

**Digital Capitalism, Emotional Labour and Identity Crisis in Chetan Bhagat's
*One Night @ the Call Centre***

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Abstract:

Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Centre* traces the transformation of Indian society under the forces of globalisation, corporate expansion, and technological advancement. Set in a Gurgaon-based call centre, the novel depicts the lives of young professionals whose personal identities, emotional well-being, and social relationships are shaped by the demands of business process outsourcing (BPO). This paper analyses the novel through the lenses of digital capitalism, emotional labour, and identity crisis. The novel presents the call centre not merely as a workplace but as a symbol of contemporary India's changing economic and cultural landscape. Employees are forced to suppress their genuine emotions, adopt foreign accents, adjust their lifestyles to international work schedules, and redefine their personal identities to satisfy global consumers. These transformations in the Indian workforce illustrate the emergence of a consumer-driven corporate culture. The culture influences language, eating habits, interpersonal relationships, and mental health. The paper further analyses how technological dependence, job insecurity, cultural hybridity, and fragile human relationships reflect the broader realities of contemporary India. Rather than presenting globalisation as wholly beneficial or entirely destructive, the novel exposes its complex influence on the aspirations and anxieties of India's urban youth. The study concludes that *One Night @ the Call Centre* serves as a significant literary representation of digital capitalism and the emotional consequences of corporate life in contemporary India.

Keywords: Digital Capitalism, Emotional Labour, Identity Crisis, Globalisation, Consumer Culture, Corporate Life, Chetan Bhagat

Introduction:

Globalisation began in India in the early 1990s. It brought unprecedented changes to the country's social, cultural, and economic landscape. The rapid expansion of information technology, business process outsourcing (BPO), and multinational corporations created new employment opportunities for urban youth, particularly in metropolitan cities such as Gurgaon, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune. Among these developments, the call centre industry emerged as one of the most visible symbols of India's integration into the global economy. Operating across time zones and serving international consumers, call centres reshaped conventional notions of work, communication, identity, and lifestyle. They created employment and economic mobility while introducing new forms of corporate discipline, emotional regulation, cultural adaptation, and technological dependence. In terms of literature's reflections on these changes, many contemporary Indian novelists have portrayed this changing corporate scenario in their literary works.

Chetan Bhagat holds a distinctive place among contemporary Indian English novelists for his engagement with the aspirations, dilemmas, and everyday experiences of middle-class youth. Unlike many writers who focus on historical, political, or diasporic concerns, Bhagat places ordinary young professionals at the centre of his narratives. His novel *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005) recounts a single night in the lives of six employees -Shyam, Priyanka, Vroom, Esha, Radhika, and Military Uncle - at Connexions, a Gurgaon-based call centre. Although the narrative unfolds within a limited time span, it offers a broader commentary on globalisation, corporate culture, consumerism, technological dependence, and the emotional challenges young professionals face. Through its characters, the novel explores the tensions between professional expectations and personal aspirations, revealing the psychological and social costs of life in the global service economy.

The present study argues that *One Night @ the Call Centre* is not merely a story about the functioning of a call centre; rather, it is a literary reflection on the changing realities of contemporary India. The novel portrays how a consumer-oriented corporate culture forces employees to modify their speech, adopt foreign names, fabricate their emotions, and conform to predetermined behavioural patterns when interacting with overseas consumers. Such expectations gradually reshape their self-perception and their relationships with others, challenging the individual's original identity. Simultaneously, the international work culture influences almost every aspect of their lives. Overdependence on the corporate sector leads to job insecurity and daily pressure. It generates emotional exhaustion and uncertainty among the characters.

This paper analyses the newly emerged corporate culture through the lenses of digital capitalism, emotional labour, and identity crisis. These are interrelated terms, widely discussed in the corporate world. Rather than imposing an external theoretical framework, the paper develops these concepts from the novel's own representation of consumer society, multicultural interactions, changing lifestyles, technological dependence, fragile relationships, and shifting mental states. By examining these dimensions together, the paper seeks to demonstrate that Bhagat's novel offers a significant commentary on the lived experiences of India's corporate youth in an age shaped by globalisation and digital economic structures.

