

PART TWO

Accented Perception

Is There a Call Center Literature?

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Hi. You have reached “Is There a Call Center Literature?”

Is there a literature that registers the social, political, and economic transformations wrought by the call center? Is there a literature that stages the tech-support relations institutionalized by the business process outsourcing industry? Is there a literature that operates through formal techniques of accent neutralization and modification comparable to those employed by call center agents?

Press 1 for details on our current services.

Press 2 for a history of our institution.

Press 3 to listen in on a trainee’s performance review.

Press 4 to review a proposal for a transnational study of Call Center Literatures.

Press 5 for a job advertisement in Global Anglophone literature.

Press 6 to watch call center theater.

Press 7 to talk to an English professor about the latest New India novel.

Our dedicated staff are eager to assist you in thinking about the Indian call center and its relationship to the English-language literature of New India. For all other inquiries, including about the Mexican, Central American, and Filipino call centers, please consult the Works Cited.¹ This call may be peer-recorded for quality assurance. Thank you for holding, and please stay on the line. Someone will be with you shortly.

I. [When: Now. Where: Here. Who speaks: An “I” that sounds like “Me.” To whom: You. What: Details on our current services. A mission statement. An admission.]

Is there a Call Center Literature? I’ve been asking this question for the better part of a decade. I entered a doctoral program in the interdisciplinary humanities in 2009 and started writing about the literary signature of the call center in 2012. I had conversations about Call Center Literature and presented on it at conferences. I drafted a dissertation chapter, article, job talk, and project proposal that sought to use Call Center Literature as a rubric to organize the study of non-Western

Anglophone texts. I pronounced “Call Center Literature” in many ways: as archive, method of study, aspiration.

It’s also true that I stopped asking my titular question some years ago, stopped searching for “a specific ‘way of speaking’” Call Center Literature.² The phrase does not appear in my 2016 dissertation on the Anglophone literature of contemporary India. In 2018, I published an article on the discursive symmetries between the figures of the expatriate writer and the call center agent.³ Call Center Literature is absent there too.

As the call center industry moved on from India, which had been its global center, as India deemphasized the call center’s centrality to its global brand, as scholarship on the call center accrued in a wide range of fields, I began to feel that there was no longer any suspense in the act of answering the call center’s call, that whatever there was to say about the call center had already been said, and, equally, that whatever the call center agent had to say had already been heard.⁴ Moreover, my advisor didn’t think Call Center Literature sounded right, and I got the message that I didn’t sound right either, speaking it, not quite like an English scholar.

I moved on. Or I thought I moved on. In fact, my departure from Call Center Literature appears to me now like the virtual migrations of a call center worker whose imaginative life elsewhere (with other, more worthy scholarly objects) belies the strictures of her position here (back where I started, never having left). My giving up on Call Center Literature after listening to myself fail to say it right feels from the present vantage like an exercise in accent reduction, neutralization, and modification (that’s still not it; can you repeat that?; never mind). Accent reduction, neutralization, and modification are of course the practices of linguistic transformation for which the call center agent is primarily known, and which are conventionally construed by scholars and fictionists as signs of the agent’s subordination. In Bharati Mukherjee’s 2011 novel, *Miss New India*, customer support jobs require malleable dispositions. “I think,” an employer says to an aspiring agent, “you have a great deal of difficulty erasing yourself from the call . . . Being a call agent requires modesty . . . submission. We teach you to serve.”⁵ We teach you, that is, to produce a truly acousmatic voice; the source of your sound must remain unseen; the caller should not be able to locate you.⁶

I erased Call Center Literature from my work. This chapter narrates my return to its concerns, which happened slowly, through ongoing efforts with Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, and Pavitra Sundar to theorize accent as non-indexical, relational, and inherently comparative, and all at once, inspired by our coproduction of *Thinking with an Accent*. My present aim is to enact such thinking by offering a retrospective interrogation of the forms of accented perception—by which I mean both listening and reading—that I tried to anticipate and accommodate through variously accented articulations of Call Center Literature over the years. In the process I reconsider who and what Call Center Literature itself accommodates through

its manifold accents, internal translations, and elisions. Who speaks (writes) Call Center Literature, and to whom does Call Center Literature speak? Who receives (reads) Call Center Literature's call, and to whom is the receiver listening?⁷

If you are reading this chapter for an argument (which is itself a form of accented reading),⁸ I offer this: an argument for accent as a form of approach; an argument for speaking as seeking, specifically for the speaking subject as seeking convergence with the one to whom she speaks; an argument for accent as a mode of fashioning language so that it approximates—even if it never reaches—the desired object. Another way of stating this is as an argument for accent as the residue of thought, as the metalinguistic trace of a process of accrual by which, in speaking, we attempt to know something, and in accommodating the one to whom we speak, we attempt to consummate that speaking as knowing.

I derive the language of accommodation from two sources. First, from sociolinguists who study how accents shift, consciously and unconsciously, in the presence of different listeners. Such shifts are termed “accent convergence and divergence,” “code-switching,” “communication accommodation,” and “dialect accommodation.”⁹ Understood as a practice of convergence and accommodation, accent emerges as the sticky tissue between what we say and who we say it to, how we sound and how we are heard, between subjects and ideas of subjects, between, to borrow J. L. Austin's typology, speech acts (locutions), the intentions that drive them (illocutions) and the way that those speech acts are taken up by intended and unintended addressees (perlocutions).¹⁰ Accent understood thus does not betray identities and origins; rather, it lays bare logics of representation, interpretation, and identification.

