

Divide in the Conglomerations of the Corporate World in *Chains* by G.B. Prabhat

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Abstract

The novel takes the readers to the intricacies of the corporate world of companies and business. It tells about Janakiraman, a business professional who was working in a leading American company “Henderson” for long twenty years. When he gets an offer from a promising company in Chennai, he comes back to India with his family. The pivotal difference, as the novel centres around the modern corporate world, is the difference of the Orient and the Occident in matters of infrastructure and work milieu. But cutting across all the differences, the novel points out the nature of capitalism and globalization which leads to the deprivation of the marginalized.

KEYWORDS: corporate world, work milieu, profit motif, servitude, toponymy, capitalism, globalization, deprivation.

Introduction

Chains is the first novel by G. B. Prabhat, a mechanical engineer turned computer scientist, who lives with his family in Chennai. The novel takes the readers to the intricacies of the corporate world of companies and business. It tells about Janakiraman, a business professional who was working in a leading American company “Henderson” for long twenty years. When he gets an offer from a promising company in Chennai, he comes back to India with his family. Then the problems of adjustments of personal values, likes and dislikes as well as of the differences in corporate ways of life come into play. The novel deals with the problems of making proper decisions and a little bit of identity crisis caused by shifting countries, as well. The pivotal difference, as the novel centres around the modern corporate world, is the difference of the Orient and the Occident in matters of infrastructure and work milieu.

Right from the moment of leaving America for good to the moment of getting an unusual offer to join back the Henderson after a lapse of one year, Janakiraman is in constant dilemma. It is the dilemma of taking proper decisions which are crucial in his life. The novel is mainly about Janakiraman’s struggles to get reacclimatized with his first home. The omniscient narrator tells the story mostly through the perception of Janakiraman. He was very well paid and was enjoying all the comforts of a posh life in the U.S. Yet he was thinking of coming back to India for some reason. He had already saved a fortune and now he wants to bring his children back to the Indian culture because of his serious apprehensions about the ways of life in the U.S.A.

The story as it grows in its own way becomes more a story of the deals, the strategies and management techniques of the LN group of companies and the struggles of Janakiraman to cope with the ways in India becomes a sub-plot. An over dose of the minute information regarding the corporate life in India as illustrated

below as the sermon of LN is a little bit of boredom for a casual reader, although the same gives room for a comparison of the situation in the U.S.

For the past few decades, Indian companies have enjoyed a protected market, limited competition and a marketplace controlled by licences. Whatever they name was the price and no marketing was done. Only rationing. Because demands always exceeded supply. There was only one thing you valued most in your people. Loyalty. Now when things change, you need different kinds of people to help your company grow. People who are used to fighting competition, who market and sell their products, who are used to dramatic cost cutting. (38-39)

The growth of LN who started off without much of a considerable capital is yet another rag to riches story. But the minute details of the penniless peddler's growth again seem to interrupt the free flow of the reading of the novel:

With the money he collected from the public, he diversified into plastics and then into leasing and finance. Some opportunities came his way for joint ventures with the Italian engineering conglomerate, Benedetti and the German textile group Behrtling. Behrtling-LN and Benedetti-LN were launched as joint ventures with the major shareholding with the foreign partners though the management responsibility was with LN. (38)

Even the elaborate pictures given about the structure of the LN group give an impression of stretching it too far. Thangadorai the General Manager-Human Resources Development is shown as briefing Janakiraman:

Thangadorai had pulled out an organizational chart which showed a detailed hierarchy. "LN Group – Chairman – Mr. C. Lakshmi Narayan" was at the top. The chart broke down this entity into group companies, their divisions and the prominent personalities. There were three major companies, LN Electronics, LN Plastics and LN Leasing and Finance. There was a prominent entry "Corporate" which presumably served the interests of the whole group. Janakiraman was going to be a part of "Corporate". (48)

But most of the details are given in a humorous and pleasant vein so that the reader does not dislike the novel. Look how Janakiraman's first meeting with LN's confidant, Srinivasan "the Assistant Manager" is described:

Janakiraman whirled around and got a surprise. Not a pleasant one. Facing him was a wiry, cadaverous, dark skinned man. His face was pock-marked. He had combed his thick black hair with oodles of hair oil with an offensive scent. On his forehead was a vermilion mark. His nose and mouth were strangely twisted. His stubble must have been at least three days old. One of his eyes was more open than the other reminding Janakiraman of Disney's Quasimodo. On his feet was a pair of well-worn Hawaii chappals.

In all, he was totally incongruous with everything else around. Like what? Janakiraman strained to think. This man's incongruity was familiar. Like what? That's it. He was like a wart on an otherwise beautiful person. (50)

After this description Srinivasan is mostly referred in the novel as the Wart.