Research Methodology:

The present study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and text-centred research methodology to examine the selected novel as a literary representation of digital capitalism, emotional labour and identity crisis. The novel is the primary textual source of the study. A close reading of the narrative is undertaken to identify recurring representations of the call-centre workplace, corporate discipline, technological mediation, consumer culture, interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and employees' psychological experiences. The study adopts thematic textual analysis to identify and interpret significant patterns within the novel. In terms of textual analysis, the researcher has analysed selected passages, characterisation, dialogues, and workplace representations and interpreted them in relation to the chosen theoretical concepts. The characters' experiences are examined in relation to the larger socio-economic conditions created by globalisation and the expansion of India's BPO sector.

Four prime reasons justify the selection of this novel for analysis. First, the novel focuses on the issues of the young generation and the impact of globalisation on their lives. Corporate changes influence India's large population; hence, it is necessary to select the novel for analysis. Second, it foregrounds emotional workplace issues and workplace alienation. It creates anxiety and stress in the employees. Third, the novel discusses the identity crisis as the Indian characters deal with overseas employees working through call centres. Fourth, as Chetan Bhagat is a well-received popular fiction writer, selecting the novel for analysis will generate interest among many readers.

The novel is analysed through theoretical concepts such as digital capitalism, emotional labour, and identity crisis. Digital capitalism is an economic system in which digital consumer data, online marketing platforms, and communication through computer networks are used to generate wealth. "Digital capitalism is an economic paradigm that describes a form of capitalism in which economic and social activity increasingly revolves

around the exchange of digital information via data networks.” (Durante, 2026) Arlie Russell Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour provides a framework for examining the regulation and commodification of employees’ emotions. She introduced emotional labour in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, which refers to managing one's feelings and facial expressions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job. She explains, “When deep acting and surface acting are forms of labour to be sold” (Hochschild, 1983). The third important theoretical concept is identity crisis. It means altering the original identity and shifting to a new one as a result of cultural forces. It is widely discussed in post-colonial studies. Dr Homi Bhabha states, “Cultural identities are never fixed or pure. They’re constantly being negotiated and transformed through hybridisation.” (Fiveable Content Team, 2026)

Review of Literature:

Chetan Bhagat is one of the most widely read authors in the contemporary period. His novels focus on youth issues, and hence the young generation reads them with great interest. The popularity of the selected novel has generated scholarly interest among many. Critics generally acknowledge that Bhagat departs from the conventional framework of Indian English fiction by foregrounding the everyday experiences of young professionals rather than elite or diasporic characters. His novels have frequently been examined in relation to globalisation, consumerism, urban youth culture, education, corporate life, and changing social values. In the current Indian context, his novels are widely analysed, and many critical evaluations are presented in research papers, edited books, and research projects. Here is a brief survey of his contribution and the critical analysis of the selected novel.

Among Bhagat's novels, *One Night @ the Call Centre* has attracted attention primarily as a narrative about India's expanding business process outsourcing (BPO) industry. Existing criticism largely examines the novel through the lenses of globalisation, call-centre culture, consumerism, westernisation, and the dilemmas of urban youth. Thomas L. Friedman's *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* offers one of the most influential analyses of globalisation and the changing dynamics of the global economy in the digital age. He observes that “The playing field is being levelled.” (Friedman, 2005, p. 7) Friedman argues that rapid advances in information technology, communication networks, and transport have levelled the playing field by reducing geographical and economic barriers, enabling individuals and businesses across nations to compete and collaborate on a global scale.

Many critics have observed that the novel reflects the socio-economic transformation initiated by economic liberalisation. Working in multinational companies influences patterns of employment, communication, and lifestyle. The call centre has often

been interpreted as a representative site where Indian employees compromise with international corporate expectations while attempting to preserve their personal identities. In *Social Change in Modern India*, M. N. Srinivas examines the processes of social transformation in post-independence India through Westernisation and industrialisation. "Social change is a complex phenomenon, and it is difficult to isolate any one factor as its cause." (Srinivas, 1966, p. 1) Srinivas argues that modernisation in India is not a simple replacement of traditional values with Western ideals. It is a much more complex process in which indigenous knowledge systems continuously interact with modern knowledge centres. He argues that the Westernisation process changed life patterns, occupational ethics, human relationships, and educational structures.