I am also following Rangan, whose chapter in this volume on the relationship between becoming “accented” and becoming “disabled” includes this insight:

When a call center trainee from small-town India undergoes voice training to ‘lose’ his regional accent, he is accommodating North American and other English-speaking customers. These customers benefit daily from the logic of disability accommodations without ever identifying as disabled, even as the call center trainee is made to feel defective, inadequate, and impaired—in short, in need of reform.¹¹

If you've read anything about the call center, it's this: that its agents don't speak in their own voices, that they have aliases, that they manipulate their accents to smooth over business transactions.¹² Very rarely do scholars focus on the accented *listening* that is happening on the other end of the line, which Rangan emphasizes. When we assume that the call center agent has been trained to reduce and minimize herself and her accent, when we assume that the call center agent's English is inadequate, we miss the ways in which she is performing radical accommodation of the Western caller, who tunes in with what Jennifer Stoeber terms the “listening ear” and is therefore primed to hear unfamiliar pronunciations of English as suspicious, deficient, or inaudible.

Stoever's listening ear is "a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices."¹³ My earliest articulations of Call Center Literature sought a vantage from which to problematize the dominant ideologies of globality at work in English literary studies in its American institutional form. These ideologies have changed over time through the culture of classroom and canon, and they put pressure on our individual readings of non-Western Anglophone texts. With Call Center Literature, I aimed to lay bare the assumptions of belatedness and Western address that, along with ironic fantasies of world literary interconnectedness, undergird readings of contemporary New Indian texts. Call Center Literature would marshal the call centers' lessons of vexed telephonic exchange, somatic adjustment, and accent modification in the reading of New Indian literature. Call Center Literature would expose the dominant Anglophone reader's "reading ear," which is primed to receive the non-Western English text as derivative, pandering, and inauthentic. [Press 2 for a history of these inaugural attempts.]

This discussion registers and advances these goals by reading both the call center and Call Center Literature as the setting and structure of an ongoing knowledge project. Like the call center, this chapter is a time machine: it flouts assumptions of chronological temporality and disrupts circadian rhythms. It is a force of connection that operates through disruption; it creates the illusion of movement toward the desired object despite its anchoring. Call Center Literature is a dissertation that was never written, a book that was never proposed, an argument that builds through self-concealment. In asking "Is there a Call Center Literature?" here, now, as you read these words, I seek to induct the academic critic into the call center by respecifying the space and time of her speaking and its reception.

The following sections reenact my past efforts to accommodate particular recipients of what I hoped would be Call Center Literature, including conference audience, thesis advisor, and hiring committee. Each section is offered as a performance of thinking with an accent. Each is a time capsule that might be read as a provisional mode of producing the intelligibility of Call Center Literature. Together they seek its origins and telos. They pursue both the archive that Call Center Literature names and the itinerary of the one who pursues it. If accent can be understood as a "biography of migration, as an irregular and itinerant concoction of contagiously accumulated voices," then this work attests that accent can also serve as a biography of thought, as "testament . . . to an unstable and migratory" process of attempting to articulate what one endeavors to know to an-other with whom one endeavors to think.¹⁴ In this way I return the subject "to the critic's otherwise subjectless speech."¹⁵

Is there a Call Center Literature?

To whom am I speaking?

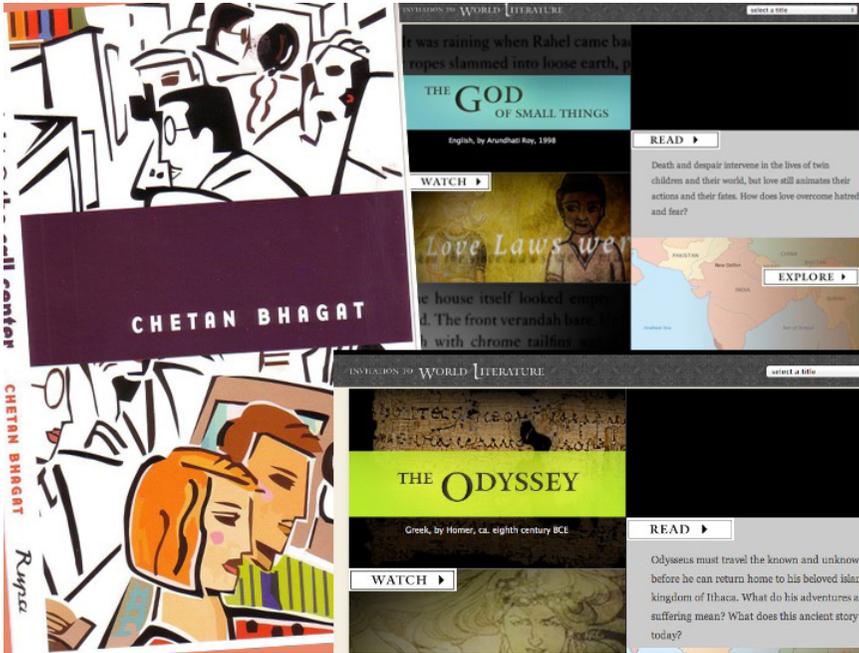


FIGURE 6.1. World literature from *The Odyssey* to Chetan Bhagat. From “Is There a Call Center Literature?” PowerPoint presentation delivered February 2014 at the University of Chicago at the graduate student conference “Whole Worlds: Systems of Affect, Capital, Aesthetics.”

II. [When: February 2014. Where: A graduate student conference. Who speaks: Some versions of “I” who recollect who “We” were. To whom: Professors, fellow students, conference audiences. What: An institutional history. Inaugural attempts at an original coinage.]

Call Center Literature began as a response to world literature, a field that sits uneasily between the disciplines of English and comparative literature (see figure 6.1). Our founder, then a doctoral candidate, was steeped in debates about world literature. Here’s how she described those debates on January 9, 2014, at a conference in Chicago during a polar vortex. It was one degree Fahrenheit outside the Aloft Hotel. Let’s listen in, and listen to those listening:

World literature is being invoked as a successor to postcolonial literary studies and critical response to globalization that is also, somewhat counterintuitively, occasioned by the globalization of literary studies and markets. Now, one triumphalist story goes, non-Western texts may finally be promoted from the marginal statuses of “postcolonial” and “ethnic” to the vaunted status of “world.” But which non-Western literatures are receiving world literary recognition? Does world literature adequately problematize globalization?

