

India on the Line: Globalization, Resistance, and the Literature of Outsourcing

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In recent years, Indo-Anglian popular fiction has undergone a startling thematic shift, with Shobhaa De's tales of Bollywood starlets now facing stiff competition from decidedly less glamorous novels—hereafter described as “call-center lit”—which feature a disillusioned urban middle class and the Indian call-centre or multinational. These inexpensive paperbacks, written in an energetic, slangy English peppered with Hindi by such authors as Chetan Bhagat, Neelesh Misra, and Swati Kaushal, address the complexities and doldrums of life within a globalized India of liberalized markets, offshoring, “neutralized” English, and troubling new hybridized identities. Call-centre lit can consequently be considered a sub-genre of what Amitava Kumar has termed “World Bank Literature:” contemporary texts that articulate concerns related to globalization, international finance, and economic development. While transnational novels tend to flourish in the postcolonial world, call-centre lit appears for now to be an Indian phenomenon. Born in part of a loan from the IMF in the early 1990s, as well as sweeping economic reforms and liberalization initiated by the Congress Party and continued by the BJP, the Indian transnational office is most often depicted in these narratives as a call-centre, which functions as a microcosm of the vexed transformations in labour, identity, and culture that globalization enacts. In particular, the call-centre's focus on the transnational, with workers speaking to callers in distant countries, as well as its emphasis on new technologies and identities, render it an apt symbol for the processes of globalization: accordingly, responses to the call-centre—whether in the popular media, scholastic discourses, or in the novels themselves—echo responses to globalization. As S. Prasannajaran, editor of *India Today*, says, “The glitz of globalization provides its own cultural clichés. The call-centre is the most widely shared temptation among the chroniclers of the new India” (qtd. in Lakshmi).

Among the current glut of pulp fiction situated in the call-centre, Chetan Bhagat's best-selling *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2004) is, in addition to being the first work of call-centre lit, still probably the most popular book in the genre, with over 2.5 million copies of the novel sold. Since publishing *One Night*, the former investment banker is now widely considered to be the most read living Indian author (McCrum). Bhagat can

also be credited for the runaway success of the call-centre-lit genre. As one commenter on the Indian popular culture blog *Jabberwock* complained, “stories concerning youngsters used to be about school, gangs or some other social ill that the media had glommed onto . . . Now every god-dammity-damn indian [sic] story has to involve a call[-]center in some form or fashion” (Singh, “End”). Indeed, the publication of *One Night* by Indian publisher Rupa & Co. has spurred a number of imitators among the multinational English-language publishing houses—Hachette, Penguin, and HarperCollins—which have a base in India and are eager to cash in on the call-center-lit trend, thereby accessing a pool of readers estimated to become the largest in the world within the next decade (Burke). Although, for instance, Penguin India’s focus remains on publishing the more ‘high-brow’ work of cosmopolitan and internationally feted Indo-Anglian authors like Amitav Ghosh, in 2010 it initiated the Metro Reads series of paperbacks, which is aimed at an Indian audience “on the go” between office and home and which, in works like P.G. Bhaskar’s *Jack Patel’s Dubai Dreams* (2011), treats life and romance within the globalized workplace (Penguin).

As Suman Gupta points out in *Globalization and Literature* (163-4), Bhagat’s success in addressing the culturally homogenizing effects of globalization in *One Night* has ironically resulted in these multinational publishers courting domestic authors whose work not only caters to an almost exclusively Indian audience, but which also features content and themes—such as the vicissitudes of the Indian call-centre—which are particular to India. Though differing vastly in their writing and success in attracting a readership, works like Neelesh Misra’s *Once Upon a Timezone* (2006), Swati Kaushal’s *Piece of Cake* (2004), and Brinda Narayan’s *Bangalore Calling* (2011), among others, testify to this surprising trend, which runs counter to rumours of the death of heterogeneous culture amid globalization.

In their ambivalent accounts of outsourcing and transnational work, these novels display a troubled and often contradictory attitude toward globalization, particularly in terms of their critical representation of the newfound valorizing of a “neutralized” form of English. As I will argue, an exploration of the historical contexts of English in India and the language’s current elite status provides some insight into the ambivalence with which the call-centre and its neutralized English are treated in these novels. My focus in this essay will be primarily on Chetan Bhagat’s representation of the call-centre and English language in *One Night @ the Call Centre*, as well as more general discourses on the place of globalizing processes in India. I will also draw on other novels within the genre by Neelesh Misra, Swati Kaushal, and Brinda Narayan to examine some predominant themes that, I believe, reflect widespread concerns about globalization. These concerns primarily center on Indian identity, especially in terms of how it relates to perceptions of naming, accent neutralization, a new breed of virulent materialism, and the betrayal of a social idealist tradition.

