Gender Anxiety and Contemporary Indian Popular Fiction

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Abstract: In her article "Gender Anxiety and Contemporary Indian Popular Fiction" Elen Turner discusses two examples of Indian "popular literature" which reflect contemporary Indian middle-class anxieties surrounding globalization and social change. The recent proliferation of foreign business process outsourcing companies in India has changed the financial and lifestyle opportunities available to young, urban Indians. While sociological and ethnographic studies have found that workers embrace what they perceive to be westernized lifestyles, the novels under discussion present a more nuanced picture. Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Centre* (2005) and Shruti Saxena's *Stilettos in the Boardroom* (2010) demonstrate that young workers embrace and enjoy the freedom accorded them by working in outsourced companies. The texts also show that a tension exists between individualism and traditional social and familial practices.

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Gender Anxiety and Contemporary Indian Popular Fiction

Recent years have seen a proliferation of English language Indian novels that can be categorized under the rather slippery genre of "popular" fiction — "literature's" opposite, according to Ken Gelder (11). Much of this revolves around the lives of the educated, urban, English-speaking elite. Characters are middle-class, with aspirations of social and economic mobility, from sections of society benefiting from the economic liberalization that began in India in the early 1990s. Some are set in India's premier educational institutions, or fictionalized versions of them, or in what are collectively known as IT enabled workplaces — call centres, banks, or business process outsourcing companies (BPOs). Characters are usually young and grapple with some kind of identity crisis brought about by the "clash" of tradition and contemporary life. In the article at hand I examine two examples of Indian popular fiction to identify how the genre reflects contemporary middle-class anxieties over social change caused by globalization, especially social change regarding gender norms. I postulate that literary engagement with issues of globalization, social change, and gender roles can be understood through a the model of thesis / antithesis / synthesis. Traditional forms of Indian adult subjectivity revolve around marriage, family, and community (thesis). An individual is judged in society by how well he/she adheres to agreed upon notions of appropriate behavior for men and women, on getting married, and producing a family at the right time, and on subsuming individual desires to these social processes. A rejection of these types of behaviors — namely through overt individualism — provides the antithesis. I suggest that the novels under discussion represent a synthesis of the thesis and antithesis. The social worlds and characters depicted in the novels both accept and reject certain aspects of traditionalist and individualist approaches to life and relationships. This synthesis is not always comfortable or easy for the characters and it is around this tension and negotiation that the dramatic action of the plots revolve.

Chetan Bhagat is one of the most popular writers of popular fiction. His books have sold an estimated three million copies, making him India's best-selling novelist at the moment (see Butalia; Sarkar; Shamsie). In the following I discuss one of Bhagat's most successful novels, *One Night at the Call Centre* (2005), as well as a relatively lesser-known example of this genre, Shruti Saxena's *Stilettos in the Boardroom* (2010). These novels dramatize the anxieties that many Indians are feeling over the redefinition of middle-class social structures and gender norms in the context of globalization by depicting female characters in particular as a metaphor for social change. As the said changes are relatively recent and ongoing, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the issue. Contemporary middle-class Indian anxieties around globalization revolve around widespread perceptions of growing Westernization among youth and young adults and the threat of corruption these pose (Nadeem 103). Increasingly, major corporations in developed countries have established BPO divisions in developing countries, enabled by advancements in information and communication technologies (Nadeem 107). India is the major hub of such operations, a phenomenon which has been aided by the liberalization of the economy since 1991: "To many, the call center has become the symbol of India's rapidly globalizing economy. While traditional India sleeps, a dynamic population of highly skilled, articulate professionals works through the night, functioning on U.S. time under made-up American aliases. They feign familiarity with a culture and climate they've never experienced, earn salaries that their elders couldn't have imagined (but still a fraction of what an American would make), and enjoy a lifestyle that's a cocktail of premature affluence and ersatz Westernization" (Tharoor 78).

