

## Revival of the Spiritual Self: Mundane versus Ethereal in Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ The Call Center*

**Dr. Sarfaraz Nawaz**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Shibli National College, Azamgarh

Affiliated to Veer Bahadur Singh Purvanchal University

Jaunpur

### Abstract

Chetan Bhagat is the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history. So far his published novels have broken all records, as all of them have been sold out like anything. *One Night @ The Call Center* is about five young people who fail to make it big in life. The novel shows their struggle of chasing their dreams in a world of cut-throat competition and high materialism. They work in a call centre in the night shift. The problem with these characters is they fail to recognize their own worth and sheepishly offer themselves to be exploited. Although talented and hardworking, they are entangled in the mundane things and become quite forgetful of the need to look inward. Before they totally collapse and completely give in to their fate, there comes a moment of ethereal experience and their lives are dramatically changed. This experience is nothing other than listening to the voice of the heart. The paper makes an attempt to show how this revival of the spiritual self emerges as a dominant theme in the novel.

**Keywords:** Materialism, Mundane, Spiritual, God, Call Centre.

*There are only two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle.*

--Albert Einstein

Chetan Bhagat as a novelist hardly needs an introduction. The huge success and popularity that he received for his novels is unprecedented, as he is by general accord acclaimed as one of the widely read and biggest selling authors of English language in India. His novels target the youth and their problems as faced by them in day to day life. *One Night @ Call Center* also has five young people as its central characters. This paper, through a thematic study of the novel, makes an attempt to explore the idea of the revival of the spiritual self in connection with the lives of the major characters in the novel.

Before the novel begins, a request is made by the author to answer some pertinent questions that actually bring the central theme of the novel to the fore. The questions are very subjective and related to the assessment of the self. By offering the readers an exercise of answering questions like what they are afraid of, what makes them angry, and what they dislike about themselves, the author actually makes an indirect implication that these are the questions that one seldom asks oneself. At the same time, through these questions there is a suggestion that real help comes through the courage to ask these unasked questions. The answer to these could open the doors to hope where there is no way out. Through these questions one can discover the strength of self-help. This self-help comes through the revival of the spiritual self. The conflict between the mundane and the ethereal is always there. What one needs is to spare some time and try to disengage with the mundane and discover the ethereal which can bring all the desired change, and put to rest the disturbances howsoever great they may be.

In our day to day life, we have been reduced to human beasts propelled by the instinct of greed to join the rat race of materialistic gain. The intoxication of success has made us unmindful of the essence of what actually makes life worth living. The maddening speed required in reaching the destination of worldly glory and achievement has blindfolded us, making us forget that we have trampled down the very values that define our existence as human beings. But there comes a moment in a lifetime when one turns to the voice of heart. This is the moment of realising the real crisis to which no other help than the self-help can suggest a resolution. Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ The Call Center* is about the self-help that the characters in the novel badly need as a remedy to their individual crises. This is the same remedy that Matthew Arnold suggested long back in his famous poem "The Scholar Gipsy":

Thou waitest for the spark from heaven! and we,  
Light half-believers of our casual creeds,  
Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd,  
Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,  
Whose vague resolves never have been fulfill'd;  
For whom each year we see  
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;  
Who hesitate and falter life away,  
And lose to-morrow the ground won to-day--  
Ah! do not we, wanderer! await it too? (Poetry Foundation)

The novel has a frame story telling how the author happened to meet an unknown lady in a train, while he was making a journey back to Delhi from an educational assignment at IIT Kanpur. The lady tells the author a very strange story only on the condition that he makes a novel out of it. The author agrees and this is how the real story of the novel begins. The story is told through one of the characters assuming the role of the narrator. There are five young people, Shyam, Vroom, Priyanka, Esha, Radhika and an old man Military uncle, all of them working at a call centre called 'Connexions' at Gurgaon. Shyam is the narrator and shares the events that take place in one night at the call centre,

coupled with the events of past through a journey down the memory lane, using the flashback technique.