These were not original questions; these were the questions on offer in literary studies at the time. Contributors to the 2003 volume *World Bank Literature* and critics like Emily Apter, in her 2013 *Against World Literature*, had already elaborated the violence of world literature's analogical thinking while specifying transnational capital and American imperialism as undergirding conditions of theorizing the world.¹⁶ Our founder was emboldened by these texts and by rhetorical questions like Peter Hitchcock's "What if world literature is not?"¹⁷ Let's tune in again:

We must question world literature's assumptions about the vocation of literature, its readers, and what qualifies a text as "world"-ly. Damrosch classes as world literature "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language." He further specifies that a text has an "effective life as world literature whenever . . . it is *actively present* within a literary system beyond that of its original culture."¹⁸ Dimock's world literary texts have a "*prolonged life* and a *global following*"; her "*practiced*" reader hears "the planet as a whole."¹⁹ These and similar elaborations tie a theory of the world to the nonequivalent conceptions of the *global*, a political and economic construct discursively constituted by the capital flows now identified with globalization, and *planetary*, a term with ecocritical resonances and an attendant call for ethical stewardship of the earth, made familiar by Spivak, while putting forth exclusive criteria for inclusion.

Our founder's task as an apprentice academic was to practice speaking the language of the world literature debate, to rehearse known questions in the hope that they might eventually spin off into something original. She would accent her intervention through carefully curated citations. She was leading up to a comment on the English-language literature of the New India. This is what she said next, in transitioning from the critique of world literature to the elaboration of a new mode of thinking about Global Anglophone literary production:

What are the criteria for effectivity and active presence? How long is a prolonged life? How is a global following measured? If "global following" were measured in terms of sheer number of readers, then the pulpy, ninety-five-rupee novels of Chetan Bhagat and his "unpracticed" readers might be far worldlier than those of, say, Arundhati Roy, whose 1997 *The God of Small Things* was recently hailed by PBS as a world literary exemplar along with *The Odyssey* and *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Ah, Bhagat. Our founder did not particularly like Bhagat, the pulp-fiction writer credited with being India's highest-selling English-language writer. She had only read one of his novels, the 2005 *One Night @ the Call Center*. What seemed clear, however, was that Bhagat had achieved the symbolic heft in the critical discourse on global Indian literature that only Salman Rushdie had in the postcolonial context, and that he had done this by explicitly dismissing writers like Rushdie who were celebrated in the West. "What is the point of writers who call themselves Indian authors," Bhagat asked, "but who have no Indian readers? . . . I want my books next

to jeans and bread; I want my country to read me.”²⁰ Bhagat’s novels were marketed and read almost exclusively in India; they were the exemplary case of novels that do not “circulate beyond their culture of origin” and instead “stay home.”

Our founder thought she could use Bhagat to advance—playfully, creatively, seriously—a critique of world literature. Here was a writer with a finger on the pulse of Indian globalization who was expressly *not* worldly, nor cosmopolitan, nor planetary in sensibility; a writer who was not addressing Western readers; a writer whose work did not travel, whose novels were not meant to be translated, and who wrote in a language as neutral as call center English.²¹ Bhagat would never be read as world literature, but was he not, in his way, worldly?

Bhagat was a red herring. The plan was always to pivot to concerning trends in the scholarship on Indian English literature more generally. Because while Bhagat may have been a genuinely “anti-literary”²² writer, recipients of international prizes were also subject to criticisms of their literary merits. Take, for example, the charges leveled against Aravind Adiga, author of the 2008 Booker-winning New India novel, *The White Tiger*. Despite his wide circulation and popularity—or, indeed, because of both—many critics read Adiga as pandering, inauthentic, and derivative.

Pandering: Both the English language and the global novel carry with them an assumed Western reader, who is, by virtue of his persistent self-centering, almost impossible to shake. Thus, India-based critics read *The White Tiger* as delivering up yet another “exotic India” for Western readers—as if they were de facto the intended audience of the novel. “[For] many of us,” Shobhan Saxena wrote in the *Times of India*, “our worst fears have come true—the West is once again using our poverty to humiliate us.”²³

Inauthentic: Despite English’s “prestige” in the Indian context, “its lack of regional specificity . . . often marks it as being culturally inauthentic.”²⁴ Thus, Sanjay Subrahmanyam criticized Adiga for using English to depict non-elite Indians: “What we are dealing with is someone with no sense of the texture of Indian vernaculars, yet claiming to have produced a realistic text.”²⁵

Derivative: Just as Pascale Casanova charged Vikram Seth with copying the “typically English and largely outmoded” literary techniques of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, Adiga was understood to be working in the form of the Western novel, retelling Richard Wright’s 1940 *Native Son*, and indigenizing someone else’s realism.²⁶

These critiques were there in classrooms, syllabi, and textbooks; they were leveled by Indian and non-Indian critics alike. They are, our founder realized, baked into the study of all Indian literatures that come to Anglo-American critical attention through the operations of the global literary marketplace. English is always assumed, against the common sense of history and biography, to be inescapably “other” to the contemporary Indian writer. Indian English literature, as Rashmi Sadana argues, “is seen not only as being less authentic than vernacular, or bhasha,

literature but also, and more specifically, as a betrayal of a particular linguistic community by one of its own.”²⁷ The literary Indian English writer, in turn, “is assumed to be pandering to a global rather than to a regional audience and . . . is considered ‘less Indian’ for doing so.”²⁸

While our founder was chafing against dominant readings of Indian English literature, she was also reading ethnographies of the Indian call center, which was, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, a well-established signifier of the New India. It was the key institution through which upwardly mobile, aspirational young Indians were speaking—literally, on the telephone—to the world. Our founder was drawn to these young Indians; she recognized their efforts at accent modification and neutralization as analogous to those of Indian English writers like Adiga, as well as to her own. Call center agents were tasked with making their Indian English sound *global*. Writers like Adiga were trying to make their English sound marketably (as opposed to inscrutably) *Indian*. She was struggling to draft a dissertation that would sound like *English*, disciplinarily speaking.