Another significant area of criticism concerns the cultural transformation depicted in the novel. As globalisation has brought the entire world together, the lines between cultures have become thinner. In Indian contexts, Westernisation has altered local lifestyles, linguistic practices, and family relationships. The adoption of American names, foreign accents, altered work schedules, and consumer-oriented lifestyles has been viewed as evidence of globalisation's influence on contemporary Indian society. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, Arjun Appadurai examines how globalisation has transformed cultural identities through the transnational movement of people, media, technology, finance, and ideas. He argues that the international cultural force has made rigid national and cultural boundaries thinner. The force also leads to the formation of new cultural identities that are fluid, hybrid, and constantly under negotiation.

The psychological analyses of the major characters is a central concern for many scholars. Chetan Bhagat focuses on alienation, frustration, loneliness, workplace stress, and interpersonal conflict. The characters' dissatisfaction with their professional and personal lives has been interpreted as a consequence of the competitive market culture. Their struggles with relationships, family expectations, and career insecurity reveal the emotional complexities experienced by India's urban workforce. Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* explores the psychological impact of neoliberal capitalism on contemporary individuals. Han argues that modern society has shifted from a disciplinary society, where control is externally imposed, to an achievement society in which individuals internalise the pressure to succeed. Han states that "The achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject." (Han, 2010, p. 8) This observation highlights a significant transformation in contemporary work. The constant demand for productivity, efficiency, flexibility, and self-optimisation generates stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. Global societal expectations place life under extreme stress.

Although these literary works have significantly advanced understanding of *One Night @ the Call Centre* through various critical lenses, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the interconnected relationship between digital capitalism, emotional labour, and identity crisis as represented in the novel. The literature review shows that existing studies have examined consumer culture, globalisation, technological dependence, or identity as separate concerns. However, collectively these forces shape individuals' identities in the modern period. This paper attempts to address this gap by examining how corporate consumer culture, technological dependence, emotional regulation, and changing social identities operate simultaneously within the narrative. Rather than treating these aspects as isolated themes, the paper argues that they together constitute Bhagat's broader representation of contemporary India's changing scenario in corporate society.

Objectives of the Study:

The present paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of digital capitalism and consumer-oriented corporate culture in Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Centre*.
2. To examine the emotional labour performed by call centre employees in response to organisational expectations and customer satisfaction.
3. To study the relationship between technological dependence, workplace pressure and the psychological condition of the characters.
4. To explore the influence of globalisation on language, lifestyle, food habits, interpersonal relationships and social values as represented in the novel.
5. To demonstrate that *One Night @ the Call Centre* functions as a literary representation of the socio-cultural transformation of post-liberalisation India.

Analysis and Discussion

Digital capitalism refers to an economic system in which business is based on data, online marketing, and communication through computer networks. After globalisation, these media are used to set up businesses and create wealth. Chetan Bhagat, in *One Night @ the Call Centre*, depicts a consumer-oriented corporate culture. He situates the narrative in a Gurgaon-based call centre that operates entirely to satisfy American consumers. The corporate culture is oriented entirely toward satisfying American clients. In the call centres, consumer digital data is available and is used to sell products. In the novel, Shyam describes, "We knew their name, address, credit card details, and past purchases." (Bhagat, 2005, p.41) This shows that digital data is used to run businesses. Online marketing is comparatively easier than physical marketing. The data helps business owners to identify the needs, choices and behavioural patterns of their consumers. Digital data helps business owners to set their

strategies. It also helps businesses stay in touch with clients through computer network-based communication.

The call centre business is solely based on online communication, which is at the core of digital capitalism. In the Prologue section, Bhagat discusses with a co-passenger girl, and she informs him about the number of call centre agents. She says, “Some 300,000 people work in the industry. They help US companies in the sales, service and maintenance of their operations.” (Bhagat, 2005, p.7) Apart from this, the major characters of the novel are call centre agents whose job is to attend to overseas consumers and satisfy their queries through computer networking communication. The novel revolves around the call centre and online communications. Shyam mentions the shift’s opening scene. He says, “Conversations stopped midway as two beeps on the computer screens signalled the start of the shift. Calls began at 10.31 p.m. Numbers started flashing on our common switchboard as we picked up calls one after the other.” (Bhagat, 2005, 41)

