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The Concept of Panopticon in the Novels of Chetan Bhagat

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat's novels provide quick readability, and the plots have a contemporary feel, although they do not employ any sophisticated style. He is a writer of human psychology. Various moods of human nature are beautifully delineated in his novels. Some of his novels have the concept of panopticon, which tries to present new ideas of life in a new style. He writes about the real facts and causes of materialistic human life. His characters are always ready to act practically. The characters of his novels do not believe in cramming facts and figures as their concerns lie, especially in the innovation of new things and ideas to progress in life. The social panopticon is the condition of the people through its surveillance mechanisms which makes them play an important role for the eyes of others.

Keywords: Human psychology, Panopticon, materialistic human life, surveillance mechanisms.

1. Introduction

Literature is essentially a study of human life with innumerable situations, reactions and emotions. It places the imaginary characters in real life-like situations and loads them with real feelings and emotions to study real beings through imaginary characters. In studying the individual, literature also studies society, history, culture, economics, morality and politics. No field can stand alone on its own. They are interconnected by nature of modern life itself. A brief overview of its presence in literature will serve to establish its eligibility as the primary tool.

Chetan Bhagat has acquired a unique identity as a popular novelist through his creative fictional writings in contemporary Indian English literature. He is considered India's youth icon. Chetan Bhagat's novels have successfully captured the life and popular culture of the modern Indian urban youth and the challenges that they experience in various aspects of their life, including education, love, sex and marriage and career goals within the context of new liberalized India. However, Bhagat has captured the sense of conflict and anxieties that the aspirational youth of Indians feel over the changes that the middle-class social structure has undergone, including gender norms and power relations in the context of globalization, like no other contemporary authors. In depicting the changing culture of modern India and its impact on the youth, he has raised certain questions that are timely and relevant in the coming century as India continues to evolve and develop in this globalized world.

The core concept of panopticon is to instill an unnamed fear in the objects of observation by making them think that they are under constant and continuous observation. The fear of the presence of this powerful gaze forces the people under observation to self-regulate themselves. Michel Foucault uses the concept of panopticon to bring out the role of gaze in power – knowledge dynamics. He suggests that this shift became possible due to a new technology of discipline in the form of panopticon and the ontology of man as a machine.

Foucault believed that discipline produced docile bodies. The modern capitalist systems require these docile bodies. The process through which the society created and is still creating the docile bodies needs to be scrutinized. By stressing the need for uniformity and discipline, society began monitoring the individuals. Foucault points out in *An Archaeology of Medical Perception* as, "The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible" (170-171).

According to Foucault, the need for discipline gave birth to the concept of prison. Moreover, it also brought in the concept of individuation. It enabled the systems to look at bodies as individuals based on their tasks, training, observation and control. This gave place to the emergence of a new economy and politics for the bodies. Discipline created a whole new form of individuality for the bodies, which enabled them to perform their duties within the new forms of modern organizations.

Panopticon, the structure is required to create docile subjects within institutions. Society has adopted the concept of panopticon to create obedient, docile individuals who never question the working of the socio-political institutions. As these social establishments are under the dominance and control of a select few who, in turn, frame their rules with their comfort and gain in mind, the majority are forced to become docile beings in the power structures. It is necessary to protect the authority of these age-old institutions because it is based on them that the capitalist continues to grow from rich to richer.

Chetan Bhagat's world appears to be entirely different with its own set of rules. Society's expectation vastly differs from other world. The rules defined by society have undergone a massive change. Both men and women have to adhere to it, and subsequently, both become victims of the societal gaze. There is no clear distinction between the expectations towards men and women. Both are expected to study well, qualify themselves, and work to earn and raise their living standard. In *One Night @ the Call Center*, Shyam reveals society's pressure on its young men. He says,

I waved a goodbye to everyone, but no one acknowledged me. It wasn't surprising. I am only cared for so much. Every cousin of mine is becoming a doctor or engineer. You can say I am the black sheep of my family... In fact, the only reason people somewhat talk to me is I have a job and get a salary at the end of the month. (OO@CC15)

Even after he works hard, his work is not recognized by Priyanka's mother. He wants to rise in the corporate ladder to improve his status. Old world virtues like the groom's character, background and family take the back seat. The determining factors are the job held by the groom, the income he fetches and consequently, the status that he holds in the society. Shyam has to become a team leader to impress Priyanka's mother. The hard work he puts in, to deserve the post, by designing a website manual for his call center and the anxiousness with which he awaits the response are all proof of the seriousness of these demands.

Varun wants to prove that he is trendy by wearing branded clothes, eating pizza and drinking coke. He tries to project his vain self in the place of his real desires. He joins the call center quitting his job as a journalist. He often reflects on this material step. Varun says, "Because I need the money. My friends have a lifestyle that I have to keep up with. Money lets me come to places like this" (186).

Varun represents the generation that has lost its passion and freedom for a fashionable life. But he chooses to be ultra-modern not because society demands it. His personal preference for the extravagant lifestyle is a mistake he soon realizes. His vanity wins over his passion. But the inherent goodness and desire always thwart him and make him short-tempered. After God's intervention, he channelizes his energy toward positive things. He plans and saves the call center and punishes Bakshi. He decides to leave the call center and pursue his passion.