Some scholars believe that these types of behaviors represent cultural rootlessness and mimicry. For example, Pavan K. Varma sees such actions as potentially harmful for the Indian middle-class, "seriously threaten[ing] to make the world of the middle class a derivative photo copy of the dominant paradigms of western culture" (xxiv). Shashi Tharoor's perception of IT-enabled workplaces is reinforced in social science literature. For example, Shehzad Nadeem, in conducting ethnographic research in IT-enabled workplaces, found that consumption of alcohol and sexual promiscuity were amongst the practices encouraged by the workplace culture (111). In 2008 this industry employed around two million workers, largely young university graduates (Nadeem 107). It is not surprising that young people are attracted to such jobs, as positions in BPOs are amongst the best paid in India for relatively unqualified or inexperienced youth (Singh and Pandey 686), although a certain level of education and English-language skills are required

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meaning that even these young and unskilled people are firmly placed within India's socio-economic elite. Women are highly visible in this workforce. Nadeem encountered one manager who was proud of the fact that they sometimes employ more women than men stating that "Slowly and steadily, India is becoming Westernized" (117). What "becoming Westernized" actually means, or is perceived to mean, is hazy, but it is generally associated with a party lifestyle, sexual promiscuity and exploration, conspicuous consumption of brand-name consumer goods, and relaxed social policing of women's behaviour (Nadeem 113). In India, where "respectable" jobs for women have largely been restricted to teaching, nursing and secretarial work (Singh and Pandey 684) the visibility of women in the IT-enabled sector is confronting to conservative sectors of society.

Although foreign investment and employment opportunities have been widely celebrated, "the resulting cultural change is not easily reconcilable with certain conservative aspects of Indian life" (Nadeem 107). This stems from not only the increased presence of young women in the workforce, but from the culture of individualism that is apparently propagated by such workplaces (Nadeem 113). As Nadeem suggests, the clash between the celebration and the anxiety engendered by the growth of BPOs supposes two different moral worlds: "The first is one in which marriage is arranged by family, gratification is delayed, and the individual is engulfed and defined by a dense web of family and social obligations. The second posits an autonomous, pleasure-seeking self that no doubt derives succour from family, but is defined more by the voluntary choices it makes" (107). The consumerist individual subject is posited as anti-family and anti-tradition. Globalization is shaping the aspirations and identities of the Indian middle class, especially those employed by BPOs, and while these aspirations do not have a clearly defined object, "they cluster around an idea of the West as a locus of modernity" (Nadeem 103). Nadeem notes that BPO workers tend to be radical in their rejection of old values, conspicuous in their consumption, and construct the west as a social utopia against which India's progress is measured (107). I suggest that this formulation is a generalization and that the novels I discuss present a more ambivalent reflection on processes of change induced by globalisation. The characters in these novels hold the West up as an ideal, the symbol of a lifestyle to aspire to, demonstrated by the fact that they adopt the outward accoutrements of what they perceive Western culture to be, namely clothing, partying, consumption, pre-marital sex, etc. But at the same time, they do not reject everything that is Indian and in fact the narrative progression of these novels depends upon a realization that Indian culture and customs should not be rejected outright. The opportunities presented by Western companies in these novels are welcome, but are not depicted as problem-free and the West is certainly not seen as a flawless utopia. Nadeem states that it remains to be seen whether the behaviors and values he witnessed in BPO workers represent youthful exuberance, a generational dynamic, or a serious reappraisal of Indian culture (116). The novels discussed suggest that it is a generational dynamic, one that is possibly long-lasting, but that does not necessarily represent a serious reappraisal of Indian culture. The authors are simultaneously critical of the blind aping of what are perceived to be Western ways and of unquestioning adherence to tradition. The women characters and gender dynamics in One Night and Stilettos demonstrate that rejecting the traditional can be liberating, opening up new opportunities, but it can also lead to stress and a lack of fulfilment in personal and workplace relations. Globalization does not herald an era of unprecedented personal or consumer freedom, but neither does it signify a crisis of the traditional Indian family. As Nadeem states, methods of negotiating globalization and tradition are enacted as "an Indian morality play where the pleasure principle clashes with the demands of custom and obligation, where kama (pleasure) and dharma (duty) meet in an uneasy suspension" (103).