Like the call center agent, like Adiga, our founder would rise to the project of simultaneously eliminating difference and cultivating a very specific difference—an Indian and global difference; a postcolonial and ethnic difference—from the American- or British-accented (which is also to say, the American- or British-literature-focused) English-speaking (and reading) voice. Whatever she wrote, it would have to pass muster with scholars steeped in the English canon, accustomed to the accents of Milton, Tennyson, and Joyce, as well as the accented criticism of their particular readers. By that same token, she would have to embody the analytics that constitute the margins of the field. [Press 5 for an enumeration of these analytics in the space of a job ad.]

That’s where “Call Center Literature” began: as a coinage vested with a nascent critique of a disciplinary fantasy of worldliness; as a coinage straining for audibility and legibility within English. Call Center Literature would trouble the premise of “world” (literature) and query the construction of the (Global) “Anglophone.” (See figure 6.2.) According to the OED, an “Anglophone” is an English-speaking person, or a place where English is spoken and heard. But what is English? A language that is not one. A subject who is not one. A voice which is not itself. As Daniel DeWispelare observes, “The ‘anglo’ in ‘anglophony’ represents a simulacrum of Englishness in a world where the vast majority of anglophones are not and have not been English since the late eighteenth century.”²⁹ To name the “Anglophone,” then, is to conceive of literature as not just written in English, singular, but as a venue where Englishes, plural, are spoken and heard, lobbed and received. To call a literature “Anglophone” is to raise the question of who and what the text itself is listening for, and who, in turn, is listening back.

III. [When: November 2012. Where: An English professor’s office. Who speaks: A dissertator. To whom: A dissertation advisor. What: A performance review. A postmortem on a chapter draft.]

Call Center Literature

- ...traces the call center's and India's discursive transformations in the story of Asia's rise
- ...“stays home”
- ...speaks in an accent-neutralized voice
- ...offers a commentary on World Literature

FIGURE 6.2. Defining Call Center Literature. From “Is There a Call Center Literature?” PowerPoint presentation delivered February 2014 at the University of Chicago at the graduate student conference “Whole Worlds: Systems of Affect, Capital, Aesthetics.”

No, I'm not just talking about the call center novel. Yes, there are call center novels. There are novelistic depictions of call centers and their Americanized agents, like Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center*, Anish Trivedi's 2010 *Call Me Dan*, and Mukherjee's *Miss New India*. These are lowbrow, pulpy texts written in the “modular” and “serviceable” English of the outsourcing industry.³⁰ Critics have only recently started writing about Bhagat, and nobody wants to touch Mukherjee.³¹ There is limited commentary on a related genre, “techie lit.”³² There are call center plays, too, and art installations, and movies, like Jeff Jeffcoat's 2006 *Out-sourced*.³³ I'm not writing about those either.

An argument? I think I'm trying to argue that it's possible to write a work of Call Center Literature without actually depicting a call center. I'm not aiming for a literal description of a genre's content, but rather for a formulation that might shed light on the cultural production of the New Indian contemporary. Call Center Literature will be a heuristic device and a provocation. To adapt Amitava Kumar's question about “World Bank literature,” “To think about books and jobs—about authors as much as agents, the literature of self-help as well as outsourced tech support—is that ‘Call Center Lit?’”³⁴ I argue that it is.

What do I mean by literature of self-help? Let me put it this way: The cliché about India is that it's where searching Westerners can “find themselves.” From

A Passage to India to *Eat Pray Love*, India has always accommodated the West's desires, nostalgia, and projections. India was a source of spiritual help for the subjects of a disenchanting West long before the inauguration of call center tech support. And so, yeah, this is what really bothers me about the novel of New India: that it depicts the people delivering tech support as the ones in need of help, in need of external models to complete their journeys into commercial self-actualization, as the ones who are deficient and in need of rehabilitation.

Mohsin Hamid's 2013 *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is the obvious place to go; it unfolds as a twelve-step self-help program, and each chapter offers a maxim for getting rich, like "move to the city" and "dance with debt." I guess what I'm wondering is, do you think I can use the term *self-help* to describe all novels of entrepreneurship? Novels that fetishize "individual initiative, personal responsibility and ambition, and individualistic notions of success"?³⁵ Take Bhagat's call center novel. It includes blank spaces on its opening page for readers to reflect on their fears; it solicits their "participation in and affective commitment" to the narrative and then offers them "an easy takeaway" or two.³⁶ (See figure 6.3.) Ethnographers describe call center agents as "entrepreneurial" even though they're not entrepreneurs because they supposedly embody the neoliberal ethic. Even though his subject is not the call center, Adiga—writer of that iconic New Indian entrepreneur, the murderous Balram—has been called "the Charles Dickens of the call-centre generation."³⁷

And actually, the call center is very much there in *The White Tiger*, and other New India texts too. It's a critical part of the *mise-en-scène*. Adiga writes India as a nation of entrepreneurs who "virtually run America now" from cities like Bangalore, where you "can't get enough call-center-workers, can't get enough software engineers, can't get enough sales managers."³⁸ In Danny Boyle's 2008 *Slumdog Millionaire*, Jamal works as a chaiwallah in a Mumbai call center; he gets on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" by tapping into the center's resources. In Raj Kamal Jha's 2015 *She Will Build Him a City*, the fantastical New City-scape that stands in for the New Indian city is authenticated by the presence of the call center, as in, "There's little traffic at so early an hour except for call-centre Toyotas that dart from light to light."³⁹

Yes, the call center is always there because it symbolizes the contradictions of New India. It is a deeply ambivalent sign that accents New India by standing apart from its surrounds. On the one hand, the call center is a sign of India's ongoing colonization; that's where we get the language of "cybercoolies," "dead ringers," and "phone clones"—as if the agents have no agency; as if they are robotic copycats; as if they are all mimicry and no menace.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the call center is a scene of Western disempowerment and overdependence on the East; that's why "outsourcing" and "offshoring" came up so often in the 2004 and 2008 U.S. elections as threats to American world dominance.