Indo-Anglian pulp fiction and the timeless appeal of the disposable book

A work of pulp fiction can be defined in terms of its aesthetic components—as a work that appears in a more inexpensive and disposable mass-market paperback format, often featuring a vividly illustrated book jacket—and in its adherence to generic conventions. In his study of Indo-Anglian popular fiction, Tabish Khair defines the content of pulp writing as

not necessarily bad literature, but [which] does not set out to be consciously “literary”; [it] may not be completely derivative, but it tends to follow generic “formulas”; [it] may not be read by millions, but it sets out to attract as many members of a linguistic community as possible; [it] does not have to have simple narratives, but it is fiction whose primary concern is the activity of narration. (61)

The novels that belong to the “call-center lit” genre typically fit both sets of criteria: published exclusively in paperback form, they are often relatively inexpensive; they bear cartoon covers in eye-catching primary colours; their writing is typically straightforward, simple, and “un-literary;” and, as we will see, they often share similar thematic concerns. Penguin India’s aforementioned Metro Reads campaign sums up on its website the appeal of pulp fiction, where it beckons casual readers to its novels with the question, “How many times have you wished for books that don’t weigh you down with complicated stories, don’t ask for much time, [and] don’t have to be lugged around?” The success of a work like Chetan Bhagat’s *One Night* and of the call-centre-lit genre more generally indicates that the attractiveness of this disposable, lightweight fiction has not diminished, even amid the turn from Shobhaa De’s stories of corrupt Bollywood high society to accounts of globalized labour.

A love-hate relationship with outsourcing

One Night @ the Call Centre is at once a romantic comedy, a self-help book with spiritual undertones, and a motivational management guide that critiques positive neoliberal narratives around globalization and capitalism just as it champions them with nationalist rhetoric. The main story, which in the framing narrative is told by a mysterious woman to Bhagat, relates (unsurprisingly) to one night in the lives of six call-centre employees. During the night they field phone calls from Americans, who are always represented as either racist or deeply stupid, squabble with each other and, finally, receive a revelatory phone call from God. With the intervention of the God character, the unhappy call-centre workers are able to achieve personal and professional success and ultimately save their call-centre—with which they have a love-hate relationship—from being closed. The novel’s combination of social critique, suspense, romance and humour

have made it a hit—within three days of the book’s release, its initial print run of 50,000 copies had sold out (Banerjee 288).

One Night’s simple and readable form of English may have also worked to increase its sales to readers. Although in 2004 only approximately one-third of the Indian population could speak English, a proficiency in the language is increasingly being perceived as integral to achieving some measure of success in the country. In 2005, for instance, Sucheta Dalal found that the difference in salary between two equally experienced Indians, one of whom was able to speak English and the other not, was as high as 400-500%. And, she adds, “the more fancied jobs in airlines, hotels, media, banks, and financial services [go] only to those who know English” (qtd. in Nadeem 249, note 43). This “linguistic apartheid” (89), as Tina Basi calls it, begins early: from a young age, children of the middle and upper classes almost invariably receive an education in English; in fact, higher education is almost impossible to receive without a preliminary knowledge of the language (Chopra, qtd. in Nadeem 249, note 43). Probal Dasgupta writes that India is caught in a diglossic situation in which English is seen as the most prestigious of the languages spoken in the country. Revealing the perceived market value and prestige of the language, in one 1987 study the names of 90% of 1200 Indian products were found to contain at least one English word (qtd. in Sailaja 6). This is despite the fact that Hindi has been deemed by lawmakers as the official language of India, while English has been given the less important-sounding title of “assistant” language. On the other hand, Basi asserts, “For Indians, the nativization or naturalization of the English language has enabled oppressed social groups, such as the dalits or untouchables, to prevent Hindi from becoming the sole official language of the nation” (89). Thus, while English education in India is the result of deep divisions in class and caste, English can also be perceived by the nation’s subalterns as a democratizing influence that wrests a measure of linguistic power from higher-caste Indians located in the north of the country, where Hindi is most widely spoken.

We can trace the beginnings of India’s diglossic situation with English—as most scholars do—to the British colonial government’s infamous Minute on Education address of 1835, in which Lord Babington Macaulay told a rapt audience that “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” This speech marked a watershed moment in India, where the East India Company’s erstwhile relatively hands-off approach of “mere” economic exploitation was replaced by economic exploitation *and* more explicit forms of cultural intervention. Accordingly, the language of instruction in India at the university level became English, and a class of English-speaking middlemen government clerks—often described as “Macaulay’s children”—constituted a new Indian elite. In *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Viswanathan shows how English education functioned as a way of

maintaining control and authority over the Indian subject. Furthermore, scholars believe that the legacy of Macaulay's plan to foster mimicry of the British among the colonized Indians, in language, culture, and behaviour, has marked the collective Indian psyche to this day; in *The Intimate Enemy*, for example, Ashis Nandy discusses how even the colonial resistance of colonized peoples shows mimicry of the British colonizer, and works like V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*—whose narrator is trapped in an identity neither completely British nor West Indian—also testify to the long-lasting impact of Macaulay's Minute (Nadeem 70).

Macaulay's legacy of English in India is also, of course, an important reason why companies were drawn to India as an outsourcing hub. Offshoring in India is generally understood to have begun in the early 1990s with loans from the World Bank and IMF and these organizations' stipulation that India open its economy to sweeping reforms and invest in technological development. Multinational corporations consequently settled in the country with surprising speed, offering members of the English-speaking middle class and a newly emerging "digerati" elite relatively lucrative outsourcing jobs compared with traditional middle-class positions working for the Indian government.