Bhagat's One Night is narrated by Shyam, one of a group of colleagues who work the night shift at Connexions, a call centre in the Delhi IT suburb Gurgaon. The narrative unfolds over the course of one night at work using flashbacks to give the background stories of the protaginists. Shyam is still in love with his ex-girlfriend and co-worker Priyanka, who has recently become engaged to a rich man based in the United States and is upset that his failure to gain a promotion at work has affected his chances of winning Priyanka back. Priyanka herself has a strained relationship with her mother who simply wants her to find a good husband and settle down. Another protagonist, Vroom, is frustrated with the mundane nature of his work at the call centre, but is angrier with himself for becoming reliant upon the good salary he earns there as he feels he is compromising his ideals. Radhika is a young married woman with an over-demanding mother-in-law and an unappreciative husband, whom she discovers is cheating on her. Esha is an aspiring

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model who moved to Delhi from Chandigarh and has been sexually exploited in her attempts to find modelling work. As well as these central characters, Bakshi, the despicable and exploitative boss, and Military Uncle, a fifty-something retiree who works at Connexions to supplement his pension, also feature. During the night in question, technical faults prevent the protagonists from taking calls thus prompting a middle-of-the-night excursion which nearly ends in disaster. Vroom, driving drunk, almost crashes into a pit at a construction site. As the group are teetering on the edge of the pit, they receive a phone call from God. God says he will save them from certain death if they promise to strive for what they really want in life, not succumb to the exploitative demands of others. This encounter encourages all of the characters to reassess the directions their lives are taking, and to implement drastic changes.

Like *One Night,* Saxena's *Stilettos* revolves around the lives of young professionals in Gurgaon and is set in BankPro, a BPO company. The text is about the lives of three female protagonists: Sarahna, a young woman who takes a job at BankPro to avoid marriage; Shivaa, a thirty-something married woman who has retained her demanding career after marriage; and Arya, a manager with successive office romances. Sarahna battles with her mother over taking the job, as the latter wants her daughter to marry and stay at home. Shivaa suspects her husband of being unfaithful because she works such long hours that she hardly spends any time with him and Arya is trying to overcome an unpleasant experience from her past, where she was offered a promotion in exchange for sex. The plot revolves around a corporate conspiracy in which some of the management are deliberately trying to make the business fail by hiring unqualified people. Arya, Shivaa, Sarahna, and others are thrown into the task of saving the company. In the process, all three women undergo processes of personal discovery acknowledging the strains that trying to juggle family expectations and career aspirations have resulted in. Sarahna stands up to her mother, who, eventually and reluctantly, accepts her choices, Shivaa opens up to her husband about her insecurities about being an inadequate wife, and Arya realizes that her tough attitude and promiscuous behavior have been ways of ignoring past trauma.

Whereas in *One Night* gender relations and anxieties appear as a sub-theme among several others, in *Stilettos* it is the driving force behind the novel. It is important to note here that *Stilettos* was published by the Delhi-based feminist press Zubaan*.* The purported feminist nature of *Stilettos* makes a discussion of this book alongside a more "mainstream" publication (Bhagat's) especially illuminating in trying to establish the gendered dimensions of social change. Unlike *One Night*, *Stilettos* can be classified as "chick lit," a term originally coined with ironic intent "to highlight the conflicting desires that emerge in the writing of young women, and the twin legacies of feminism and patriarchy, which inform their lives" (Ommundsen 107). The genre has become commercially successful all over the world and has largely moved away from the original ironic and critical intentions. But, as Wenche Ommundsen points out, the notion of conflicting desires remains strong, "reflecting the challenges facing young women as they navigate careers and relationships, independence and commitment, and commodity culture and traditional values" (108). These tensions are all clearly evident in *Stilettos*, but the novel only manages to provide a partial critique of the patriarchal culture of the international corporation. As one reviewer remarked, although this book could have been "an opportunity to serve up a good read about women in high places, about their grit and strength and perseverance … it … turns out to be a disappointingly low-end chick lit and office romance" (Saleem <http://www.thehindu.com/arts/books/article1158982.ece>). Saxena creates characters who may be strong, but who reinforce the stereotype that the corporation and the world of business is a man's domain. Both *Stilettos* and *One Night* depict and explore the tension between traditional gender roles, particularly those of women, and those required by a new, contemporary, "global" workplace that appears to be in conflict with "traditional" values and practices. These tensions are best exemplified in both novels through the motifs of clothing, sexual harassment, and the free mixing of young men and women at work, all of which lead to generational clashes between the protagonists and their elders. *Stilettos* presents the BPO as a place of potential liberation for women. Saxena is herself a manager at a BPO solutions company in Gurgaon and sees the positives of this "subculture," as Tharoor described it (78).