The call center is a sign of India's rise and fall. It's evidence of the Empire striking back; it's also the Indian analog of the Chinese sweatshop. On top of that, the

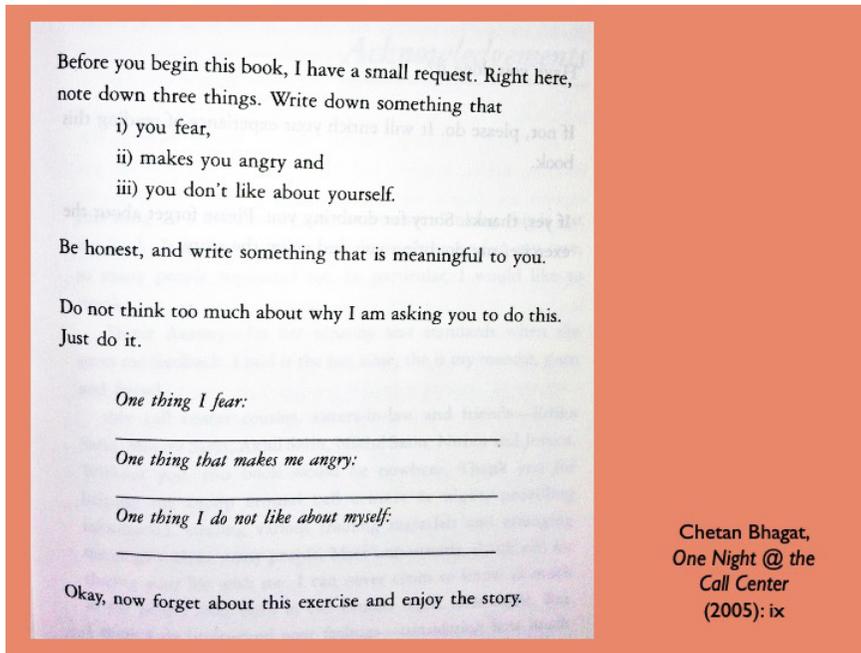


FIGURE 6.3. Bhagat's invitation to readers. From "Is There a Call Center Literature?," Power-Point presentation delivered February 2014 at the University of Chicago at the graduate student conference "Whole Worlds: Systems of Affect, Capital, Aesthetics."

call center agent has absorbed the brunt of India's own internal critique of globalization, as voiced, for instance, by one of Smitha Radhakrishnan's informants in her ethnography of IT workers: "Take the kids working for BPOs. No background, their parents have never seen money—some get into drugs. It's very, very negative. The culture is opening up for a whole lot of wrong kinds of things."⁴¹ Do you see where I'm going with this? Call center agents are considered pale imitations of Americans, but they are also considered inauthentic, inappropriate Indians.

Female call center agents have it especially tough. Do you remember the horrific gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, who was called "Nirbhaya" and "India's daughter," in Delhi last year? Jyoti was putting herself through medical school by working nights at a call center. This came up often in the news coverage, because call center agents, specifically women, serve as "placeholder[s] for a temporal rupture that threatens to render Indian futurity unintelligible from its traditional pasts."⁴² On the one hand, the female call center agent is independent and autonomous; she earns good money, works night shifts, and interacts with both women and men professionally. On the other hand, she is a threat to so-called Indian values: "Call center job equals call girl job!"⁴³

When Megha Majumdar's novel *A Burning* comes out in 2020, the call center will still serve to signify the dangerous new subjectivities that emerge in New

India's name. In that novel, newspapers make up stories about suspected terrorist Jivan, specifically imagining her wanton life as a call center agent: "Look," Jivan tells her cellmate, "*Deshar Potrika* says I used to work at a call center, and they have pictures of somebody! Somebody else on the back of a motorcycle with a man. I have never even been on a motorcycle."⁴⁴

And—

Sorry, what was that? Yes, I guess I've moved away from my original questions about tech support and self-help. How will I sell this project, you ask?

IV. [When: January 2016. Where: Microsoft Word—Drafts Folder. Who speaks: A "scholar." To whom: Search committee members. What: A proposal for a project not undertaken.]

Is There a Call Center Literature? develops a theory of the literature emergent from the encounter of plural Englishes in the global Anglosphere through a transnational, comparative study of Anglophone textual and visual media routed through three "call center countries": India, the Philippines, and Mexico. As service-oriented "back rooms" of the global economy, each of these national sites evidences the contradictions and epistemic violences of contemporary economic and cultural relation on the world stage. By that same token, they have significantly different histories of English-language imposition and acquisition, geopolitical entanglements with the United States, migratory itineraries, and relations to world literature, which the project pursues.

The global iconicity of the call center—an institutional satellite of Anglo-American multinational and transnational corporations—has made it a key site for the investigation of colonial afterlives, racial capitalism, the international division of labor, and global narratives of entrepreneurial opportunity. *Is There a Call Center Literature?* marshals the poignant symbolism and material infrastructure of the call center in order to conduct a transnational literary study situated at the nexus of Global Anglophone and Global American studies. The project asks the following: To what extent are contemporary Indian/American, Filipino/American, and Mexican/American literatures mediated by the cultural and linguistic phenomena of the call center and call center English? Do we hear the "accent-neutralized," economically optimized voice of the call center agent in the voice of the Global Anglophone literary text?

