. In the meantime one should not dumb any author-no matter how popular they appear, no matter how shallow they appear-as worthless as many tend to do to Bhagat. After all as Raymond Williams put it, "culture is ordinary".





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