As Nadeem points out, women's employment is not synonymous with empowerment "but in a social setting where women are often considered repositories of family honour, being able to work at night with men is no small matter" (115). Sarahna, the most "traditional" of all the female characters in *Stilettos*, is described as having attended an all-girls' college and is therefore concerned that she will have trouble fitting in at BankPro (37-8). However, she is excited by the

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social and romantic possibilities that come with this free mixing between young men and women: "the guys who had joined the new process DCP were pretty good looking. Twinkle and she exchanged knowing and appreciative looks, as she was sure the guys were doing, looking at the lot of them" (88). This representation of young women workers' behavior confirms the results of ethnographic research with BPO workers, who often see their workplace as a marriage pool (Patel 20). This contrasts with traditional practices where parents arrange marriages for their young adult children and with acquaintances whom they consider suitable. Marriage is seen as the transition point from childhood to adulthood and the decisions and selections surrounding it are a social action and not an individual one. Therefore, the fact that some of the BPO workers in these novels are selecting their own partners is disruptive of the traditional social order.

Although the comingling of young men and women is portrayed as a process which can lead to increased career, financial, and personal opportunities for women, in both novels its negative flip-side is also explored, namely sexual harassment. While by no means restricted to the BPO sector, sexual harassment of women employees is a theme in both novels. *One Night* is narrated by a man whereas *Stilettos* is told through women protagonists. Both novels condemn sexual harassment when it appears in obvious and indisputable ways — such as pressure to have sex in exchange for career advancement — but their representation of it in other ways is more ambivalent. For instance, in *One Night,* Shyam notes: "I saw Vroom stare at Esha. It's never easy for guys to work in an office with a hot girl. I mean, what are you supposed to do? Ignore their sexiness and stare at your computer?" (70). Although stated in a flippant manner, this comment highlights the tensions which can arise from young men and women working closely side by side*.* Shyam is suggesting that Esha's attractiveness is at fault for luring Vroom's attention. Where does this assumption go if we take it to its logical conclusion? If Vroom were not an innocent character, if he did want to force himself on Esha, would the suggestion be that it was her fault for alluring him with her beauty? In *Stilettos*, Saxena attempts to correct this traditional scenario where women are perceived to be to blame for attracting men. Women protagonists are repeatedly shown objectifying men, talking about who is hot and who is not, in a way more conventionally done by males. But despite Saxena's attempt to present strong, independent women, the reversion to sexist language is at times shocking. For instance, when the tough, beautiful manager Arya first bumps into Sam, a colleague she goes on to have a relationship with, we read that "Just because she was good looking, did not mean she was dumb. But, in spite of everything, he was quite cute. He donned a slight American accent, nothing pretentious, though. But he was not her type. He was mature looking and much more suave than she liked her men. She really liked the tough guys, who would carry her on their shoulders and spank her if she was wicked! And since she usually was, she got punished quite often" (63).

Sam begins as the object here, being appraised by Arya, but by the end Arya becomes the object and is reduced to a caricature of a sexually objectified woman. Younger Indian women writers have been credited with being bold in their use of language, especially English, and their willingness to discuss issues, such as sexuality, that may have been more difficult for earlier generations (Dev Sen 14). However, there is nothing inherently progressive or liberating in descriptions of sex or expressions of sexuality if these are not matched with an understanding of what has led to attitudes being shaped as they have (Coward 59). The above passage by Saxena may be intended to be playful rather than misogynistic, but nevertheless reinforces patriarchal notions of sexuality. Less ambivalent are Bhagat's and Saxena's narrations of sexual harassment when it is unquestionably an exploitative act prompted by an imbalance of power. In *One Night* Esha's agent encourages her to have sex with a photographer to get a job in a fashion show. She does so and is told immediately afterwards that she is too short to be a catwalk model anyway: "Like the bastard didn't know that before he slept with me" says Esha (179). He sends her money afterwards as "compensation." Although she is not actually forced to have sex with the man, she feels guilty and is exploited afterwards. Esha is in an especially vulnerable position because she left her home and family to try to break into modelling in Delhi. Her appearance and self-presentation causes tension at Connexions too, as the boss Bakshi tells her: "You wear tight skirts and tops, but I only look at them from a distance" (272) thus suggesting that she is always objectified and vulnerable.