At the turn of the twenty-first century, India was at the center of the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry, subject to journalistic and scholarly debates about the relative freedoms and unfreedoms of a form of cybercoolie-ism that nevertheless seemed to secure the nation's triumphant arrival into capitalist futurity. Since 2010, the Philippines and Mexico have each assumed the mantle of "call center capital of the world." As the call center has physically relocated in space and time from Bangalore to Manila to Mexico City, the call center agents themselves have shifted from provincial, rural-to-urban, in-country Indian migrants whose accents and "mother tongue influences" must be neutralized, to

Filipinos whose English is more audibly American than that of British-oriented Indians, to the Mexican “returnee” who is often a U.S.-born and/or raised deportee and whose call center English is unambiguously a form of American English.

This project reads the BPO industry’s movement away from the accent neutralization of potentially global Indians toward the ready intelligibility and assumed globality of Filipino English speakers and Mexican deportees as a form of return from the vexed aspirations of the global and neutral to the constrained realities and demands of the American listening ear.⁴⁵ If, as scholars of the Indian call center have argued, the object of call center accent neutralization was once the development of a placeless (and thus global) voice, the “skin tones” of audible Americanness have reasserted themselves as the primary sign of globality.⁴⁶ The chapters seek to understand this movement in relation to a corresponding dynamic between “world” and “global” literary paradigms, which are being mediated by the United States as the producer and representative of the dominant ideology of globality and cosmopolitan literary style. How might the Americanization of global communications technologies and service infrastructures relate to the internationalization of American literary studies? How have Indian, Filipino, and Mexican American literatures written in the time of the call center participated in the creation of a “global” American literary voice?

V. [When: Fall 2015. Where: The Modern Language Association Job List. Who speaks: An institution. To whom: Potential assistant professors of English. What: A job ad, one of few.]

The Department of English announces an entry-level tenure-track position in Global Anglophone literature, to begin in the fall semester of 2016.⁴⁷ The successful candidate must be able to teach postcolonial and globalization theories, world literature broadly conceived, and a specific field of specialization (e.g., African, Caribbean, or South Asian global literatures) to advanced undergraduates and graduate students, as well as intermediate courses in English and in the core curriculum.

[Please hold for interview prep, in the form of a riddle.]

Question: What do you tell an English department searching for a Global Anglophonist?

Answer: You tell them you study the discourse on India’s *globalization* and concomitant transformations in the critical understanding of Indian *Anglophonism*.

Answer: You tell them you study the Global Anglophone.

Answer: You tell them you study Call Center Literature.

[Please hold for the interviewer’s follow-up questions.]

Is Call Center Literature really “global”? Or just . . . Indian?

What’s the relationship between Anglophone literature and American literature?

How would you organize a course on the twentieth- and twenty-first-century English-language novel?

What else could you teach?

VI. [When: April 2013. Where: The San Jose Repertory Theatre. Who speaks: An accented listener. To whom: Fellow members of the global Anglosphere. What: An Indian American reflects on watching Indian Americans perform as Indians performing as Americans.]

Playwright Anupama Chandrasekhar's *Disconnect* follows the working nights of three "last stage" debt collectors at BlitzTel call center in Chennai in 2009. Its primary interest is how the India-based call center agents engage with unseen Americans on the other end of the line. What forms of connection might they forge?

Disconnect was staged across the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere between 2010 and 2013, earning positive reviews and more than one comparison to David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The play is about impersonation: the agents take on American monikers, biographies, and attitudes while putting on their best American accents to serve their Buffalo-based client, True Blue Capital. Agent "Ross Adams," who is really Roshan, has the most convincing accent. His fellow agents—Giri/Gary and Vidya/Vicki—have less luck convincing their interlocutors that they are actually in the United States.⁴⁸ Ironically, Roshan/Ross's "authentic" accent proves to be a liability. The titular disconnect refers to his ultimately disastrous infatuation with one of his Illinois-based "marks," Sara, who manipulates him into having her credit card debt expunged. Roshan/Ross imagines that the two of them are in a relationship; he calls her 167 times in one week when he feels her interest waning. Sara then files a lawsuit against the company.

Here are the character descriptions from *Disconnect*'s official playbook:

Avinash, male, mid-forties, clearly Indian accent

Ross, male, early twenties, American accent

Jyothi, female, mid-twenties, fake American accent

Giri, male, early twenties, neutral accent

Vidya, female, early twenties, neutral accent

None of the characters has been to America⁴⁹

The specification of a "fake" American accent implicitly produces Ross's American accent as authentic, despite the fact that he, too, is putting it on. Also, the specification of a "neutral" accent distinct from the "American" accent confirms what scholars like sociologist A. Aneesh have argued: namely, that the neutral accent of the call center is a global signifier of placelessness and not an attempt to universalize the American, British, or Transatlantic accent.⁵⁰ The playbook curiously replicates Roshan's self-erasure by listing him, and him alone, via his alias, Ross, as

if he has fully effected the transformation from Indian agent to American subject.⁵¹ It also provocatively queries what it means to have “been to America.”

In a 2013 production staged in San Jose, California, the actors were primarily Indian Americans, playing Indians, playing Americans. In other words, they were American-accented Indians, who were also American-accented Americans, performing as Indian-accented Indians, performing, with varying degrees of success, as American-accented Americans. All forms of mimeticism on display were self-referential. Everyone had been to America. Everyone has always already been to America. But what kind of going is this, and what form of belonging? Is the relationship of the Indian call center agent to his imagined life in the United States all that different from the relationship of the Indian American to his imagined life in India?

There’s another way to ask the question. In Americanizing his accent, performing somatic adjustments to a time zone across the world, producing the knowledges of an American subject, and serving to smooth over business transactions for a transnational corporation, is Roshan performing as a white American “Ross” or as an Indian American “Ross,” who might also be understood as a form of the Indian subject-self? How might this revision of our conventional assumptions of the call center agent’s performance enable us to ask and understand not just who is speaking (an Indian) and who is listening (an American), but to whom the speaker is speaking and to whom the listener is listening?