"An entry point into that world:" Chetan Bhagat's didactic English

This group of English-speaking, English-educated digerati—whom sociologist Shehzad Nadeem calls "Macaulay's cyber-children"(50) — appears to form a substantial segment of the target audience for Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Centre*. Dealing with the transnational workplace and featuring youthful, college-educated, and English-speaking protagonists that resemble nothing so much as the novels' readers, Bhagat's book signals the rise of a new genre in Indian popular fiction that treats issues surrounding different kinds of English, as well as globalization and transnational labour. The novel focuses especially on the valorization of a neutralized or globalized English, which is basically synonymous in Bhagat's terms with American English (so, crucially, not the Indian Standard English that grew out of British colonialism): the central characters are forced to adopt Westernized English names and participate in language and accent "neutralization" classes. Despite the ambivalence in *One Night* towards a "de-Indianized" or neutralized English, Bhagat has evinced pride in his novels' casual and colloquial English, maintaining that his books are educational: they are "read by government-school kids, for whom English is very much a second language, and who know that they have to learn it if they want to get anywhere in life . . . my books often provide them with an entry point into that world" (Singh, "Chatting"). Bhagat's work can accordingly be seen—and has been seen by the author himself (Burke)—as appealing not only to

call-centre workers, but to ambitious readers wishing to enter such a globalized workplace. This may also serve to explain a paradox that underlies *One Night*'s success: as discussed, English is the language of the Indian elite; pulp fiction, however, is typically viewed as a form of "low-brow" literature aimed at a mass-market audience. If this audience bought *One Night* and books similar to it in an effort to learn English or improve its knowledge of the language, then this may explain the novel and genre's mass appeal despite the elite status of English in India. Bhagat, then, views English largely as a tool of upward mobility; his objection is not to Indian Standard English, then, but to the denial of Indian identity implicit in the accent neutralization workshops and renaming practices he says are common at outsourcing firms.

One Night's appeal to Indian audiences

Another clue to *One Night*'s popularity—beyond its ability to help young Indians grow better acquainted with writing in English—lies in its pulp form and resultant entertainment value. With its themes of upward mobility and the achievement of the "American dream," capitalism inevitably informs the contents of the pulp novel, offering the reader a sense of optimism that he or she may rise from his or her current economic situation and a utopian happy ending, and a concurrent feeling of frustration that he or she has not yet attained the promised horde of treasure at the end of the capitalist rainbow. "Hence," Clive Bloom concludes, pulp fiction is, like capitalism itself, "both oppressive and liberating, both mass manipulation and anarchic individualistic destiny" (14). By reading the pulp text and empathizing with the protagonists, the Indian reader is encouraged to shape ideas of his or her own ideal future—a utopian place in which, according to Richard Dyer's writing on the escapist thrust of popular entertainment, losses in the reader's reality under the capitalist system are eventually undone by capitalism. The protagonist's boredom with life inside the capitalist workplace becomes enthusiasm; solitude and alienation are replaced with solidarity and community; and fragmented subjectivity becomes whole again. In this way entertainment responds to "real needs *created by society*" and "provides alternatives *to* capitalism which will be provided *by* capitalism" (26-7).

The call-centre lit discussed in this paper offers a happy ending—an alternative to the initially stifling globalized workplace in the novel—through that same call-centre or transnational workplace; these sites ultimately provide the protagonists with a route toward utopian visions of community and success. However, as I will discuss, this capitalist happy ending is simultaneously undermined by other thematic aspects of the texts as, at the conclusion of these novels, the globalized workers are alienated from less globalized members of their society, as represented by

their traditional families. Although the workers band together in solidarity, forming “new and improved” families and communities from amongst themselves, they ultimately seem to operate at a great remove from less globalized subjectivities than theirs—their newly globalized, hybrid personas and ways of speaking can only be fully understood by each other, and a sense of alienation therefore prevails at the call-centre and multinational.

While the endings of these novels are to some extent utopian, the call-centres and transnational companies they depict reflect Foucault’s vision of the heterotopia; as such, they “suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (3). What they do, in other words, is reveal in miniature the larger macro processes enacted by globalization and alternately champion and undermine these. In addition, the heterotopias depicted here occupy a space between Foucault’s heterotopia of crisis—in which an extreme transition in identity is undergone, as with the adolescents and pregnant women that Foucault lists—and a heterotopia of deviation, “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (5). The workers described in call-centre lit undergo a profound transition within the call-centre or transnational, assuming a hybrid identity not quite “Indian” and yet not “Western”—an identity we may only be able to describe, vaguely, as “globalized”—which places them in a heterotopia of crisis. On the other hand, their alienation from their given societies indicates that in some sense they also work from within a heterotopia of deviation, where their globalized identities are regarded as deviant by their families, therefore forcing them to create families out of their colleagues.

In entering the heterotopian zone of the call-centre and transnational workplace, the protagonists of call-centre lit grow increasingly hybridized as they are taught to mimic American accents and assume new names. Homi K. Bhabha famously writes in *Location of Culture* that hybridity subverts the colonial “rules of recognition” and creates new sites of power, even as, in his 2006 prologue to the Routledge edition, he writes ruefully that the global cosmopolitanism of outsourcing “readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy margins within metropolitan societies” (12). Raka Shome has described how the virtual diaspora of the call-centre indicates that “hybridity need[s] to be delinked from [its] taken for granted association with disruption and resistance” (119). Although the hybridity enacted by the call-centre in *One Night* ultimately serves to foster nationalistic resistance among its workers, this resistance is somewhat short-lived—it only serves to keep the call-centre from shutting down, and many of the novel’s main characters continue to work there by the conclusion of the novel.

