



## TRAPPINGS OF THE NEW ECONOMY: QUESTIONS OF FREEDOM AND BONDAGE IN ANJUM HASAN'S *NETI, NETI, NOT THIS, NOT THIS* AND USHA K R'S *MONKEY MAN*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the emergence and development of the BPO industry in India. It argues that though the call-center jobs provide financial independence to the youth at a young age, this freedom and the 'success' that comes along with it are short-lived. These job profiles are no different from factory working conditions, and marketing the use of ICT cannot gloss over the harsh realities of call-center work-life. Women's participation is welcomed because of 'gendered' notions of work and not because of some desire to 'emancipate' them from patriarchal controls. The narratives of 'liberating' potential are stories created to build a positive image of the industry, in addition to providing cheap labor for 'first' world countries at the cost of 'third' world women. I use two novels, Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti, Not This, Not This*, and Usha K.R's novel *Monkey Man*, to establish the arguments made in the paper.

**Key Words: BPO, Call-Center, Outsourcing, Economy, Gender**

### **2.1: Introduction:**

Liberalization changed the discourse of the Indian nation from a Nehruvian socialist ideal to a market-oriented capitalistic ideology. What was a one-time necessity, a "crisis driver response," got valorized over time as the legitimate means of 'development' (Bhaduri and Nayar 10). Among the things which helped consolidate the narrative of the market were the

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call centers, that had put India at the forefront of the global economy. The fact that the sector employed women without hesitation meant that the industry became the face of the liberal economy that promised emancipation for them. But the question is, can neoliberal policies disguised in a liberal image benefit women? Can economic development be equated with and lead to personal, social, and political freedom? How does the call center narrative affect the Woman Question in general? Intending to find answers to these questions this paper attempts to discuss women's position in the new economy through a reading of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti, Not This, Not This*, and Usha K.R.'s *Monkey Man*. The first part of the paper covers the theoretical arguments around the development of the BPO industry and the second part provides a detailed analysis of the novels to substantiate the arguments made in the paper.

## 2.2: BPOs: Financial Independence or 'Temporal Imperialism'?

The Business Process Outsourcing industry (BPO) emerged in India in the 90s with the establishment of service centers by American Express, British Airways, and GE Capitol (Taylor and Bain 267). The industry grew rapidly, moving from providing simple back-office services to performing more complex functions of telemarketing, tax compliance, payroll, etc. (Pradhan and Abraham 23), as it generated huge profit margins for the companies. While the west critiqued outsourcing for it rendered many jobless, it was an opportunity that integrated India into the global economy, providing lucrative career options by Indian standards. The sector generated somewhere around 1.05 million direct jobs and employed 2.5 million people indirectly (23). While 75,000-115,000 people were working in the industry in 2003 (Taylor and Bain 267), the number grew to 470,000 by 2006 (Patel 29). As per the 2002 NASSCOM-McKinsey report, it was the fastest growing sector in the year 2001-2002 (Ramesh 492).

Among the many attractions of the industry, a major one is the superior work environment comprising glass buildings, fancy interiors equipped with the latest tech facilities and recreation spaces. Divya C McMillin found that the "modern 'MNC looks'" was the irresistible charm of call-centers, apart from high salaries and the many other perks of a BPO job (238). This becomes an even bigger factor in the case of women. Preeti Singh and Anu Pandey report that 75 % of their respondents cited a "good environment" as the reason for liking their jobs (685).

However, researchers argue that call-centers represent "an extreme form of, the mass production model" (Batt and Moynihan referred by Taylor and Bain 269), providing "high-



volume, low-value, routinized, short cycle-time workflows” (270). The employees are engaged in a 9-13 hours workshift that is in tandem with the client (271) so that not only are they routinely working at odd hours but are also not entitled to national/religious holidays (Ramesh 496). Salary becomes a matter of performance as demerits and incentives are given for errors/quality index (496). The degree of surveillance, while taking calls, makes Babu P Ramesh compare them to “Roman slave ships” (495). Despite overtly racist comments of the callers, the employees are expected to maintain their composure, necessitating “performance of emotional labor” (Hochschild referred by Taylor and Bain 273). The emphasis on ‘accent training’ and usage of anglicized pseudonyms strongly suggest ‘imperialist’ and ‘neocolonialist’ tendencies (Taylor and Bain 273; McMillin 237). What call centers are doing then is “colonization with and of time” (Adam 17), “temporal imperialism,” and “temporal entrapment” (Adam qtd. in Patel 28). Call-centres, thus, continue to have high attrition rates due to stressful working conditions, belying their claim of a promising job market.

According to Ramesh what call centers do is “camouflaging work as fun,” providing “illusionary freedom and flexibility” in the form of parties, freedom to dress, and availability of recreation options (495), when the reality is that the youth is “burning out their formative years as cyber-coolies” (496).