In *Stilettos* it is gradually revealed that tough-girl Arya left her previous place of employment after implicating several members of the management in large-scale sexual harassment and abuse. The man she considered her boyfriend had attempted to drug and molest her: "She had come out of her last company a complete mess, but not without first logging an integrity complaint

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against not just Sihaan but his whole gang of miscreants who drugged girls at parties and lured them to the very same rented apartment where Arya had been taken. From the managers to the highest strata of the organization, a good number of people were involved in this racket. Sihaan had been stupid enough to reveal to her their names and those of the girls who had gladly volunteered for unplanned and undeserving promotions within the company" (104). Although this could be viewed as a success story of a case of sexual harassment being taken seriously and prosecuted, Arya remains traumatized by what happened. She cultivates a tough exterior to hide her vulnerability suggesting that a woman trying to be successful in a male dominated business environment must succumb to either stereotypical binary: to play on her feminine attractiveness to men or adopt the masculine characteristics of ruthlessness and strength.

A related issue is that of clothing, as it is repeatedly suggested throughout the two novels, namely that the way a female dresses has a direct effect on the amount of male attention she receives, the level of admiration, and envy she experiences from other women. Meenakshi Handa and Arpita Khare state that in India, "Western brands represent enhancement in the status of the whole family and symbolize a higher social class and liberalized thinking" (3). Although it is not specific clothing brands that are mentioned in either of the two novels, Western-inspired styles, trends, and items of clothing are presented as desirable. However, whereas Handa and Khare argue that high-end fashion purchases by the individual symbolize higher status for the whole family (3), the scenario presented in both One Night and Stilettos is a clash between the younger protagonists — who want or choose to wear modern, Western-style clothing — and their parents, who disapprove or would prefer them to wear more traditional clothing such as saris or salwar kameez, and have long hair. The "liberalized thinking" of the group Handa and Khare claim an individual's fashion choices represent is exactly what is being resisted by the older generations in One Night and Stilettos. Throughout both novels things traditional and Indian are portrayed as un-cool in contrast to things perceived as Western. As Nadeem states, amongst the aspirational middle classes "the consumption of high-end goods and the emulation of Western lifestyles becomes a means of drawing status distinctions and marking socioeconomic position" (104). This consumption is particularly noticeable in these novels through the motif of clothing, particularly female clothing: "Mediating between the body (associated with what is private and personal) and the external world, which simultaneously requires decent concealment and display, [clothing] becomes an important indicator of social identity and difference. For women, it also marks conformity with accepted ideals of femininity" (Jones 378).

Numerous feminist scholars in various global contexts have pointed out that women are often seen as the repositories for a nation's, religion's, or community's "honor" — that men are judged according to how well "their" women conform to agreed-upon norms of behavior, to put it simply (in the Indian context see, e.g., Chakravarti; Menon and Bhasin; Sarkar and Butalia). Women's choices of clothing are one such practice through which the honor, respectability, or social mores of a community are expressed. It is not accidental that in One Night much more attention is paid to what women characters wear than the men. Shyam continuously expresses bafflement at the amount of attention his female friends and co-workers pay towards their own and each other's dress: "Only women have this special area in the brain that keeps track of everything they and their friends have worn during the last fifty days" (71). Such claims represent a "stereotypical example of fetishization" and an embodied set of cultural codes (Cook 357): "Clothing performances" are not as frivolous as is sometimes assumed, and are a form of cultural expression that can reveal a lot about perceptions and practices of subjectivity (Cook 353). For example, in One Night Priyanka's conflict with her mother revolves around ideas of what is appropriate clothing and behavior for a young woman. She tells Shyam: "She had different rules for me and my brother, and that began to bother me. She would comment on everything I wore, everywhere I went, whereas my brother… she would never say anything to him" (126). Priyanka's change in attitude towards traditional clothing and accessories is symbolic of her acceptance of other traditional practices. In one of Shyam's flashbacks to several months earlier, Priyanka recounts having a fight with her mother who wanted her to wear a gold necklace that had been gifted to her. Priyanka did not want to wear it: "And I was like, no Mum, it won't go with my dress. Yellow metal is totally uncool, only aunties wear it" (56) ("aunty" being shorthand for an older, matronly woman). After announcing her arranged-marriage plans several months later, Priyanka states, happily: "I can see what Radhika says now about getting a new family. Ganesh's mum came around today and gave me a big gold chain and hugged me and kissed me" (78). Priyanka's earlier reluctance to wear old-fashioned, traditional or unfashionable accessories is presented as being in