The novel tries to capture their individual problems and the failure to cope with them. Shyam tries hard to make a mark as a successful person in life. He loves Priyanka and hopes to marry her someday. But like all protective and fore-seeing mothers, Priyanka's mother makes it a point that her daughter should settle with a well-off and established person who can guarantee her every comfort in life rather than ending up with a loser like Shyam. Vroom loves Esha who has set a very high goal of becoming a model and is so obsessed with her dream that she is ready to pay any price, if she could buy it. Radhika is married to Anuj who belongs to an orthodox family where she has the least space to enjoy respect even as a working woman, sharing the financial burden of the family. A complaining mother-in-law and a grumbling husband is what she has in life as a gift of love and to top it all, to the greatest shock of her life, she discovers that her husband has been cheating on her all these years. Military Uncle is forsaken by his son and the daughter-in-law and lives a life of isolation, wishing he could spend his days with his grandson.

The novelist has put these characters together to focus on the predicament they are in. The company cab comes to pick them up and drops them at the workplace right in the heart of the night. While the world sleeps, these people work like hell to meet the goals they have set for themselves. They do so in order to live up to the expectations of the family, and meet the demands of the world which values one's worth in terms of money alone. You are termed the black sheep of the family, if you fail to bring wealth to the house, no matter how gentle and good you are. Your qualifications are nothing but trash, if they cannot generate a source of income. Shyam, when he lost his first small job of a website designer, had to face humiliation at home until he joined the Connexions to restore his dignity in the family.

At the call centre, his boss Bakshi, a real pain in the neck, overburdens him with extra work and he cannot choose but silently suffer for fear of not being able to be promoted to the position of the team leader, if he dared to argue. He has to make a compromise in order to avoid being declared a loser. He cannot afford to lose a job, as he loves Priyanka. Both of them date together and even have sex. But when it comes to making the final decision of marriage, Priyanka has to choose someone else. Her mother does not approve of Shyam's credentials as a suitable husband for her daughter and manages somehow to find an NRI, Ganesh, working at the Microsoft in America and earning a lot. They break up and bitterness enters their relationship, though they continue to be colleagues at the same workplace. Remembering one of his past dates with Priyanka, after they have broken up, Shyam very bitterly questions the tendency of people to make even the sacred bond of marriage a deal of selling out the daughter or the son to the highest bidder. This is what makes an end of every love story. The basic question that crops up in a marriage arrangement is whether the boy is settled or not. There is no space for feelings and emotions with a belief that money can buy one everything including happiness.

Bakshi is the worst boss one can ever imagine to have in their wildest dreams. He is a nightmare crushing the dreams of his employees under his arrogant boot and never allowing them have a moment of respite. It is very hard to be happy when he is around. Uncouth, uncultured, and a good for nothing guy as he is, he leaves no stone unturned in causing them trouble. Highly inefficient, disgusting, and mean at heart, he stoops so low as to steal away the credit of developing the

‘Troubleshooting Website’ by posting it to the Boston head office in his name, which was actually the brainchild of Shyam and Vroom. These poor fellows have the shock of their lives but miserably suffer though their rage knows no bound. Their anger smoulders within their hearts but they cannot help it. They curse Bakshi like hell but know no ways to settle scores with him.

Shyam is so upset he is in a state of indecision what to do. By passing off their project as his Bakshi has not only spoiled their hard work but also diminished the prospects of Shyam’s promotion which he badly needed to prove himself worthy of Priyanka. Vroom’s words fall on his eardrums like bombs as they expose the fear gripping his soul, not allowing him to go ahead and teach Bakshi a lesson. This fear remains with him as he never believed in himself and never solicited succour that was there if he asked for it:

We worked on it for six months man. And all you can say is we can’t do anything as he may downsize us? This fucking loser Bakshi is turning you into a loser. Mr. Shyam, you are turning into a mouse pad, people are rolling over you every day. Priyanka tell him to say something. Go to Bakshi’s office and hold his damn collar.  
(*One Night 146*)

Radhika marries into an orthodox family out of love for her husband, Anuj. She has a tough time balancing herself between home and office; a demanding mother-in law at home, ready to shower taunts at her and a beastly boss at office adding to her woes. She becomes addicted to taking soothing pills to avoid anxieties and worries surrounding her life. She does not get any emotional support from Anuj at the family front and has to face it all alone. Normally she does not make a fuss about the family matters but sometimes it is too much for her to tolerate, and she has to share her woes with her colleagues to lighten her burden. She fails to understand why the man she loved should become so unfeeling and unreasonable sometimes. But the greatest shock of her life confronts her when she comes to know of the betrayal of her husband. The man for whom she prepared herself to undergo unpleasant circumstances turns out to be shallow and non-serious in love. She is terribly upset and has a nervous breakdown.