Ethics of the Corporate World

In the novel, corporate business in the U.S., is shown as more or less straightforward and fair, while in India the same is depicted as highly crooked. The central story line itself shows it. Janakiraman in consultation with LN, moots up “LN consulting”, intending to attract not only Indian companies but also foreign companies as the service charge would be enticing for the foreign companies. Janakiraman being the former official of Henderson impresses the Industry and Trade Promotion Bank especially with his presentation with a video projector and laser pointer. LN becomes very happy that Janakiraman gains a loan of Rs. Twenty crores from the bank and readers are amused to see how business is run in the Indian scenario.

The picture is complete when Janakiraman is shocked to find that the loan amount is diversified unlawfully and unethically to some other investment by LN without Janakiraman’s knowledge. So Janakiraman becomes totally helpless and LN apologetically tries to save the situation. People who know the ways of business in India, like Shankar, one of the managers in the LN Groups and Ravichandar explain to Janakiraman that it was only through monetary juggling that LN, a machine operator’s son achieved such a position in life. They make Janakiraman realize that the initial investment of LN in the beginning was nothing but zero. It is curious to note the piece of advice given to Janakiraman by Ravichandar that there is an ancient piece of Indian wisdom telling not to look at ‘Rishimoolam’ or ‘Nadhimoolam’ and Ravishankar asks Janakiraman to make an extension of the axiom and add not to look at ‘companymoolam’. “Saints, rivers and companies. Judge them not by their past, but by their future” (216).

Stress and Strain in the Corporate World.

The novel also shows the stress and strain caused by the hectic schedule in corporate sector and how one misses one’s real life. Janakiraman with his sole experience in the U.S., is in a fix and finds it hard to come in terms with the reality. Further bickering with other officials and personal problems disturb him. The professors of Anita, his daughter, tell Janakiraman that Anita is extra ordinarily intelligent and is also very sensitive. But she is not a very happy child and the reason may be that she has been deprived of sufficient parental care and love. Janakiraman feels an acute stinging in his throat as he realizes how his profession makes him miss his life.

The stress and strain that Janakiraman experiences, is reflected in Janakiraman’s fancy connected to Eugene O’Neill. He imagines himself in the uniform of Emperor Jones. But it is Arokiaswamy with a scale to slay him, Anita and her former American lover, Rocky, and the Central Exercise men in uniform who come to persecute him. He shoots his silver bullets at them and they disappear. Janakiraman calls out for LN in panic and gets no response. He then calls out “MD Saar, MD Saar”, but there is only the sound of drum beats, tom-tom-tom! This significantly shows the perplexity of Janakiraman in finding out the winning formulae of survival tactics in the Corporate world in India where professional skills or competence alone does not help one much. Janakiraman who is not used to be subservient to superiors,

In fact Dave’s phone call and offer to Janakiraman doesn’t put an end to Janakiraman’s dilemma, but it intensifies the dilemma as the option is open again. The novel abruptly ends when Nakamura , one of the topmost companies in Japan pays an

important visit to the LN Consultancy. LN is in excitement and expectation. At the nick of the hour there is a power failure and number one “genset” also fails making the lift dead. The guests are given a very warm traditional welcome with ‘kumkum bandhis’, garlands, trays with flower, ‘kalkandu’ and Éclair chocolates.

The general organizer, the Wart profusely apologizes and requests the guests to climb up the staircase. The fat Japanese officials strenuously climb up all the way to Janakiraman’s room. When they reach the fifth floor, the officials are visibly panting and with a grin ask for water. When they enter the cabin of Janakiraman, they realize that the power cut has affected the air conditioning too. The General Manager of the company steps in the cabin, commenting that it was very hot. Janakiraman smiles, and stretches out his hand.

Disparities in the Corporate world of the Occident and the Orient

Thus the novel in a disarmingly simple language and style makes the theme of corporate life quite palatable despite an overdose of technical aspects and jargons of modern business life. The novel probes into the difference between the thoroughly professional styles of the Western corporate life with that of the struggling style of the East. One of the major differences Janakiraman perceives is the highly decentralized ways of systems in the West, where debates at the primary units go up to influence the decision making bodies. The credit for the success of a company goes to the entire team of the committed staff. On the contrary, In India glorification of personalities into demigods is the practice in prevalence. In India also corporate companies imitate the western ways of high standards of interior decoration and LN centre is exquisitely decorated on par with western based companies. Difference in value systems in corporate companies is also shown as a point to reckon with. Janakiraman recollects that Dave Henderson, the Chief of Henderson Corporation, known in the company as CEO Dave, was “stiff, impersonal, ideological and yet pragmatic” (20).