The term digital capitalism also limits human beings to resources. The new corporate work culture treats the employees as just machines. In one of his observations on Bakshi’s treatment of his employees, Shyam mentions, “He never refers to us as people; we are all ‘resources.’” (Bhagat, 2005, p.54) Bakshi’s use of ‘resources’ reduces human employees to economic units within the corporate system. The term removes individuality and humanity from the employee and replaces them with their productive value. The language of digital capitalism transforms the worker from a person into a resource, making labour measurable, replaceable and economically exploitable. There are a few more references where the employees are treated as resources. Another important quotation that signifies digital capitalism is, “He passed off our work as his, Shyam. Do you realise that?” (Bhagat, 2005, p.150) Shyam and Vroom have spent six months developing the website/manual, but Bakshi presents their technological and intellectual labour as his own. The episode exposes the unequal distribution of credit, ownership and economic power within the digital workplace. The text identifies the work as “six months of work on this manual alone.” Digital capitalism creates new forms of intellectual labour, but managerial power can still appropriate the worker’s knowledge, creativity and technological skills.

There is always a practice of reducing employees under the guise of right-sizing. The corporate culture depicted in the novel also reveals the growing insecurity associated with global capitalism. Throughout the narrative, employees remain anxious about the possibility of organisational restructuring and job loss. The management’s proposal to rightsize the company creates an atmosphere of uncertainty that affects every character. Bakshi’s statement creates tension among the employees. “Team, I have called you today to

tell you about a few changes that happen at Connexions. We need to right-size people. So people are getting fired. It wasn't a rumour... Radhika's face turned white. Priyanka's and Esha's had shocked expressions.” (Bhagat, 2005, p.183) Employment is presented not as a stable career but as a temporary arrangement, constantly threatened by market fluctuations and corporate decision-making. Their productivity does not guarantee employment because corporate decisions are governed by cost reduction and profitability. Digital capitalism produces a contradiction: workers are expected to be highly skilled and productive while simultaneously remaining replaceable and insecure.

Another important feature of consumer society reflected in the novel is the commodification of emotional labour. Employees are not merely expected to solve customers' technical problems; they are required to project confidence, politeness, enthusiasm, and emotional stability, regardless of their personal circumstances. Their voices become products that represent the company to international consumers. “Arlie Russell explains that emotional labour is typically about attempting to feel the right feeling for the job.” (Baker and Walsh, 2022) Individual emotions are therefore subordinated to corporate expectations, transforming interpersonal communication into a commercial activity. Bhagat subtly suggests that, under such conditions, employees gradually lose the distinction between genuine emotional expression and professionally fabricated behaviour. Their identities become increasingly shaped by workplace demands rather than by personal individuality. This condition illustrates how corporate institutions extend their influence beyond economic activity into individuals' emotional and psychological lives.

Bhagat demonstrates that globalisation has transformed traditional employment into a service-driven corporate structure in which the consumer occupies the central position. Connexions management repeatedly emphasises politeness, patience, and customer satisfaction, regardless of callers' behaviour. Employees are trained to remain courteous even when confronted with abusive or unreasonable customers. In their training sessions, the agents are taught about the 35-10 rules. It helped agents adjust to their callers. “A thirty-five-year-old American brain and IQ is the same as a ten-year-old Indian's brain.” (Bhagat, 2005, p 53) It shows the extent of compromise an employee is willing to make when dealing with foreign customers. Such professional conduct illustrates how corporate organisations regulate the behaviour of their workforce to preserve business interests. Customer satisfaction is no longer merely a commercial objective; it becomes the governing principle that shapes workplace discipline, communication, and professional identity.

The emotional labour leads to human exploitation. Employees work to satisfy the client, regardless of the client's rude behaviour. This also further affects the manager-

employee relationship. There is always a tension in this relationship. One of Vroom's quotations shows how the relationship leads to emotional labour. He says, "Meanwhile bad bosses and stupid Americans suck the life blood out of our country's most productive generation." (Bhagat, 2005, p. 254) The novel presents global emotional labour as a system in which India's educated youth become a form of inexpensive service labour for Western consumers, producing a tension between economic globalisation and human exploitation. Shyam describes the emotionless work and human exploitation: "... people were busy with calls. Radhika helped someone defrost her fridge; Esha assisted a customer in unpacking a dishwasher. Everyone was speaking with an American accent and sounded different from how they had in the Qualis" (Bhagat, 2005, p. 42)

Identity crisis is one of the lenses through which the novel is analysed. After globalisation, multinational companies are established. In this new work platform, employees work for international clients, and hence they have to adjust their language and daily routine according to the clients. This leads employees to compromise their personalities; their personal lives are reorganised to meet the demands of global commerce. Through this setting, the novel portrays the emergence of a consumer society in which economic success depends on uninterrupted service, technological efficiency, and emotional performance. The employees are expected to subordinate their personal convenience, emotions, and even biological rhythms to meet the expectations of overseas clients. The novel therefore presents the call centre as an important symbol of India's participation in the global digital economy, where identity is fabricated to meet international business demands.