Esha in her bid to prove her mettle and to live an independent life leaves her home town Chandigarh and comes to Delhi only to expose her to the hazards and threats of city life. Even the love of Vroom for her cannot stop her from chasing the dream of becoming a top model. Success allures her from a distance and she follows it madly, putting to risk her honour and self-respect. She makes a big compromise of sleeping with a guy from the fashion- world to get a break. This so called break does nothing more than leave her shattered and broken, as the guy having enjoyed her declares her having too small a height to be a model. A sense of guilt coupled with a harsh realization of failure crushes her down. The mental agony is too much for her to bear. She inflicts injuries on her own body in a desperate attempt to alleviate the suffering of the soul with the excruciating pain of the body.

With a guilty conscience she is the only character in the novel to suggest the very questions the author raised before telling their stories and before they undergo an ethereal experience, making all of them re- examine their lives and ask certain questions that they never asked themselves before they entangled in the mundane things of life. Esha is the first one to undergo this transformation but will need time to come out of this state of despair like others when the moment of real awakening dawns on all of them. Vroom, unlike his other colleagues who undergo their individual internal

suffering and conflict without much show of it, cannot hold the disturbances within. He vents his anger and frustration on things, people, and whatever comes his way. But he also lacks courage to question himself, to find the truth about himself.

Military Uncle is the only character in the novel that represents the woes of the elderly. He is discarded by his son and daughter-in-law and works with the group of these young men at the same call centre. He hardly speaks and qualifies the description of old men by W.B. Yeats in the poem "Sailing to Byzantium": "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / a tattered coat upon a stick..." (Poetry Foundation). The attitude of his son has left him heart-broken. Most of all he misses his grandson and wants to be with him. He keeps downloading pictures of animals on his computer to send them to his grandson in US. Once he mails them but the harsh reply from his son would have cracked any heart in the world:

Dad... You have cluttered my life enough, now stop cluttering my mailbox. I do not know what came over me that I allowed communication between you and my son. I don't want your shadow on him. Please stay away and do not send him any more mails. For literally or otherwise, we don't want your attachments. (*One Night* 160)

Like other characters in the novel this elderly fellow also fails to accept the truth about him. He had arguments with his daughter-in-law and could not tolerate her modern way of living. He was thrown out. He loves his grandson a lot but cannot do anything for him. He does not dare to think of a compromise, to think of talking it out with his son and daughter-in-law, as his ego will not allow him to do so. He suffers because he never asked himself what he wanted.

Thus we see that the novel portrays all the significant characters with their individual woes and predicament. They are victims of their circumstances. Their lives are in a mess. They seem to be losers in life. Their greatest fear lies within them, obstructing their will to grapple with their miserable conditions. Their woes continue to accumulate, as they have cultivated a timidity to take things lying down. They don't have courage to explore their dark sides and change things about themselves which actually cause their suffering. And one particular night, they all confront the extreme point of their crises. They feel their hearts would crack, if they do not take some time off and do something to find an outlet to release their burden. It is decided they go to some nearby pub. In the dead of the night, Vroom along with his colleagues takes the Qualis and moves towards the pub. Radhika has splitting headache and a fit of depression. They stop at a medico with round the clock service. The boy at the counter refuses to give the desired pills without a prescription. Radhika has a loud argument with him. The way she shouts at the boy shows the intensity of bitterness and the degree of frustration she undergoes in her heart of hearts:

‘What does he know about wrong or right? Everything is wrong with me you moron-my husband is banging some bitch while I slog my guts out. Happy now?’ Radhika said, her face more red than her broken bangles. She held her head for a few seconds. Then she removed her hands from her head and grabbed the medicines. The boy at the counter did not protest this time. (*One Night* 191)

Like Radhika all of them have their grievances with life, the story of their loss and failure deep down their hearts. They drink and try to forget their pain and ignore the scars of time and destiny on their lives. On their way back Vroom decides to take a short-cut route as they are getting late.