Globalization and Indian identity

Chetan Bhagat has written that his “call-centre cousins, sisters-in-law and friends” inspired his tale, “providing information, stealing various training materials and arranging meetings” (317). But in *One Night*’s framing story, a mysterious woman—who, as it turns out, is actually God in disguise—furnishes Bhagat (who is also a character in the book) with this information, chastising him for paying too little attention in his first novel to “the biggest group of young people facing a challenge in modern India” (14): the 300,000-strong men and women who work in the Indian call-centre industry. The author’s wording here is somewhat surprising; in many ways this group would appear to be among the main beneficiaries of globalization in India. After all, in a country where the majority of the population makes less than two dollars a day (Murphy 429), their pay is relatively high; and, as critics have pointed out, as English speakers many of them could find other jobs outside the outsourcing industry quite easily. Instead, in *One Night* they are depicted as the underdogs of the country’s globalization story, their rights and dignity trampled upon by Americans. The character Vroom compares his dehumanizing call-centre work to prostitution:

“Every night I come here and let people fuck me.” . . . [He] picked up the telephone headset. “The Americans fuck me with this, in my ears hundreds of times a night . . . And the funny thing is, I let them do it. For money, for security, I let it happen. Come fuck me some more,” Vroom said and threw the headset on the table. (216)

The problem with the call-centre (and thus globalization), Bhagat suggests, is that, as Vroom implies in this passage, it has resulted in a new materialistic culture in India that mirrors American consumerism. Relatedly, working at the call-centre is tantamount to a betrayal of the nation-state and its anti-consumerist social idealist founders. This newly materialistic culture and nationalist betrayal are linked closely to, and perhaps even rendered possible by, the accent neutralization and renaming practices of the call-centre, which undermine, erase, and distort a sense of “authentic” Indian-ness. These issues point to a deep-seated concern that globalization is homogenizing (or Americanizing) Indian identity. And, signalling their prevalence, these anxieties can also be detected in a number of other works within the “call-centre lit” genre.

A call-centre worker by any other name

The goal of the call-centre in *One Night* appears to be the cultural homogenization of its workers: “true” Indian identity is squelched and American mimicry encouraged whenever possible, especially through the call-centre’s valorization of an Americanized or globalized form of the English language. The workers are, for instance, forced to change their

names to Western ones—Shyam becomes Sam, Vroom (or Varun) is transformed into Victor, and Radhika turns into Regina. Shyam is so deadened by this process of effacement that he passively relinquishes all control over his identity, saying, “American tongues have trouble saying my real name and prefer Sam. If you want, you can give me another name, too. I really don’t care” (22). Shyam has been transformed for the worse by the call-centre: from an Indian man with an Indian name, he is now merely an uncaring and nameless cog in the ruthless machine constituting globalization. As Raka Shome has noted of real-life call-centre workers, not only does the worker assume an American-sounding name, but he or she must also assume the guise of an authentic American and perform this identity with callers (115). The connection between identity and name, and the call-centre’s power to rename its Indian workers, is a common trope in the call-center lit genre: in Neelesh Misra’s *Once Upon a Timezone*, for instance, accent training coach Ms. Lily tells “Neil Patterson,” formerly Neel Pandey, that “the most precious acquisitions you will have to sacrifice at the workplace will be . . . your *identity* and your *name*” (86; italics are Misra’s). In changing Indian names to American ones, the call-centre and accordingly globalization upend all that has been known before—including names, meaning, and identity—thereby demonstrating a terrifying, god-like power.

Accent neutralization and the erosion of identity

Bhagat also critiques the call-centre’s rule that workers use an Americanized (synonymous with globalized or neutralized) form of English, in which most linguistic traces of their Indian origins are scrubbed away, including the common Pan-Indian blurring between the / w / and / v / sounds in speech. Linguist Claire Cowie has studied how call-centres teach their workers “accent neutralization:” before employees begin working, they take pronunciation classes and are given phonetics handbooks that “refer to the ‘elimination of regional influence’ and encourage trainees to become more comprehensible to native speakers of English by ‘improving pronunciation’” (321). Although Cowie finds that defining a “neutral accent” is difficult, as companies hold different views on what precisely constitutes a neutral sound, the ideal is usually that (in contrast to the call-centre in *One Night*) it not sound entirely American, despite containing strong characteristics of the American accent; for example, it is typically rhotic (Cowie 324). However, it should not sound British either, and definitely not Indian (323). As such, critics of outsourcing have accused call-centres of distorting and even destroying Indian identity by forcing Indian workers to “pass” as Americans, and this popular refrain is reflected in Bhagat’s novel.