### 2.3: ‘Empowering’ Women:

The emergence of call centers is often associated with ‘liberation’ or at least the ‘empowerment’ of women. For example, Jaya Prakash Pradhan and Vinoj Abraham write that call centers have been “nothing less than a social reform movement as far as economic, social and cultural empowerment of women is concerned” (24). “Financial independence provided by employment in call centers has empowered women to be assertive and independent in their outlook, attitude, and career choice. The gender-neutral and international working atmosphere in call-centers has the potential to further female empowerment” (25).

The perception of call centers being ‘gender-neutral’ spaces pervades across the industry as there is no discrimination at the entry-level. However, there are no statistics that show gender representation in call centers in India (Baxi 6), and the image of the industry as ‘women-oriented’ is based on an image/perception. The largest study in this regard is that by



V.V. Giri Labour Institute in Noida, where women constituted 38% of the sample workforce (6). Parul Baxi also points out how while calculating the potential for empowering women one must take into account that the female literacy rate was 54.16 percent (2001 census), besides the fact that 70 percent of the population resides in rural areas with poor ICT infrastructure- 4.3 million computers for a population of one billion (8). Thus, if at all callcenters have empowered Indian women they are largely urban, educated women. Within that, one must take into account the difference between single women, married women, and married women with children. For example, Singh and Pandey write that 92 percent of their respondents were unmarried women, as the night-shift requirement and long working hours are not fit for women in their reproductive years. Thus, they could not find women within the age group of 30-40 in their study (686). Their domestic role as caretakers takes precedence over their careers, except in cases where they need to support their families financially (686). Even if one looks at it in terms of economics women generally are part of process jobs and not technical jobs, working at the lower end of customer care services (687).

Bruce A. Weinberg argues that by “de-emphasizing physical skills,” computer-based jobs increase the demand for female labor (290). However, it must be taken into account that high-skilled women workers are substituting low-skill men in the job market, as the economy moves from the industrial base to the service sector (Topel; Juhn and Kim referred by Weinberg 304). Hence, it is the white-collar nature of ICT-based jobs that have increased the participation of women in computer courses in India (Varma and Kapur 58). Thus though the new economy has offered women more opportunities, the structural biases and gender-based division of labor that prevent women from having equal access and status are still very much in place.

Kelkar et al’s study of women’s participation in IT-based industries suggests the same. They write that the IT sector empowers individuals, instead of addressing structural inequalities that can challenge patriarchal relations. Thus, in practice “there has been no change in the gender-based division of labor, but only a shift of responsibility from professional women to women workers at the lower end” as women transfer their domestic work to maids or older women within the household (72). And though “women’s status in the family and society was directly proportional to their status in the workplace” (74), the truth remains they can exercise power over their own earnings only, and their freedom of decision-making does not extend to familial wealth and property matters (75). To add to that in the workplace women are at a



competitive disadvantage in comparison to men on account of restrictions on mobility because of marriage and children (76-77).

#### 2.4: 'Gender Neutral' or 'Gender Labeled':

This brings us to the question of why women are preferred in the service sector/BPO industry. Contrary to its claim of a 'gender-neutral' work environment, the call-center industry heavily relies on gendered notions of work. It is believed that women 'naturally' have communication and interpersonal skills, making them better candidates for a customer care job profile (Taylor and Tyler qtd. in Belt et al. 25). The ability to smile, address with concern, make people feel good, are qualities which, it is assumed, come 'naturally' to women. Winifred R. Poster points out how the discourse of "nimble fingers" and "dangerous places" leads to "gendered labeling of jobs" (88). "While men should be ('naturally') aggressive, competitive, independent, tough, hardworking, and well-skilled, women should be ('naturally') caring, cooperative, team-oriented, sensitive, unmotivated, and in some cases, under-skilled" (90). The narrative of "dangerous places" ensures that women are confined to specific spaces, deemed to be 'safe,' while men can rein over field jobs (90-93).

Thus, when men enter a job market that values 'feminine' qualities like caring and communicating, they end up "performing femininity" (Mirchandani 111). When dealing with a racist client, a call-center employee, male or female, enters into the role of "mothering" or "servitude," leading to "racialized gendering of jobs" (114).

The BPO industry's biggest argument in its favor is that it can provide one with financial independence at a young age. But the question is are financial independence and emancipation the same thing? While the studies of call centers in the west have led to an argument in favor of "feminization of labor" or "feminization of service" (Belt et al., Breathnach; Bonds referred by Patel) or coining of terms like "pink-collar workforce" (Howe referred by Patel 30), the truth is women's entry into the field is marked by shifting of these jobs from being white-collar jobs to "deskilled, feminized workspace" (Anne Bond referred by Patel 30). In the case of Indian women, it leads to "rigidification of time" (Poster qtd. by Patel 36) as it disrupts women's work within the domestic space. Thus, in India, men dominate the field of callcenters- 50 to 70 percent as per Poster and Mirchandani's work on Gurgaon and



Noida. It is even more so in the case of smaller cities like Ahmedabad where 80 percent of the workforce are men (Patel 40). Based on her interviews, Patel argues the reason why men in India opt for this otherwise “pink-collar” job is because by Indian standards it pays more and also because unlike women men can move through the nightscape without any restriction; they have “physical and temporal mobility” that is denied to women (40).