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direct contradiction to her agreement to marry a man chosen by her mother. Her later approval of a gold necklace symbolizes her change in mindset, one that could allow her to accept something that had previously caused conflict with her mother. Adhering to tradition in one aspect of life is portrayed as being at odds with fashionable, youth culture. Not only does Priyanka agree to an arranged marriage, but this agreement is accompanied by a change in attitudes towards clothing.

This same shift can be seen in Radhika in One Night. She is married and wears only Indian clothing as she lives with her husband's family, who are conservative. Shyam describes Radhika as follows: "She wore a plain mustard sari, as saris were all she was allowed to wear in her in-laws' house. It was different apparel from the jeans and skirts Radhika preferred before her marriage" (34). Furthermore, Radhika must cover her head with her sari when at home, as "all married women in their house do it" (71). These examples suggest that not only is it Radhika's in-laws imposing this dress code upon her, but the very institution of marriage, demanding she relinquishes her individual preferences in favour of social norms. As with Priyanka, marriage and Western-style clothing are presented as mutually exclusive. The individualism of BPO culture is constructed in opposition to practices central to social organisation such as marriage. Being an individual implies resistance to incorporation into a social order. Marriage is still expected of everyone, but these instances from One Night suggest that young Indians have not necessarily resolved how to adhere to this expectation while keeping hold of the westernised lifestyles they create for themselves as young, single adults. As they are apparently unwilling to do away with the traditional idea of marriage, it is the other aspects of their lifestyles that are sacrificed. The dichotomy is set up in these novels as a sign of how deep the anxiety, and the perception of a clash, runs for many people, affecting all aspects of life, from the "macro" — marriage partners, and who chooses them — to daily clothing.

In the world of BPOs presented in One Night and Stilettos, women cannot have successful or fulfilling independent careers unless they break with tradition on some level. In Stilettos, Sarahna faces hostility from her mother over her decision to work at BankPro because she immediately cuts her hair and dons a pair of jeans. When she goes for her interview at BankPro, she takes careful notice of the other young employees: "One pretty girl especially drew her eye, not because of her obvious good looks but more for her trinkets. She showed off her pierced belly button well, in a tummy baring sleeveless top and low washed out jeans. Her ears flashed multiple silver rings in different sizes and her short, cropped hair, streaked blonde, fell on her forehead in permed curls. Girls in her college were never allowed to dress like this. This place opened up a whole new world of opportunities, not just for one's career but also personal development, thought Sara" (39). Layer upon layer of fashion commodities are described here, all requiring money and processes to obtain and maintain — piercings, tops, jeans, hair cut, color, texture … Each addition adds another layer of individual expression, of departure from the effects achieved by traditional Indian dress and grooming. Personal appearance is equated with personal development because it is understood that shunning the outward symbols of Indian womanhood — the long, plaited hair and Punjabi salwar kameez Sarahna wears to her interview — represents a desire to become less uniform, more Western and therefore individual and "modern." Although unmarried, Sarahna's job at BankPro encourages her to change her style of clothing which leads to conflict with her mother; in One Night, Radhika is married but continues to go to work albeit dressed in a traditional manner. In this instance, it is her job that causes the most conflict at home as she finds it difficult to fulfill the obligations of a daughter-in-law while working at night. In both situations — Sarahna's and Radhika's — young women struggle to lead independent lives without breaking with tradition. In Sarahna's case she shuns traditional clothing expectations and in Radhika's case she breaks expectations about a married woman working outside the home.