In *One Night Shyam*, who sometimes reluctantly works as one of the call-centre's beleaguered accent trainers, provides readers with an explanation of some of the difficulties of feigning a "neutralized" American accent:

You might think the Americans and their language are straightforward, but each letter can be pronounced several different ways. I'll give you just one example: T. With this letter Americans have four different sounds. T can be silent, so "internet" becomes "innernet" and "advantage" becomes "advannage." (53)

In light of the overwhelming role globalization plays in the text, Shyam's use of the words "internet" and "advantage" here seems revealing. In this passage, an American accent appears to be linked to the internet—perhaps globalization's most evident technological manifestation—and the consequent "advantage" that globalized labour can bring. Shyam's explanation is also didactic, perhaps indicating Bhagat's recognition that his audience is aware of the advantages that a neutralized accent can carry in a globalized India and is eager to learn more about it. The author's disdain for this accent and the language training of the call-centre is manifested through his spokesman Vroom, however, when Vroom invents the nursery rhyme, "Go train-train, leave your brain" (53), to scold Shyam for his spinelessness. By speaking in the accented English of another nation, the workers are shown not only to turn their backs on their national identities, but also to abandon their intellectual faculties in favour of Shyam's passive, brainless acceptance of the call-centre's imperialist regime. Accent neutralization is accordingly figured here as a form of *political* neutralization. Despite Cowie's conclusion that most call-centres do not teach their workers a completely American accent but rather an amalgam of several accents, Brinda Narayan's *Bangalore Calling* and Neelesh Misra's *Once Upon A Timezone* also feature characters that are forced to imitate American speech on the telephone. In the first story of *Bangalore Calling*, "Over Curry Dinner," accent trainer Yvette notes that, after learning to speak with an American accent, a once-"diffident woman now flaunted a false brashness [and the] Tamilian flung his American r's with the spunk of a novice soldier" (4). In speaking with an American accent, Narayan implies, the Indian characters quickly assume American identities as well, which are figured in this passage as aggressive and war-like. As with the call-centre's practice of renaming, accent neutralization as it is depicted in call-centre lit is linked closely with the distortion and disappearance of Indian identity; as I will argue, this is in turn related to a concern that globalized India is betraying its early post-Independence socialist ideals, as well as fears of the rise of a mock-American materialist culture in the country.

A material world

Chetan Bhagat suggests in *One Night* that the call-centre, in forcing the characters to assume new American versions of their names and speak in a form of English from which the Indian accent has been carefully removed, develops in its workers a breed of consumerism which mimics that seen in the West. In one important scene, for example, Vroom attacks a billboard featuring a Bollywood actress selling soda: “This airhead chick is supposed to be our role model. Like she knows a fuck about life and gives a fuck about us. All she cares about is cash. She just wants you to buy this black piss” (236). Vroom is not immune from this materialism, however: he leaves his job at a newspaper to work at the call-centre because the latter pays its workers a better salary; and his oft-mentioned addiction to pizza is linked to a sense of moral turpitude in the character: as Vroom confesses in a typically louche moment, “I like pizza. I love it. I like jeans, mobiles, and pizzas. I earn, I eat, I buy shit, and I die” (239). Notably, after delivering this anti-consumerist speech about the soda billboard, Vroom breaks the windows of a Pizza Hut franchise, indicating his new unwillingness to brainlessly accept the American culture thrust upon him by globalization in the shape of the call-centre’s renaming and accent neutralization. This thematic concern can also be found in other works of call-centre lit: Narayan’s story “Platinum,” for example, tells the bleak story of Bitty (transformed by the call-centre into “Betty”), who after being confronted over the telephone line with the cold-blooded materialism of her American callers, grows greedy and grasping even as her credit card debt spirals out of control. “These days,” Narayan writes, “Bitty identified more with the Kate Andersons of Americas than with colleagues at her centre. She was, after all, saving up every hard-earned rupee to pay for those new Gucci . . . sunglasses” (81). Likewise, this anti-materialist discourse can be seen in scholarly criticism of outsourcing and its deleterious effects on India’s youth; Shehzad Nadeem, for example, has found that workers in outsourcing focus strongly on status—especially through the consumption of Western products (53). Like Bhagat and Narayan, Nadeem blames call-centre workers’ mimicry of Westerners, evinced through the imitation of American pronunciation and in renaming, for this growing focus on status and consumption. Sociologist Jonathan Murphy likewise sees call-centre work as fostering a homogenous middle-class value system that echoes “western consumption-oriented lifestyles” (420). Indeed, Murphy’s interviews and surveys with Indian call-centre workers reveal that “Respondents had substantially more consumer goods than the wider Indian youth population, indeed more than Indian urban upper class youth as a whole” (426). Some of the concerns featured in call-center lit about a newfound virulent materialism in India, then, may very well be valid.

Outsourcing and a betrayal of postcolonial India's early socialist ideals

In an illuminating *New York Times* article, Jim Yardley writes that, amid India's globalized economic boom and the flight of its population from village to city, Mohandas K. Gandhi "can sometimes seem to hover over modern India like a parent whose expectations are rarely met"(A1). While Gandhi valorized a simple village life free of craven material desires and Jawaharlal Nehru, postcolonial India's first prime minister, advocated a socialist political platform, globalized India under the current neoliberal gaze of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is a far cry from its founders' vision of a rural socialist utopia. This sense of globalized India's betrayal of its founders also permeates call-centre lit: for instance, Bhagat implies through the character of Vroom that by participating in outsourcing (and thereby, as we have seen, shedding their "true" Indian identity), the call-centre workers have turned their backs on the nationalist heroes of yesteryear who enacted India's independence: as Vroom says, "Two generations ago, it was the young who made this country free—now that was something meaningful. But then what happened? We have been reduced to a high-spending demographic" (278). Only when Vroom rejects his erstwhile materialism and delivers a stirring political speech at the end of the novel can he redeem himself in the eyes of the nation-state: he whips the call-centre workers into a frenzy by drawing on their hatred and resentment of their American bosses, proclaiming that "stupid Americans suck the life blood out of our country's most productive generation" (279). An implicit connection is drawn, then, between the British Raj's exploitation of colonial India and the American corporation's mistreatment of postcolonial India. The crowd responds with "a collective scream" and "collective voice" (279), symbolizing Vroom's political power: in the call-centre, metonymic of globalized India, Vroom-as-political-leader has enacted a miracle of unity among the diverse members of his call-centre society. As such, *One Night* can be seen not only as a guide to the call-centre that is geared toward Indian call-centre workers and aspiring call-centre workers, but it may also *model* behaviour to this group: Bhagat calls upon his readers to exert the same anti-imperialist power that India's founders did, replacing their materialistic and mimetic ways—in the call-centre, and outside it—with political resistance and nationalist solidarity. Only this, the novel tells us, can reverse the betrayal of the early Independence leaders.