Vroom loses control of the vehicle, as he was in a highly drunken and depressed state. The Qualis gets stuck on a mesh of hanging construction rods. They have blood curdling in their veins, having never imagined their lives to come to such a dead end. They try their cell phones but no reception is available in absence of network in the area. Then all of a sudden, Shyam's phone starts ringing. To their dismay and awe they find it to be a call from God. Hardly believable! But as the voice unravels the hidden secrets of each one of them, one by one, bringing them face to face with their weaknesses, fears and crises, they have no option but to believe. This is the first time they turn inward when the moment of high crisis invades their already complex and anxiety-ridden existence; when a life threatening situation confronts them in the face; when it seems there is no way out; when death is about to capture them all. The voice of God teaches them many forgotten lessons of life. They wonder how they had been so negligent to the source of energy and strength residing in their very heart not paying attention to the voice that called them in moments of worry, anxiety and pain. The voice of God seems to be vibrating through their souls and feels like very much their own when He tells them the most important call in the world is the inner call:

‘Yes, the little voice inside that wants to talk to you. But you can hear it when you are at peace—and then too it is hard to hear it. Because in modern life, the networks are too busy. The voice tells you what you really want. Do you know what I am talking about?’ .....And the voice is easy to ignore- because you are distracted or busy or just too comfortable in life. Go on, ignore it—until you get tangled in your own web of comfort. And then you reach a point like today, where life brings you to a dead end, and there is nothing ahead but a dark hole.’ (*One Night* 217)

They open up before God and have no inhibition disclosing their utmost fears, worries, wishes, regrets and the things they would like to change about themselves. To their pleasant surprise they find their egos don't get hurt this time. They have very comfortably laid bare their hearts enjoying the way honest recognition of truth heals the misery-torn and care-worn soul after a moment of ethereal experience. Astounded, spell-bound and stunned, the group returns to their office. Now they are changed people. They are no longer, submissive, weak and timid.

The novel brings a remedy to the crises of the characters through literal *deus ex machina* by bringing God in the story. On the face of it, the whole dramatic turn seems to be the manipulation of events by the storyteller to arrive at an easy-going solution of the problem. Some of the reviewers of the novel have a problem with the ending of the novel: “I believe that the post phone call story could have been better” (Basu). But the technique has been used very cleverly by the author to suggest the underlying theme of the story that is the revival of the spiritual-self, the moment of real awakening, when one comes face to face with oneself; when one dares to ask oneself what is wrong with him or her; when one takes up a firm and unwavering decision with conviction and belief in oneself. The phone call from God is actually the inner voice of the characters themselves. It draws their attention only when they are ready to listen to it. The suggestion by God that failure is the key to success makes them believe they are not losers. Only they need to accept the truth about themselves and destroy the cocoon of illusion around them. Their readiness to listen to the voice of the heart, to explore their own dark sides, and to believe in themselves brings the much needed self-help. In our mundane life we tend to neglect the spiritual self which is the source of happiness and peace and freedom from the trivial fears gripping the heart. When the spiritual self gets awakened, the illusion of the mundane disappears clearing all doubts, confusions and dilemmas. This is what happens in the novel towards

the end. Having undergone the ethereal experience of meeting God, the characters are able to sort out their problems and come out of their depression and the lasting sense of loss and failure. Shyam and Vroom teach Bakshi a lesson. They save the Connexions from collapsing by helping a great number of employees save their job. They start their own website design company. Radhika decides to get a divorce from Anuj, Esha forgets everything about the illusion of the modelling world and joins an NGO, and Military Uncle gets a Visa for the US to meet his grandson and patch up things with his son and finally like all good love stories, Shyam and Priyanka meet when they accept the truth about themselves.

**Works Cited:**

- Matthew, Arnold. "The Scholar Gipsy." *Poetry Foundation*,  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43606/the-scholar-gipsy>.
- Basu, Sarang. "Book Review: Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ The Call Center*." *Thoughts Engrossed*,  
<https://www.google.com/amp/s/sarangbasutkar.wordpress.com/2011/08/24/252/amp/>
- Bhagat, Chetan. *One Night @ Call Centre*. Rupa & Co., 2005.
- Einstein, Albert. "Albert Einstein Quotes." *Brainy Quote. Xplore*, 2001-2021,  
<https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/albert-einstein-quotes>.
- Yeats, William Butler. "Sailing to Byzantium by William Butler Yeats." *Poetry Foundation*,  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43291/sailing-to-byzantium>.