And yet, interestingly, when advertising itself the industry chooses to use images of women to represent itself. A 2002 *India Today* image projects women as “housekeepers to the world,” and a 2006 *Time Magazine* chooses the image of a call center employee wearing a bindi, wedding jewelry, and headset on its cover page to depict call centers (36-37). The reason is that unlike the conventional job profiles like teaching, nursing, secretarial or clerical work, women’s presence in non-traditional sectors brought a “new image” into existence, one of “breaking barriers of the stereotype” (Singh and Pandey 684).

‘Allowing’ or restricting women access to work at night has a historical context that dates back to laws like Factory and Workshop Act (1891), the Indian Factories Act (1911), the Indian Factories Act (1984), the amendment made to the 1948 Act in 2005 (Patel 49). The interesting thing about the 2005 amendment is that though in the name of ‘equal’ opportunity it ‘allows’ women to work, under the precondition that the employer takes care of women’s safety, it does not talk about equal pay (50). Thus, the law conveniently makes female labor available at a cheap rate for the benefit of the global economy. Patel argues that narratives about the ‘emancipatory’ potential of call-center jobs are part of the colonizing mission that guarantees cheap labor for the sake of its “globalizing mission” (53).

Although the ability to work at night disrupts the conventional notions of time and space about women’s mobility, the fact remains it does not result in personal independence or changing of gender equations at home. Patel’s study adds to Kelkar et al’s position on women in the workforce. She points out how despite financial independence, women’s decisions are often guided by their position vis-a-vis the male member of the family, father or husband (109-112). In addition to it, the nightshift puts an additional burden on women who are socially seen as ‘sexually deviant,’ attracting scrutiny and suspicion of neighbors and police (117). “Earning her income did not translate into breaking free of the mobility-morality narratives that bound her to a strict work-to-home, family-centered lifestyle (129). “Economic mobility and temporal mobility...does not necessarily translate into increased social mobility” (129). It can seriously



injure a woman's reputation in the marriage market that runs on the principles of 'proper' behavior (130).

## 2.5: The Alice in the World of Worker Ants:

The protagonist of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti, Not This, Not This*, Sophie Das works in a company that transcribes soundtracks for Hollywood films (a BPO). With her English education and familiarity with Western culture, she comes across as someone who is a perfect fit for the industry. She has "no trouble with American accents or American spellings or American references to American cars and supermarket chains and rock bands and cigarette brands" (39). She is not like the "slow ones, the ones who had to listen to James Bond six times before they understood what he was saying, the one with atrocious grammar" (40). However, the initial "thrill" of being part of an American firm gradually dies down as the monotony and repetitiveness of her job start consuming her sense of being (39). Sophie's sense of discomfort comes from looking at people like Shanthi, the "worker ant," with her "unbreakable habits, her identical lunch boxes, her army of relatives, her temple-going, her salwar-kurtas all cut in the same way and made from the same kind of fabric. There were no spaces left in the picture for doubt or idle daydreaming" (41). Sophie is the Alice of the text who is afraid that this touch with reality will breakdown her ability to dream, to be creative. Her job, thus, increasingly becomes a drudgery that lacks meaning and purpose: "there was something sinister about this vomit of images...horrible thinness, the unrelieved flatness of film, a two-dimensional world whose peculiar chemistry reduced everything to the same thing" (43). Unlike her superior Maya, who takes the job seriously, Sophie looks down upon the "retarded job" that requires her to relentlessly type captions (49).

The vulnerability of these new job profiles is visible from the fact that by the end of the novel both Sophie and Maya lose their jobs. Yet, no one cares about it as "every week people left or were thrown out" (272).

Sophie's sense of horror becomes a reality towards the end as we see her entering a job profile that would numb her senses and turn her into a "worker ant" Shanthi. As language editor for a journal (again an outsourcing job) she must work tirelessly with the hundreds of



other “worker ants,” losing any sense of identity that she may have, submerging herself in the pool of the global workforce.

“Sophie has been surrounded by fifty people in her earlier job and felt dwarfed, but now she was truly a cog in a machine, an ant among other stupidly industrious ants who just carried on tapping on their keyboards without a clue as to their impending fates. She earned less here than in her previous job and had to work harder. Ninety pages of text a day was the minimum requirement ...Everyone here was a Shanthi Gowda, and you either had to keep your eyes trained on the computer nine hours ...or quit” (277).