This theme of globalized India's betrayal of its postcolonial founders can be found in other texts within the call-center lit genre as well. In Swati Kaushal's work of chick-lit *Piece of Cake*, for example, Minal Sharma—who works at an Indian multinational—is the great-granddaughter of an Indian freedom fighter, who, she is told, would not have approved of her job: as her Mahatma-worshipping mother says, "In our time, it was enough to be good. Nowadays you youngsters want too much . . . Just

look around, everywhere there's greed and misery. This was not Bapu's vision" (130). Minal's globalized labour therefore puts her at odds with the sense of tradition represented by her great-grandfather and, by extension, Independence leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. In contrast to other works of call-centre lit, however, which rarely offer solutions to these problems, Bhagat posits a nationalist politicization of India's youth as a remedy to the forces of globalization, cultural homogeneity, materialism, and American imperialism.

Indian identity: the critics weigh in

As I have mentioned, the renaming and accent neutralization practices of the call-centre have come under attack not just in Bhagat's novel but also in the Indian media for the perceived role of outsourcing in the loss of "authentic" Indian identity and culture amid globalization. In an article about what he calls "cyber-coolies," Harish Trivedi writes,

[Call-centre workers] speak in an accent that is . . . resolutely not Indian . . . it has, over a long and rigorous training programme, been "neutralized." A lot else in their personality, biological clock, and identity has been neutralized as well. So, why do these eager young souls have to pretend to be Americans, to be anyone but themselves? Why are they obliged to lie . . . each time they open their mouths?

Tina Basi contends, however, that this popular refrain among opponents of outsourcing is wrongheaded and essentialist in its assertion that a 'real' Indian self, which can be assumed or dropped at will, exists at all (86). In a country as diverse as India, with its abundance of castes, classes, ethnicities, and religions, it is difficult to argue—as authors like Bhagat and Narayan often seem to do—for the existence of a monolithic "authentic" Indian identity (or, for that matter, of an American one). One might also question the premise that learning to speak in a different accent than one has been taught at home within the call-centre necessarily carries more negative effects than receiving an English education in India, where students are taught to speak with an accent that still hews strongly to British pronunciation. And, although the inherent racism of "accent neutralization" is obvious, with "the voice of the third world subject . . . literally erased and reconstructed in the servicing of the global economy" (Shome 110), it may also be important to ask why in Bhagat's novel and in Trivedi's critique, Indian Standard English, born of colonialism, is posited as better than American or neutralized English, which arises out of the needs of Western corporations. It is as if critics and authors such as these are concerned that a new diglossic situation is arising among forms of English in India, in which the American, globalized, or neutralized variety is replacing the already elite Indian one in terms of prestige. One wonders, then, whether this is a case of Macaulay's children fighting Macaulay's cyber-children to maintain their perch at the top of India's English-speaking hierarchy. Rather than attack the accents used by call-

centre workers by hewing to an essentialist dream of a single and definitive form of Indo-Anglian speech, and thereby furthering the hegemonic, elitist status of a given accent, it may be more helpful to focus on the ways in which empires and Empire have compelled their subjects to speak over time; and the possibility, as Trivedi saliently points out, that workers are being trained to be culturally homogenous clones amid the “high-tech virtualized disciplining” (Shome 107) of Indian call-centres.

“Operation Yankee Fear” and the upside to call-centre work

The fear of a homogenization of Indian identity has been backed up to some extent by scholars like Jonathan Murphy, who claims that Indian call-centre workers are part of a new middle class that shares its values with the middle class of the developing world (430). Bhagat’s inclusion of this theme accordingly reflects middle-class Indian concerns that globalization, as emblemized by the “neutralized” English spoken in the call-centre, is eroding and homogenizing Indian identity. Paradoxically, however, the tools of the call-centre that Bhagat criticizes—including the lessons it teaches the workers about American culture and miming a non-Indian identity—eventually allow the novel’s characters to win, through a plan they call “Operation Yankee Fear,” upward mobility and a nationalist victory over the Americans. By capitalizing on their knowledge (gained through MTV, CNN, and their accent neutralization and American culture classes) that “Americans are the biggest cowards on the planet” (280), the workers—led by the newly political Vroom—tell their terrified callers that the United States is being attacked by terrorists. Only if the Americans continue to call the call-centre every hour, thus driving the call-centre’s numbers upward, will they be saved from their terrorist foes: as the workers tell the Americans, “We will save this country. The evil forces will never succeed” (284). The call-centre is consequently saved from being shut down by its American owners. Despite the vitriol directed towards the call-centre in the novel, its survival is conceived as a positive outcome because the Indians have wrested control of it from their American bosses, stemmed the threat of mass layoffs, and gained a sense of psychological mastery over the American callers (282). Just as Ashis Nandy in *The Intimate Enemy* shows that British colonialism provided some of the tools of colonial resistance to early nationalist leaders, then, so does the call-centre offer similar weapons to the workers in *One Night*. In his work *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, Bruce Robbins describes how literary works featuring upward mobility typically contain a “Fairy Godmother” or donor figure who teaches a character how to climb the social echelon: oddly enough, despite its villainy and efforts towards cultural homogenization, the call-centre appears to have similarly provided its workers with the tools to achieving success.