The ruthless nature of capitalism in the West is evident when Janakiraman asks CEO Dave if he could join back in Henderson after a lapse of one year, in case his decision of joining back to India proved a folly. Dave gives a reply in the negative. Janakiraman reminds him that he worked for the company for twenty years and the reply is ““Did I not pay you for twenty years?”. The cold ruthless, nobody-is-indispensable-logic of capitalism” (3). In India also corporate companies are ruthless in its nature as it is evident from the treatment of a labourer who was hit by Janakiraman’s car. On the private road to LN Electronics factory at Sriperumpudur, Janakiraman’s car hits an old man. Evidently it is the folly of the old man and the car was moving not more than 20 kilometers per hour. Yet the man is flown in the air and lands with a thud on the car’s bonnet. Srinivasan alias the wart, the assistant manager of LN, rushes to the spot with other company men; consoles Janakiraman and offers him fizzling “Limca”. He also assures to take care of the old man and reassures that they know the best way to handle that type of cases (115-116).

India’s corporate sector also shares profit motif and exploitation, but the whole system is embedded in a more subjective environment rather than objective. This is evident in the novel as LN personally could recall the personal details of most of the employees and once he gives rupees 2.5 lakhs to an employee, whose wife met with a serious accident, on Srinivasan the Wart’s advice (140). Further people like the Wart and Ganesan the telephone operator, are extremely loyal to LN and they enjoy immense freedom even with LN although apparently they are not sophisticated or polished enough in a fast developing corporate company. Yet they are retained and

LN depends on them on many issues. LN confides in such people and they are treated in a way as the insiders who do not require a formal knock at the door to meet LN on emergencies. Janakiraman is surprised that Srinivasan the Wart knows such personal details that he is staying with his mother, personal details which Janakiraaman never disclosed to anyone except LN (51). Further even the office furniture arrangement are done according to “Vasthu”--an ancient Indian treatise about the construction of buildings and about propitious and unpropitious configurations-- even to the inconvenience of the personnel and the customers (63).

Another notable factor is the amount of freedom one enjoys in the US in comparison with that in India. Janakiraman remembers that “snarling at your boss was a liberty you could take only in America” (2). He could call the chief of Henderson by his first name and could treat him on equal terms. In LN group of companies, everyone calls LN as “MD Saar”. Whenever Janakiraman refers to him as LN, old loyal people like Srinivasan, the Wart or Ganesan would indirectly persuade Janakiraman not to call the Chief as LN (187). At last Janakiraman also starts referring to LN as MD, at least in the inner circles.

Further the abject servitude of some of the loyal subordinates also is notable in India. Srinivasan, the Wart, an assistant secretary, is never offered a seat by LN at any point of time and he never ventures to sit either (51). Janakiraman is also amused by the abject servitude of the attendant boy of Thangadorai who is the General Manager, Human Resource Development at LN Group of Companies. Even Ravichandran, an intimate friend of Janakiraman who is also very close to LN, gives a tip to Janakiraman: “Try avoiding any differences with LN in public” (78). Janakiraman retorts that great companies are made strong because of debates. Still Ravi insists that disagreements should be converged only in private to LN.

The function at LN Plastics, Chingleput, when it gets ISO 9000 certificate, is an indicator to the one-man-shows in Indian societies. The “medieval thrown like chair” for LN and the steel folding chairs for the other senior managers, the “discreet distances” the senior managers deliberately kept, the long line of factory workers and their families to receive LN, large number of garlands meant only for LN, the loud speaker’s Tamil “MGR number” which means “we wish you to be hale and hearty so this land may progress, so its poor people may progress” and fire crackers clearly show how LN is treated by the rest of the employees (193-194). This shows the habit of deification of personalities in the East.

Shankar, Vice-President (Technical) of LN Group gives Janakiraman the axiom that “Men may come and men may go, but LN goes on forever” and Janakiraman thinks that is very much like the way of American Corporate Companies. Janakiraman recalls that in America also individuality of workers in corporate companies is never taken care of. “An important part of every Indian’s life in America is the rechristening he undergoes when he joins a company” (20). “Ramachandran will become “Ram”, not the legitimate truncation that they would do in India but “Ram” as in “ram”, the uncastrated male sheep. Jagannathan would become Jags, Krishnaswamy would become Chris, Rajendra would become Roger and even a easy-to-pronounce Murali would become Lee” (20). Janakiraman also becomes John Janakiraman much for the sake of European palatability. “And anyway, he needed America much more than America needed him” (21) and by extension this is the notion which America tries to sell off even when it attacks other sovereign countries under fake pretensions.

The power of language, especially the power of naming is vital as toponymy facilitates representation. Bill Ashcroft says: “The process of naming is fundamentally an act of power and the most important power is the power over representation, the power to present a toponymy as the only representation of a real world” (100). Actually wielding power is what globalization is all about. He continues: “The most obvious ploy in colonial discourse in general is to name particular sites, towns, headlands, mountains, and rivers with the names of imperial politicians and monarchs” (100). This means that re-naming with the names in the popular culture of the colonizer has been widely practised in the erstwhile colonies. These names act as markers which always signal the world to be emulated and adored. In fact the naming ceremony in the US is an extension of the colonial “naming process”. Even in the generous change of name to make it look alike, it is the look alike of “them” and not “others”.