## 2.6: New Woman of the New Economy:

Pushpa Rani of Usha K R’s *Monkey Man* worked as a daily-wage typist at a government office “typing reports for fifty rupees a day, less than what a contract sweeper was paid” (77). Pushpa’s fate changed after she saw an advertisement in which a girl was smartly “dressed in black trousers and black T-shirt and her hair was cut short in a fringe across her forehead” (78). It is this image that became the source of her inspiration and gave her the confidence, with which she decided to neither speak nor ask anybody about working in a callcenter, and went on her own to check what the term meant and bought her first pair of trousers (78). All that the advertisement demanded was that you were “young, ambitious, resourceful and English-speaking” (78). The narrative informs that this is “how she would like to be seen” – “sharp, cocky and warm,” like the woman in the advertisement (78).

It is interesting to note that though Pushpa wants to forget about the “inconsequential days” of her past when she was bullied by her superior Neela at CSES, she does not evaluate her call-center job in a similar way (79). Her current ‘success,’ the fact that she has been chosen as the face of the cover of *Nation Today*, makes her justify the rude and abusive behavior of her customers. She prides herself in being an employee who finishes work on time and attracts no complaints from customers. In her chance encounter with her former colleagues, she becomes a subject of everyone’s attention, who noticed her “low waist blue jeans, purple lipstick and a silver faux leather handbag. Gone was the synthetic salwar-kameez and the single plait taunt with hair oil. Her eyes too were unfettered from their thick glasses” (72). She now has the courage to revert to Neela who teases her about “monkey tricks- change your name and your accent,” by curtly pointing out that her “swanky” office is better than being “cooped up at the Centre” (72). For the researchers, Alka and Dr. Larson, she is the



subject of their study on the transformation brought about by the change in the economy- “The New Economy and the New Woman” (74).

However, this narrative of ‘success’ cracks as the novel progresses. Neither her yoga practice nor visits to the temple can calm the restlessness of her mind. Her tired back and bickering with her family are all indicative of her deteriorating health, a consequence of the imbalance of the call-center lifestyle.

### 2.7: A Free World or Illusion of Freedom?

For both, Sophie and Pushpa, their sense of independence and identity come from their respective jobs. Sophie has a space of her own in Bangalore, away from the restrictions of her home. In Bangalore, she has grown as a person, becoming more confident everyday. Similarly, Pushpa may not have seen sunrise in a month, but she commutes in a Qualis (80), earns fifteen thousand a month, and in a countrywide poll has been chosen as the “face of the country’s burgeoning Business Process Outsourcing industry” (81).

Can this be called ‘liberation’ then?

Sophie can smoke and invite malefriends to her house, but only if she can hide them well from the judgemental eyes of her landlord and RWA members. Discipling the female body is not only the task of the family but is a moral responsibility that her neighbors can take upon themselves. Even as we see her feeling uncomfortable by the threatening male gaze lingering on her body, she continues to be bullied in the name of high-paying jobs that corrupt women. Her vulnerability as a woman who is living alone is exposed at the moment when a call-center employee is brutally killed by her boyfriend, labeled as a ‘call-center murder’ (151). Violence against women lurks in every corner of the ‘modern’ city.

For Pushpa, it is true that she has managed to escape the bullying of those like Neela, but what about the abusive callers? Her salary and the new work culture enable her to have that sense of confidence where she can just point out the blue-colored drink that she wants, even if she does not know the name, for she can pay; can plan a hangout at a disco with her friends; or party with her friends and boyfriend in Coorg on new year’s eve. But this does not necessarily give her the freedom to make her own decisions in her personal life. She may reply curtly to her father, about being away all night without informing them, but she cannot escape the



judgmental remarks of her mother who believes that this is what happens “if you maketoo much of your daughters. They start to think that they are the same as men” (196). Economic freedom has done little to alter gender lines, and thus, the mother no longer cares about Pushpa’s income for her son is earning too. So, even though it is Pushpa who took decisions regarding her brother’s career, her mother thinks she should listen to her brother now (196).

## 2.8: Conclusion:

Though one can not deny that the usage of ICT and the growth of the BPO industry has opened many avenues for women, making them financially independent. Yet, the availability of opportunities alone cannot be an indicator of a more ‘liberal’ world. One needs to acknowledge that women are incorporated into the call-center industry, not because of a ‘gender-neutral’ approach to work but because women are expected to ‘naturally’ have the qualities required for this profession. Hence, their demand. The ‘emancipatory’ potential of the global economy cannot be studied without taking into account the position of women as residents of the ‘third’ world. Gendered notions of work and structural inequalities continue to place women in a disadvantaged position vis-a-vis men. Their identity within the domestic space continues to overshadow their professional dreams.

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