Interestingly, Bhagat's representation of the call-centre as a dead end for India and Indian youth abruptly ends once this nationalist victory over the United States is won; suddenly the call-centre—though still officially run by Americans, and still catering to American callers—is no longer such a terrible place to work. While Vroom and Shyam leave the call-centre to start their own web design company, their female colleagues Esha, Radhika, and Priyanka continue to work there (reflecting the gendered landscape of the call-centre [Murphy 421]): despite the office's problems, it provides them with the money to begin their journeys of upward mobility and independence, whether as a corporate fundraiser for an NGO, the principal of a preschool, or a liberated woman free of a philandering husband and abusive mother-in-law (309-10). At the end of the novel Bhagat no longer seems to have qualms about globalized labour; he merely wants India to dominate the global markets. When we last see Shyam and Vroom in the novel, they are trying to find international clients for their web design company (309), and it is only a matter of time, Bhagat hints, before they will reign over their own multinational firm, striking a blow for Indian nationalism and market domination. Emma Dawson Varuguese points out in her insightful work *Beyond the Postcolonial* that India's newfound status as a so-called global superpower is echoed in the postcolonial subject's willingness to adapt to and participate in a globalized world in flux (205). Likewise, in *One Night* the protagonists' agenda is more in keeping with their participation in a globalized marketplace than in engaging in any sustained resistance to neo-imperialism—even if this participation is framed as itself a form of resistance to the USA. It may nonetheless be worthwhile to recall Gayatri Spivak's warning against "theories . . . that support the idea that upward class mobility . . . is unmediated resistance" (xii): in *One Night*, the call-centre agents are able to triumph over the novel's villains by accessing upward mobility through the power of the transnational workplace. But even as capitalism solves these characters' problems, it requires them to mimic their erstwhile foes—and, unlike more productive forms of mimicry that inspire resistance among the oppressed, it leaves the call-centre untouched; in fact, thanks to the workers, their transnational office is stronger than ever before.

The theme of the call-centre ultimately providing its workers with community, upward mobility and a happy ending is echoed in other works of call-centre lit, highlighting the ambivalence with which outsourcing and globalization are seen in India. In *Piece of Cake*, Minal finds a new family in the form of her multinational office colleagues, which replaces her sanctimonious social idealist family: in the final lines of the book, Minal looks at her colleagues and thinks, "Family" (Kaushal 367). And, when Vroom reveals his plan to prevent the call-centre in *One Night* from being shut down, the entire office responds affirmatively to his entreaties for community and solidarity with "a collective voice" (279). Among the central characters, Shyam is reunited with Priyanka, Vroom with Esha, and Radhika moves into Esha's apartment. Only two of the six principal

characters make an attempt to reunite with their families after this; the remainder—most notably Priyanka—do not rekindle these relationships, finding community instead in their fellow employees or former employees of the call-centre. Consequently, in *One Night*, as in *Piece of Cake* and other works of call-centre lit, one's colleagues can replace one's family as sources of strength and solace. The call-centre can in this light be seen positively as a place where, through the power of communal action, one's erstwhile family can be rejected and a new and improved family gained. Likewise, in a piece of popular entertainment, Dyer writes, an initial sense of fragmentation—caused, crucially, by capitalism—is replaced by a theme of community—resulting from capitalism, and represented by utopian feelings of “togetherness, sense of belonging” (25).

As the economy changes with processes of liberalization and globalization, so does the Indian family; indeed, Bhagat has said a central theme of his writing is this generational divide (McCrum). In her research into the changes being enacted in the middle-class family amid globalization, Heinreke Donner notes that concerns have arisen around “new intergenerational conflicts, which are often depicted as the inevitable consequence of economic transformation” (29). The call-centre workers in the novel have been altered by their transnational labour, ghettoized and alienated from their families by their late hours and globalized outlook. Basi comments,

Transnational Indian call-centre workers participate in globalizing discourses and processes, by way of their interaction with people living outside India, which in turn produce globalized identities. The production of these identities is contingent upon their access to these globalizing processes and thus serves to create “disjunctures” (Appadurai 1996) between themselves and those not working in the call-centre industry. (34)

The workers' alienation from less globalized Indians leads, then, to Minal and *One Night*'s call-centre workers joining the only group where they belong: the family created by their fellow globalized, transnational colleagues. Notably, popular cultural discourses around the alienating effects of globalization and transnational labour are turned inside out and rendered positive when the “natural” family is lost and a new office-family is gained. But this theme of happiness at the expense of Indian family and a sense of tradition is also reflected in some positive discourses in the media surrounding globalization and outsourcing: for example, in his paean to globalized India, *India Calling*, journalist Anand Giridharadas describes how “tales of call-centre jobs and freedom in the city” have begun to free Indians from the confines of caste and religion. This troubling discourse holds that by replacing Hinduism with capitalism, they can achieve a measure of success and happiness that was previously considered impossible. In other words, as Gaiutra Bahadur writes sardonically in a review of Giridharadas' work, capitalism “accomplishes what the Naxalites and Nehru failed to achieve.” But, outside their bubble, the workers have grown distant from less globalized members of their

society (often represented by their families), who are unable to understand their transnational subjectivities.