The novel further illustrates how global consumer markets shape the everyday routines of Indian employees. Because Connexions serves customers in the United States, employees work through the night while the rest of the city sleeps. Their working hours are aligned with foreign time zones rather than with local social life. To meet service deadlines, Connexions schedules employees to work round the clock in shifts, including local holidays and festivals. Shyam could not attend the wedding of his relatives. He had to go to the office. The dialogue between Shyam and his aunt shows that he is busy with corporate work, keeping aside the family get-together. "Oh hello, Shyam. Woke up finally? My mother's sister said. 'Office? You are not coming for the wedding?' No, I have to work." (Bhagat, 2005, p.16) This quotation shows that the employees are separated from their family life.

Food is also a cultural segment that defines one's identity. The globalised corporate work culture changes the food habits of the Indian employees along with their daily routine. Vroom describes his fascination with pizza. He says, "No way. Pizzas are the ultimate balanced diet. Look at the contents: grain in the crust, milk protein in the cheese, vegetables

and meat as toppings. It has all the food groups. I read it on the Internet—pizza is good for you.” (Bhagat, 2005, 98) This indicates his changing food habits, which are a part of a hybrid identity. In another statement, he describes the food culture in the novel. He observed the government’s approach towards youth, and he says, “They say youth because they want the damn Pizza Huts and Cokes and Pepsis of the world to come and give their ads to them. Ads that say if we spend our salary to have pizza and Coke, we will be happy.” (Bhagat, 2005, 213)

Findings of the Study:

1. The present research paper discusses that the novel portrays India under the influence of globalisation and how the force of globalisation changed work culture in India. The terms digital capitalism and consumer theory focus on the changing lifestyle of the employees who work at the call centre.
2. The novel also demonstrates how the international corporate culture changes traditional work and turns it into a service-driven work culture where the satisfaction of the client is a prime concern
3. It is also presented that the employees' artificial behaviour to satisfy the overseas clients comes at the cost of fabricating their original personality. Employees are forced to adopt a foreign accent full of mannerisms.
4. The call centre work culture disturbs employees' personal, family and social life. To accommodate international time zones, priority is given to clients' convenience rather than employees', and hence Indian-based call centres work night shifts to fulfil the needs of USA clients.
5. The paper also highlights that employees are not human beings at the workstations; rather, they are commodities to sell themselves as objects to clients. They have to speak in a manner the clients expect. Representing with confidence, politeness and enthusiasm, though the employee does not feel it. It shows he is not a human being but a machine to work.
6. It is a constant threat for the employees to be fired from the company under the guise of rightsizing. This creates psychological disturbances in the employees, and that leads to them experiencing anxiety, stress and loneliness.

Conclusion:

Although the novel acknowledges the economic benefits of multinational corporations and the expansion of India's service sector, it also questions the human cost of such development. The novel discusses the functioning of digital capitalism that uses data as the currency to do business. Fabricating the original linguistic accent to make

overseas clients happy is an outcome of digital capitalism. Emotional labour and human exploitation are at the core of globalisation. Call centre agents have to perform with great sincerity, politeness, and enthusiasm while talking with clients. Managerial authorities instruct agents not to lose their cool while dealing with clients. Cultural identification is thinner in globalised corporate sectors. The youth have changed their lifestyles, especially their food habits. The force of globalisation leads to emotional stress, job insecurity, altered lifestyles, and growing dependence on corporate systems, which accompany the prosperity promised by globalisation. Bhagat does not reject globalisation outright; instead, he offers a balanced portrayal that recognises both its opportunities and its contradictions. The call centre thus emerges as a microcosm of contemporary India, where consumer culture, technological advancement, and global business practices reshape individual aspirations and social relationships. Through the experiences of its young employees, *One Night @ the Call Centre* portrays digital capitalism, emotional labour, and identity crisis as powerful forces that transform not only economic structures but also the everyday lives of ordinary people.

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