The motif of choices of clothing represents a generational clash in both novels, but this clash is evident in numerous other ways as well (on women's issues including "appearance," see also, e.g., Sharma; Waller). Ultimately, the clashes between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the Indian and the Western are what lie at the heart of anxieties. One cause for generational anxiety is the fact that young BPO workers often earn more than their parents, which can shift household dynamics, unsettling parental authority (Nadeem 119-20). Financial independence enables identity to be formed via consumption. The characters take on these jobs either as a way of contributing to family income, or so that they do not have to financially rely on their families. While the young characters generally celebrate this freedom, the flip-side is also explored in One Night, through the character of Military Uncle. He is the only call-center worker who is not in his twenties, but a fifty-something retired army officer. He is not a dominant

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presence throughout the novel and Shyam describes him early on in hazy terms as he does not know him well. Shyam believes Military Uncle was thrown out of his house by his son for not getting along with his daughter-in-law (27-28). His military pension is too meagre to survive on and without the support of his son he has to take the job at the call center to make a living. Because he is older, he is assumed to be traditional. When Priyanka announces she is getting married, Shyam recounts: "Even Military Uncle got up and came to shake hands with Priyanka. His generation like it when young people decide to get married" (74). Military Uncle does not really feature as an individual in *One Night*, but as a representative of the older generation. The only point where he speaks up and expresses his opinions, he is expressing regret at having previously been conservative and intolerant: "I want to be with my son and grandson. I miss them all the time. Two years ago I was living with them, but my daughter-in-law did things I didn't like — she went to late-night parties and got a job when I wanted her to stay at home … I argued with them before moving out. But I was wrong. It's their life and I have no right to judge them with my outdated values. I need to get rid of my inflated ego and visit them in the US to talk it over" (255).

The son and daughter-in-law who reject him are not let off without judgment, however. During the night in which the events of the novel are taking place, Military Uncle asks for Shyam's help in editing some photos of animals to email his grandson in the US. He receives the following reply from his son: "Dad, You have cluttered my life enough, now stop cluttering my mailbox. I do not know what came over me that I allowed communication between you and my son. I don't want your shadow on him. Please stay away and do not send him any more emails" (188). By presenting both sides of this incident of generational conflict, Bhagat is suggesting that the younger and the older generations could be more tolerant and open-minded towards each other. The older generation could accept that society is changing and that their offspring are unlikely to behave as they did at that age. The younger generation should recognize that these changes could result in selfish behavior, and they should try to minimise this.

In conclusion, both novels synthesize, rather than resolve, tensions between tradition (thesis) and contemporary social change prompted by globalisation (antithesis). The aping of the West and the proliferation of *Ersatz* Western lifestyles is sometimes seen to result in cultural rootlessness creating a materially-obsessed economic elite. These judgments often center around perceptions of gender roles. While these anxieties certainly have elements of truth and could be the cause of some concern, *One Night* and *Stilettos* also present complex counters to these assumptions. The protagonists in both novels do not always reject traditional values radically, although their familial elders often perceive their actions as being such rejections. The same young women are ultimately seeking closer relationships with husbands and parents than their "modern" lifestyle allows them. Tensions arise when their independence and individualism conflict with the traditional, culturally- and socially-derived relationships they also value. All protagonists display certain levels of preference for Westernized lifestyles, but both *Stilettos* and *One Night* demonstrate that these material attachments are not things around which life should revolve. Personal fulfilment, however such should arise, is prioritized over superficial symbols of affluence or success. These tensions do not result in a radical rejection of traditional values, but a reformulation of how they could coexist with the contemporary realities of a globalizing India. Sociological studies are helpful in discerning what the actors directly involved in a profession that symbolizes India's economic rise feel about themselves and their work. However, the study of literature can also provide nuanced insight. The authors of *One Night* and *Stilettos* have stepped back and reflected upon how they perceive the changes in their society and therefore provide a contrast to informants who may be headily preoccupied with what their job means to them personally. There is no doubt about the fact that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, two decades after India's economy liberalized and opened up to global investment, profound economic, social, and cultural changes are underway. But change does not equal wholehearted rejection of the old and novels such as *One Night at the Call Centre* and *Stilettos in the Boardroom* enable us to see and reflect on this.

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