Esha loses her virginity to get an opening in the modelling field and is punished by getting cheated. The problems of Esha become manifested in her mind and it even becomes self-destructive. She hurts herself and finds satisfaction in her pain. Society's presence is nowhere to be seen. She never bothered about what society would say. Her hurt seems to spring from her own mind. So, the panopticon is in her mind. This cheating hurts her more than any moral preoccupation. She explains her state as "Nobody forced me. I chose to do it. But ever since, I feel this awful guilt" (142).

The panopticon as a visible structure is more pronounced in the modern age with cameras and GPS systems which can penetrate any place. But a change in the attitude of the modern generation makes these omnipresent devices powerless. The modern generation has learned to move out of the olden day's illusion of an ever-present eye in the form of society. They are aware of the camera around them, but they also have places to chill out in the dark with no watchful eyes. Priyanka and Shyam live to their fullest as a pair of lovers. They don't require the sanction of matrimony to begin life. Their intimacy flourishes anywhere and everywhere without even the thought of any omnipresent eye. When they break off, neither seems to worry about the physical intimacy they shared earlier.

Chetan Bhagat has created characters that are bound by the social panopticon. Modern times have a lot of expectations from both men and women. Shyam, Varun, Radhika, Priyanka and Esha in *One Night@ the Call Center* want different things in life. They have different passions. Shyam wants his own business, Varun wants to be a journalist, Radhika wants to be a homemaker, Priyanka wants to be a teacher and Esha as a model. They all choose to be in the call center for the money that it pays. So, though they have regrets about being there, it is their willing choice. Young boys and girls are expected to create an identity for themselves, study well and earn well. If they fail to do so, they are criticized by society. This pressure is from the social panopticon rules of their life.

Hari, Ryan and Alok in *Five Point Someone* know that they have worked very hard to be the students of the reputed IIT. They also know that it is the IIT degree that will be their identity and future. So, though they are unsatisfied with the system and indulge in all kinds of pranks, they too want to pass out of IIT with good jobs. Neha is very cautious in her relationship with Hari. She doesn't want her father to know about her relationship. She is not bothered about the society or its moral values. She goes to the extent of meeting Hari on the roof at night. When Hari goes to Neha's room on the eve of her birthday, she willingly asks him to kiss her, as "What are you thinking? Look into my eyes," Neha said "Aren't you going to kiss me?" (FPS 131).

Krish, in *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* is very particular from the beginning to work in the company that pays the greatest salary. He doesn't have any idealistic attitude towards work and earning. He is simply after the money. Krish says,

‘We’ve good grades. You’ll easily get HLL. It is the best marketing job, right?’

And I'll go for WPM'.

'WPM?'

'Whoever pays more, so I can save as much money as fast as possible.'

I grinned. (2S 30)

Krish's family situation is constantly disturbed because of the quarrel between his father and mother. As a son, he sides with his mother and hates his father. He tries to escape from his house rather than to solve the problem. Thus, the due need to come out of their situation and seek freedom is absent in almost all the characters. So, they fail to recognize the bad faith operating in their lives and don't realize the tools of this bad faith. It is from an external source that the realization comes. Once the realization comes, their confusion are resolved, and everything becomes crystal clear.

In addition to conditioning people through its surveillance mechanisms, the social panopticon makes them play roles in the eyes of others. These roles which make one live in bad faith are also monitored by it. The roles have expectations attached to them. The differences in these expectations lead to a difference in roles. As Chetan Bhagat has very different protagonists, there is a vast difference in their expectations. Society's use of gaze, including a sense of always being watched by somebody, makes it a conceptual panopticon. This panopticon improves self-discipline. People are conscious in the eyes of society. They react to society's gaze and, hence, are always kept in the passive position of an object. It creates anxiety and fear when society's rules are bypassed.

Society has its own set of expectations for men. When they fail to perform these roles, the panopticon lends due pressure. Chetan Bhagat's male protagonists too feel this pressure from society. They are aware of society's expectations. They also try to abide by the rules and live in bad faith. But, they soon learn to overthrow the effects of the social panopticon as the analysis suggests. In doing so, they inevitably move away from bad faith. Their negation of the social panopticon is the first step towards good faith.

2. Conclusion

The liberating power of the gaze is seen in Chetan Bhagat. Bhagat's world shows a different set of rules, but the social panopticon exists. The rules have changed with the times. Though a victim of it in the beginning, Bhagat's characters soon realize its impact and learn to ignore it. They move towards focusing on their life, nullifying the effect of the social panopticon. As Palmer says in *Sartre; For Beginners* says.

When two human beings encounter each other they do so in terms of roles, which are formats of interaction that allow people to engage each other in efficient, non-threatening ways. There are professional roles, familial roles, political roles, entertainment and leisure – time roles, among others. There are even criminal roles.... Because people must interact with other people, there seems to be no alternative to role-playing.... but they also limit and disguise our radical freedom, as they make it easier for us to objectify others and ourselves. It is a law of human beings. (76)

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