VII. [When: July 2020. Pandemic times. Where: Here. Who speaks: An “I” that might be “Me.” To whom: You? What: An English professor reads a celebrated debut.]

COVID summer. The end of American empire. The hottest summer in Arizona in 125 years. Megha Majumdar’s *A Burning* hits the stands with the force of an event. A glowing review from James Wood in *The New Yorker* begins with a comparison to William Faulkner’s 1930 *As I Lay Dying*.⁵² The debut novel receives two separate reviews in the *New York Times*, including on the cover of the Sunday Book Review.⁵³ Oprah adds *A Burning* to her 2020 Summer Reading List.

Attuned to the market, I read *A Burning* the week it comes out. It is the latest English-language take on the abortive promises of the New India. It tells the stories of three ambitious characters—Jivan, Lovely, and PT Sir—who are variously on the rise before they intersect and effect what will be for one of them a devastating fall. We have read versions of this story before. Majumdar’s debut joins Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Mukherjee’s *Miss New India*, Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Jha’s *She Will Build Him a City*, and Arundhati Roy’s 2017 *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in attempting to lay bare the contradictions and depredations of an ascendant, global India that cannot, or will not, accommodate the aspirations of the majority of its people. As in each of its novelistic predecessors, the path to having “a better life” in *A Burning* begins with English, which is “the language of the modern world.”⁵⁴ Majumdar’s characters aspire to

middle-classness and regular chicken dinners. Politicians are corrupt. Teachers are corrupted. Working-class men in dirty sandals attempt and fail to gain entry into air-conditioned shopping malls.

Derivative, I think, catching myself in an act of bad faith comparison.

I read on. Page by page, *A Burning* recruits the listening ear. It raises my hackles with its explicit address to an assumed non-Indian reader. This address comes across most clearly in the novel's descriptions of food; ambition in the New India novel is frequently measured in appetites. In *The White Tiger*, New India is a land of two castes and two destinies: "Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies . . . eat—or get eaten up."⁵⁵ "From an eater of cabbage," Majumdar's Jivan reflects, she was "becoming an eater of chicken."⁵⁶ PT Sir becomes "a man with bigger capacities than eating the dinner [his wife] cooks."⁵⁷

At first I take note of the novel's most explicit moments of internal translation and definition:

Some men cluster around an enterprising phuchka walla, a seller of spiced potato stuffed in crisp shells, who has set up his trade. The scent of cilantro and onion carries. On all the men's foreheads, even the phuchka walla's, PT Sir sees a smear of red paste, an index of worship—of god, of country.⁵⁸

Phrases like "spiced potato" and "index of worship" center the non-Indian reader and decenter the reader in the know. It is an unremarkable mode of translation—the lifeworld on offer is of course an object of ethnographic interest to Wood, Oprah, and the average reader who needs these glosses—but I am as annoyed as if my own name has been mispronounced. Majumdar is not talking to me.

Pandering, I think, catching myself in the articulation of a knee-jerk critique.

Reading on, I underline the English-language translations that stand in for what could have been English-language transliterations. Unlike "phuchka walla," the following never actually appear in the text: "spiced lentil sticks" are not introduced as "chanachur" or "sev"; "yogurt fish" do not read as "doi maach"; "syrup-ice" is not first given as "ice gola."⁵⁹ Elsewhere in the text, even these suppressed forms of regional suggestion, the ghostly syllables that do not sound on the page, are elided: "My mother was cooking fish so small we would eat them bones and tail"; "PT Sir slams his after-dinner dish of sweets on the table and lunges for the remote"; "[PT Sir] gets up and washes his hands clean of turmeric sauce."⁶⁰ "Fish" and "sweets" and the inconceivable "turmeric sauce" are offered as universal signifiers, devoid of specificity; they appear in these lines without referents, unmarked.

Inauthentic, I think, catching myself in a routinized performance of policing.

Wood approvingly characterizes Majumdar's novel as "spare"; he compares her "surface realism" to that of Akhil Sharma, noting that both avoid the use of "sticky words"—words involving touch and taste and smell.⁶¹ Susan Choi's review is more ambivalent: "[Majumdar] is so far from exoticizing her setting as to be almost too economical, leaving the reader to snatch at clues where she can as to political, social and cultural context."⁶² It is telling that the New York-based Majumdar's

narrative decisions are posited by these critics as the result of a choice between “surface” and “sticky,” between the “economical” and the “exotic.” This has always been the catch-22 of ethnic authorship in the U.S.-dominated, global publishing industry: be ethnic on the surface, but don’t let the reader get *stuck*; signal difference but do not discomfit; accent the text (economically) if you must, but translate, gloss, explain, paraphrase, *italicize* (the exotic). In short, accommodate.

Reading Majumdar, I hear echoes of Bhagat’s neutral English that requires neither italicization nor translation. I recall the rise of Adiga’s hungry entrepreneur; I remember that Hamid writes self-help as a rise preceding a fall. I hear myself leveling criticisms of *A Burning*—derivative, pandering, inauthentic—that were leveled against these other works of what, once upon a time, in an effort to skirt just these sorts of critiques, I thought I’d call “Call Center Literature.”

But what if Call Center Literature is not? What if Call Center Literature isn’t about the call center, doesn’t signal Indian globality through the strategic placement of call center as prop, doesn’t formally register tech support relations as self-help, or name the contemporary transnational Anglosphere, but is, in simplest terms, a literature of accommodation? What if Call Center Literature exposes the West and the limits of its literacy, the norms it upholds in order to shore up its status, its demands for compliance? What if Call Center Literature names the accommodated listener, not the speaker who accommodates? What if Call Center Literature names the reader and the limits of her critical position, not the writer and hers?