This theme of alienation at once mirrors and expands on the stance of Jorge Heine and Ramesh Thakur, who write in *The Hindu* that globalization has led to “[t]he deepening of poverty and inequality—prosperity for a few countries and people, marginalisation and exclusion for the many.” Call-centre lit suggests that the upward mobility gained by India’s globalized middle classes working in the call-centre and transnational company results in the exclusion of “the many.” In addition, it produces a sense of anxious alienation for those who, like the call-centre workers, are entering the ranks of “the few” and recognizing, on some level, that their newfound upward mobility and globalized subjectivity create new elite communities.

One Night’s linguistic conflicts

While Bhagat does not criticize the use of Indian Standard English in *One Night*, a certain ambivalence can nonetheless be discerned in the novel’s linguistic borrowing of Hindi at several significant moments, which troubles the book’s English linguistic utopia and sheds insight into an intriguing incongruity on the part of Bhagat, who writes exclusively in English. Channelling Shyam, Bhagat includes flashbacks in the text to a happier time in the character’s life, before the call-centre robs him entirely of his spirit and identity. In these sections of the novel, Hindi words are used for family relationships—as in *didi* (60), meaning “sister,” and the titles of songs *Mahi Ve* and *Dil Chahta Hai* (115, 122)—while in Shyam’s unhappy present Hindi words are used only to denote some of life’s basic necessities, including items of clothing like the *salwar kameez* and *dupatta* (225) and food and drink, such as *parathas* and *chai* (37-8), which have no real English equivalent. As Shyam slips further away from his “authentic” Indian identity and his depression grows, his culture and family relationships likewise begin to melt away (as symbolized by the Hindi words’ disappearance from the almost completely English lexicon of the text), and his national identity is accordingly depicted as tied to India by only a few threads, reduced to significations of the bare necessities of life within India. Rather than revealing some form of subversive linguistic hybridity here, then, Shyam’s language shows that the English of the call-centre comes to dominate all discussion of the call-centre and life outside it; the hybridity of Hinglish shifts slowly into the monopolistic stranglehold of English.

This conflict between English and Hindi is mirrored symbolically in *One Night*, with the novel’s love interest Radhika offered a symbolic choice between a relationship with Shyam, represented by the *dhaba* (a small, very informal restaurant on the side of a highway usually frequented by truck drivers), and with Ganesh, a wealthy American of

Indian heritage, who is represented by a five-star restaurant (165, 301). While the *dhaba*, significantly referred to in Hindi (instead of, say, the English word “truckstop”), is described as bearing greater emotional appeal, the English-signified five-star restaurant is elite and promises comfort—but lacks the cultural significance and pleasures of the *dhaba*. As we have seen, English is valorized in *One Night* as a tool with which to achieve a nationalist victory and upward mobility. However, Bhagat’s occasional use of Hindi in the text relates English not only to wealth and comfort, but also to cultural alienation and to the replacement of a more vital linguistic hybridity with a homogenizing English. Just as Bhagat displays ambivalence towards globalization, then, so does he reveal more generally his uncertainty about English as compared with a native Indian language.

Conclusion: The ambivalence of Macaulay’s cyber-children

One Night @ the Call Centre and other works of call-centre lit reflect Shehzem Nadeem’s provocative argument that “just as the status of the colonial mimic men was dependent upon the structures of British colonialism, today the social position of [outsourcing] workers [in India] is contingent upon the continued patronage of Western corporations” (58). Although *One Night* and other works of call-centre lit can be accused of being overly optimistic—and even naïve, to varying degrees—about the liberating powers and utopian qualities of the heterotopian transnational workplace, they remain ambivalent about certain aspects of India’s globalization story: in particular, they betray some guilt about the possibility that the country’s “outsourcing generation” is turning its back on its freedom-fighting anti-colonial heroes, indicating a suspicion that globalized, transnational labour is merely one symptom of a new form of imperialism. Their depiction of changing subjectivities amid Indian globalization—with old identities lost and new ones found—is also ambivalent, in that the globalized identity can seem to have an alienating effect on its bearer. Although the replacement in these works of the natural family with one located in the call-centre or transnational is framed as a happy ending, it echoes negative rhetoric in the popular media around globalization: namely, that intergenerational conflict is growing in India, and that these transnational workers are becoming alienated from less globalized members of Indian society. If Indo-Anglian popular fiction provides any insight into the minds of readers struggling to cope with the new realities of Indian globalization, with its hybrid identities and hierarchies of English, then the new and improved India and hybrid identities enacted by globalization are being greeted with a great deal of ambivalence.

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