The craze of the Orient to imitate the Western standards is also notable in the novel. It tells of their training sessions conducted by Corporate Companies in an attempt to bring quality into service. But most of the training sessions are misused rather than utilized in India (186-18.) Neither the organizers nor the participants take programmes in the right spirit. Such sessions are often considered as a befitting break from the normal work schedule and most of the participants utilize the occasion for shopping, visiting relatives or for entertaining themselves (186-187). There is also an interesting anecdote of how Janakiraman earned a loan of 31 core rupees from Industry and Trade Promotion Bank merely with a video projector and a laser pointer presentation before the officials of the Bank. After the presentation, Mr. Vinod Mishra, General Manager of Industrial Finance, asks his secretary to take down the name and address of the people who sell the projector and the pointer and suggests him to buy them the following week. He was more convinced by the projector and the laser pointer than the line of argument (106-109).

At the same time, curiously, the Americans are shown as neat and decent in their business deals and such exceptions anywhere in the world of corporate business are again improbable. When LN diverts the money of a loan allotted to a particular head to another head, the protagonist feels that in America such things would not go scot free: “Under the American accounting standards, this event would have caused a scam. He was pretty sure that this kind of thing entailed serious action in the U.S.” (207). Dave, the chairman of the famous American company Henderson, does not give permission for Janakiraman who worked with him for twenty years to rejoin the company if Janakiraman changed his decision to spend the rest of his life in India. But curiously it is shown that Dave, even after one year, could not find a substitute for Janakiraman and he expresses his regret and offers Janakiraman the post over phone (221).

Conclusion

The novel *Chains* also projects the poor infrastructure, poor emoluments and working environment in India as against the conditions in the West. In the U.S., even company chiefs are called by their first names by the subordinates whereas in India subordinates stoop to servitude and the chiefs enjoy it. Debates promote the growth of companies in the West while dictatorship of the chief and the personal glorification prevail in India. Ruthless nature of capitalism, where neither the individuality of the employees nor their job security matters, is shown as a common feature in the East and the West.

Indian bureaucrats are portrayed as inept and corrupt while Indian doctors working in substandard conditions are shown as skilled and efficient. The abject servitude of the subordinates and personal glorifications of the superiors are shown as a special feature in India. But a general deterioration in personal and social relationship is pictured in America especially due to the pernicious impacts of drugs, criminal activities and unbridled sexual profligacy. The nature of capitalism is also a feature shared irrespective of the East-West divide. Capitalism is concerned with profit motive and individuals and their job security are totally ruled out of the picture. Janakiraman, who has been working with Dave of Henderson as his brilliant lieutenant for twenty years, asks Dave if he could join back in the company after a lapse of one year in case his decision for settling back in India misfires and Dave gives a reply in the negative.

Again, the alteration made in one's name when a foreigner works in America also is characteristic of the nature of capitalism. Janakiraman also got his name changed as John Janakiraman just to please the customers of the company. (20) Lack of freedom right from the schools to corporate work places, apparent servitude of the subordinates and dictatorship and personal glorification of superiors are shown as special features of the Orient. The nature of capitalism which denies individuality, security and job permanency to the employees is shown (*Chains* 3, 20, 51, 115-16, 187) as a factor both the East and the West share.

. But the atrocious nature of capitalism, commodification, failure in giving proper love and care for the near and dear ones due to the hectic work schedule in the modern times, squandering of money by millionaires and religious fundamentalism are features shared by the two worlds which bring forth a sort of novel cross-culturalities in the two worlds. Further, western multinational corporations continue exploitation under the pretension that natural resources "belonged to all humanity" (Nixon, 70). The novel also shows the ill-effects of globalization both in America and in India. Many anecdotes are set apart to show how capitalism permeates across the globe in myriad forms and relegates the farmers, labourers, women and children into deprivation.

Deepika Bahri poses a relevant question in this regard: "Who, apart from the faceless MNC, celebrates the demise of the small producer—individual farmers and farm labour (many of them women and children), indigenous and small industry—implicit in this new model, and why?" (62). As Miyoshi argues, globalization is an "Outgrowth, or continuation, of colonialism" (247) and the current phase is merely a continuation rather than a recent phenomenon. The world as a global village thus has neoliberal agenda which protects the consumerist interests of the corporates and the "entire system of values, attitudes, morality, institutions, and more important, mode of production" (Jan Mohamed 62) of the West/America and hence it is disconcerting to people at large across the world.

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