I, we, have long focused on the questions of how the Indian English writer uses English, and whether the writer convincingly captures the accents and vernacular sensibilities of an authentic Indian milieu. We come to the text with normative Anglophone reading ears, hot with the knowledge of our Anglophony. Do I chafe against Majumdar because I perceive she is not talking to me, because she accommodates someone else? Or is it that her text exposes my own incontrovertible thinking with an American accent?

I pick up *A Burning* like I pick up the phone these days: hesitant, curious, suspicious. I hear Majumdar’s anticipation of the dominant Anglophone reader, in whose place I uncomfortably sit. I hear her pronounce words that are not meant for my ears. I am supposed to read over them, to ignore them, to excuse them. But they catch my eyes and catch in my throat like the fish bone she doesn’t name. I am listening for an accent that only my accented reading can produce.

Is there a Call Center Literature?

Who is reading?

NOTES

1. Blitzer, “Deportees”; Lopez, “Dreamers”; Padios, *A Nation on the Line*.
2. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44.
3. Srinivasan, “Call Center Agents.”
4. The call center has received scholarly treatment in fields including anthropology, communication, cultural studies, film studies, geography, linguistics, literature, new media, performance studies,

politics, rhetoric, and sociology. For examples of monograph-length ethnographies of the Indian call center, see Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*; Basi, *Women, Identity*; Mirchandani, *Phone Clones*; Nadeem, *Dead Ringers*; Patel, *Working the Night Shift*; and Rowe, Malhotra, and Perez, *Answer*. See also Chow, *Native Speaker*; Gupta and Mankekar, "Intimate Encounters"; Menon, "Calling Local/Talking Global"; Sharma, *In the Meantime*; and Vora, *Life Support*. Treatments and emphases vary. For instance, Vora reads the call center agent in relation to the gestational surrogate, as one who provides "life support" by investing "vital energy" in other, comparatively more valuable bodies (1). Gupta and Mankekar read call center labor in relation to recent Marxist theorizations of immaterial labor, affect, and alienation. For Menon, the call center presents an opportunity to retheorize "cosmopolitanism from below" (13).

5. Mukherjee, *Miss New India*, 241–42.

6. For an elaboration of the acousmatic in the fields of film and sound theory, see Chion, *Audio-Vision*, and Kane, *Sound Unseen*.

7. Napolin, *Fact of Resonance*, 16. Accented perception is a form of resonance in Napolin's terms.

8. Following Eidsheim's argument that "attending to the acousmatic question tells you only who is listening," I return the acousmatic question to the reader: who are you, reader, and who or what are you reading for? Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 24.

9. Giles, *Communication Accommodation*.

10. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

11. See chapter 3 of this volume.

12. Indian accents are made to sound global and placeless at the level of the syllable. For instance, agents are taught to pronounce both *o*'s in the word *laboratory*, as opposed to dropping the second *o* in the British-accented *lab-o-ra-try* or the first *o*, as in the American-accented *lab-ra-to-ry*. See Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*, 59.

13. Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 7.

14. Abu Hamdan, "Aural Contract," 72–73.

15. Starosta, "Accented Criticism," 178.

16. Kumar, "Introduction"; Apter, *Against World Literature*.

17. Hitchcock, "The World," 87.

18. Damrosch, *World Literature*, 4 (italics added).

19. Dimock, "Literature," 175, 180 (italics added).

20. Quoted in Sinha, "Chetanic Verses."

21. Anjaria, "Introduction"; Butalia, "Panel," 201–2.

22. Joshi, "Chetan Bhagat," 319.

23. Saxena, "Fact." See also Ghoshal, "Booker"; Subrahmanyam, "Diary."

24. Sadana, *English Heart*, 15.

25. Subrahmanyam, "Diary."

26. Casanova, *World Republic*, 121.

27. Sadana, *English Heart*, 137.

28. Sadana, *English Heart*, 138.

29. DeWispelare, *Multilingual Subjects*, 18.

30. Krishnamurthy, "Furtive Tongues," 92.

31. For a discussion of Bhagat, see Chakravorty, *In Stereotype*, chapter 6.

32. Thottam, "Techie Lit."

33. Other visual mediations of the call center include the television series *Outsourced*, the film *Call Center Girl*, the art installations "Call Cutta" and "Call Cutta in a Box," the theatrical production *Al-ladeen*, and the mixed-media photo animation and video series "The Virtual Immigrant."

34. Kumar, "Introduction," xviii.

35. Mankekar, "Becoming Entrepreneurial," 226.

36. Anjaria, *Reading India*, 44.

37. "His Master's Voice."

38. Adiga, *White Tiger*, 3, 45.
39. Jha, *She Will Build*, 134.
40. Mirchandani, *Phone Clones*, and Nadeem, *Dead Ringers*.
41. Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian*, 45.
42. Rowe, Malhotra, and Perez, *Answer the Call*, 139.
43. Patel, *Night Shift*, 48.
44. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 50.
45. The United States is of course not the only Anglophone nation served by the call center industry. However, I offer the “American listening ear” as a figure for a deterritorialized mode of American racialization and communicative relation that has come to inflect both the international division of labor and the assertion of “global” subjectivities more broadly.
46. Chow, *Native Speaker*, 8.
47. On the emergence of “Global Anglophone” as a job market category, see Anam, “Introduction.”
48. Merchant, “India’s Call Centres,” 13. Merchant observes that many of “India’s call centres [dropped] the fake accents” as early as 2003. By 2009, Chandrasekhar implies, Americans were onto the game.
49. Chandrasekhar, *Disconnect*, 5.
50. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*.
51. I am indebted to Pavitra Sundar for this point.
52. Wood, “Debut Novel.”
53. Choi, “Facebook Post,” and Sehgal, “Terrorist Attack.”
54. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 38.
55. Adiga, *White Tiger*, 54.
56. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 38.
57. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 73.
58. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 42.
59. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 47, 73, 171.
60. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 5, 30–31, 48.
61. Wood, “Debut Novel.”
62. Choi, “Facebook Post.”

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