

The Portrayal of Moral Values and Ethics in Chetan Bhagat's *'One Night at the Call Centre'*

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Abstract:

Human ethics and values have remained at the crux of ancient Hindu philosophy. One must indulge in righteous action and lead a life adhering to the frame-work of morality and ethics chalked-out by religion and society. In fast-paced race of modern world, moral values and ethics appear to be losing their significance. Chetan Bhagat is one such popular fiction writer whose novels reflect a strong under-tone of morality and ethics. Though his set-up and characters are modern, they function in a modern environment; yet they reflect a strong faith in moral values and ethics which is timeless and relevant in all ages. One such novel is his, 'One Night at the Call Centre' which depicts the struggle of six characters, namely, Shyam, Priyanka, Varun, Esha, Radhika and Military Uncle and deals with the various personal and professional problems they confront and their success in solving them with the help of "Inner Voice". The present paper focuses on the way these characters learn about the importance and relevance of moral values and ethics and how they actually put into practice.

Key words: Moral values, Ethics, Modern, Ancient, Hindu philosophy

1. Introduction

'Human values' are words that put forth an array of connotations, the main being human knowledge and the sense of believing what is right. 'Ethics' may be considered moral philosophy. These concepts are major under-current of the literature of ancient civilizations and the later day philosophers, scholars and great leaders of social and political movements. Be it on the personal or on the professional level these values need to followed, if one wishes to live a peaceful and contented life. Like other values and basic concepts these words can be interpreted variously. Some of the definitions are as follows:

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'ethics' as,

1 [usu. treated as pl.] the moral principles governing or influencing conduct.

2 [usu. treated as sing.] the branch of knowledge concerned with moral principles.

While in *Dictionary.com*, the word 'ethics' has been defined as,

1.(used with a singular or plural verb) a system of moral principles: *the ethics of a culture*.

2.the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular arclass of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc.:*medical ethics; Christian ethics*.

3.moral principles, as of an individual: *His ethics forbade betrayal of a confidence*.

4.(usually used with a singular verb) that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.

2. The treatment of Moral Values and Ethics in Classical and ancient Indian/Hindu Philosophy

As B. Gustavsson points out,

Classical literature does not make a distinction between values and human values. Perhaps there was no need for it then. Philosophical ideas on value enquiry were directed towards finding the nature, meaning and purpose of human existence...In the Western tradition it is represented by Plato's formulation of the absolute values of Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

While as per the Hindu Philosophy the concept of ethics and human values may be well explained in the *BhagvatGita* which propagates the view of 'righteous action' i.e '*karma*' or doing the right thing at the right time. It also asks the devotee of Krishna or the readers to be fearless, take charge of their life and stand up for the truth by practicing '*nishkama karma*'.

3. The place of Moral Values and Ethics in modern times with special reference to Chetan Bhagat's novels

In the present materialistic world pre-dominated by greed and cut-throat competition, is there any scope to adhere to ethics and human values? Whether these concepts are relevant and adhered to or practised is a debatable question. Many authors of present time have tried to depict the modern man's dilemma to be ethical or to be successful at any cost. One such novelist is Chetan Bhagat. His prominent works include: *Five Point Someone*, *One Night @ the Call centre*, *Three Mistakes of my Life* etc. His novels are pre-dominantly youth-oriented and discuss the contemporary nuances prevailing in the Indian society. *One Night @ the Call Centre*, was published in 2005, and has received both popular as well as critical acclaim. Through the novel, Chetan Bhagat paints a realistic and disillusioned picture of modern India. The novel is a saga of the

struggle for survival in the urban jungle. Thus, it acts as a suitable and apt background for investigating these values and chalking-out their place in present time.

4. The portrayal of human ethics and values in 'One Night at the Call Centre'

The novel depicts the struggle of six characters, namely, Shyam, Priyanka, Varun, Esha, Radhika and Military Uncle and deals with the various personal and professional problems they confront and their success in solving them with the help of "Inner Voice".

The protagonist of the novel is Shyam, an employee at the call centre named 'Connexions' in Gurgaon near Delhi. His call centre alias is Sam Marcy. He considers himself as the 'black sheep' of the family. While other family members have grown up to be doctors or engineers, he has to remain contented with a call-centre job. His boss Mr. Bakshi takes undue advantage of him. Shyam is in love with Priyanka. Though Priyanka also reciprocates the feelings, but eventually breaks up with him due to his incompetence and "too compromising" attitude. And also because Priyanka's mother thinks of him as a 'loser.'

Shyam's friend and colleague, Varun, alias Vroom is presented as a typical confused youth. He has fascinated by high speed cars. His call centre name is Victor Mell. His parent's separation has left him frustrated and insecure. He is strongly attracted to Esha, the "hot chik" at the call centre. Esha is an upcoming model and was not able to participate in a beauty pageant because of her height. She had earlier made a 'compromise' by sleeping with a designer for a modeling contract and terribly guilty about the misdeed. So, she inflicts pain by physically torturing her body. She also refuses to enter into a relationship with Varun because she feels that the misdeed would catch up with her.

Another important character is that of Radhika, a married woman who takes care of her home, tends to her orthodox in-laws by day and works at the call centre by night. She feels betrayed and lost when she comes to know that her husband loves someone else. The character of Military Uncle though small is equally important. He has left his house due to a tiff and he terribly misses his grandson. In this way, all the characters of the novel are dealing with one crisis or another at personal or professional level and yearn for an ethical solution to their problems.

5. The end of the novel and ethical connotations

The life of all the six characters in the novel takes a dramatic turn one night when they receive a call from 'God'. This divine intervention or God's call is the salient feature of the novel. It comes at a very crucial point in the life of all the characters. When they are fed-up of all their problems. As Radhika says, "It is awful. Like what we did wrong? Why is our life in these pits?" This is a universal question and it a plea for providing ethical and righteous solution to one's problems. The author provides the apt and morally correct solution, not just to the characters of the novel but also to the readers in the form of a call from God. This call acts as a ray of hope in the darkness of life. With death staring at the characters, when the *Qualis* meets with an accident, God calls them. Shyam's cell phone begins to ring, and God introduces himself as, "the little voice inside that wants to talk to you... the voice that tells you what you really want."

6. Conclusion

Thus, the novel portrays the struggle of six call centre employees in Delhi and one special night that changes their life. Thus, God's call makes them "capable persons" and tells them that there are four qualities required to be successful.

They are: medium amount of intelligence, a bit of imagination, self- confidence and failure. In this way, God provides an ethical and practical solution to their problems. He makes them realize their mistakes and shows them the path they need to follow. Individuals need not peep here and there to solve their problems as the solution lies within us, "You see, [I] have a contract with all human beings. You do your best and every now and then I will come behind to give you a push"

God inspires the group to such an extent that they all plan together to teach their boss a lesson, to refine their personal lives and to pursue what they wanted in life. This way of life is infact nothing but ethical and one which adheres to basic human values of what is right or wrong.

To conclude, the novel not only portrays the ideological crisis of the day but also offers viable and ethical solutions to it with artistic excellence. Through the novel, Bhagat touches the pulse of the younger generation and also delineated the ethical and righteous path of action or the 'nishkam karma' as stated in the *BhagvadGita*. What God says in the novel may be considered as a brave attempt by Bhagat to restore faith in the fact that traditional ethics and values need not be sacrificed at the alter of success. One can lead an ethical and truthful life and still be successful by listening to the "inner voice"

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