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# Exploring the Cultural Significance of Contemporary Indian Literature: A Critique

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**Abstract:** Popular fiction encompasses plot-driven works that are intentionally crafted to align with specific literary genres, thereby appealing to readers and enthusiasts who possess familiarity with those genres. This type of fiction is generally differentiated from literary fiction. According to screenwriter Robert McKee, the "specific settings, roles, events, and values that define individual genres and their subgenres" are referred to as genre conventions. These conventions are dynamic and subject to change; while they are primarily implicit, publishers of fiction may occasionally articulate them explicitly to serve as guidance for authors seeking publication. The categorization of works into genres is often arbitrary and subjective, with no consensus on the precise criteria that govern any particular genre or on the overall classification of genres themselves.

**Keywords:** popular fiction, mass fiction, commercial fiction, best-selling novels, didactic novels.

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Popular fiction, is plot-driven fictional works written with the intent of fitting into a specific literary genre, in order to appeal to readers and fans already familiar with that genre. Popular fiction is generally distinguished from *literary fiction*. Screenwriter Robert McKee defines *genre conventions* as the "specific settings, roles, events, and values that define individual genres and their subgenres". These conventions, always fluid, are usually implicit, but sometimes are made into explicit requirements by publishers of fiction as a guide to authors seeking publication. There is no consensus as to exactly what the conventions of any genre are, or even what the genres themselves are; assigning of works to genres is to some extent arbitrary and subjective. Popular fiction is often dismissed by literary critics as being pure escapism, clichéd, and of poor quality prose (*Anatomy of Novel* 17).

In literary fiction, the author is often judged by critics on his or her grasp of the scope and nuance of the English language, and on the lack of predictability of the narrative itself. The amount of effort readers put into this fiction can be almost on a par with that of the authors themselves. In order for an author to be successful in literary fiction, positive reviews from important critics are absolutely vital. Indeed, in a very real sense, the critics are the only audience that matters, which explains why literary fiction often pays badly: critics get their books for free.

In the realm of popular fiction, the only critics that truly hold significance are the readers who invest their money in the books they select. Reviews tend to have a negligible effect on sales. Readers evaluate an author based on their skill in transforming ordinary language into something exceptional and in presenting well-known stories in a captivating and original manner. The effort required from readers is minimal, which is the essence of the genre: the primary aim is to entertain rather than to engage them in complex exercises (*Culture* 48).

The underlying philosophy of much popular fiction is more optimistic: the human condition might indeed be deplorable, but individuals can make a positive difference in their own and others' lives. The Muses of popular fiction are Zoroaster and Jung, the philosophy more classical than to modern. Popular fiction is a continuation of and an embroidery upon ancient myths and archetypes; popular fiction is good against evil, Prometheus against the uncaring gods, Persephone emerging from hell with the seeds of spring in her hands, Adam discovering Eve. It is very difficult to pin down the fixed and singular point of origin of popular fiction in India or anywhere in the world. Such a difficulty is embedded in the transient nature of popular culture.

Gone are the days when commercial fiction books written by western authors dominated our book shelves. Now that space is increasingly being taken up by young Indian authors whose writing is vibrant, personal, and clicks instantly with the reader.

These authors represent a growing breed of young writers who are not afraid to experiment, and who share their deepest personal stories with the readers. The fact that they are bestsellers is just another dimension of their success stories; they are at once the author, the promoter, the celebrity and sometimes even the agony aunt.

Popular fiction, like other forms of popular culture, is subject to contest. Some critics regard popular fiction as a product of democratization of fiction. On the other hand some other critics consider it as cheap literature. For example, read the introductory paragraph from a popular novel entitled-*A Sunny Shady Life, An Icy Hot Love* by Sachinn Garg:

I am a kewl dood from Delhi hu wanna to be on the top all the tym, cannot face double standards n hate ekta kapoor Television serials. I am here 2 make fun lovin adventurus friends hu r wild as I. I am a good cricket player n my friends say I am a very good dancer. And remember, messing with Sunny is a big no-no OK? (99)

On reading this extract, one would criticize the writer severely for lacking depth in his writing. But if one looks at it objectively then this is the only reality we are left with.

Popular writers tend to cater to the demands of fun. Chetan Bhagat's first novel, *Five Point Someone*, has sold over 700,000 copies. Karan Bajaj's debut novel *Keep Off The Grass* was a bestseller with sales of more than 500,000. Recently, *The Secret of the Nagas* by Amish is believed to have sold 70,000 copies within a few weeks of its release. All these

authors have a few things in common. They respond to the general public taste.

Few award-winning Indian writers in English can claim such demand for their work. Though literary fiction is not expensive in comparison to prices abroad; books of the genre aren't exactly cheap. In India, literary fiction titles start at about Rs 500, and can go up to Rs 699, for a hardcover. Paperback prices hover around Rs 300. These books are mostly marketed as works that will appeal to a select, intellectual readership. It's easy to see that a reader would think many times before shelling out that kind of cash for a book that might not be their cup of tea. On the other hand, when a book costs approximately Rs100 or less, more people are willing to give it a shot. As a result, there is now a rash of cheap Indian pop fiction hitting the bookstores. Penguin has a series priced at Rs150 and Harper Collins has titles that cost Rs195.

Regardless of how dodgy the pop fiction might be, it is prodding our writers to tell stories that are compelling and relevant to contemporary India. Aside from price, this is the major selling point of books by authors like Bhagat. Readers from a variety of backgrounds are able to relate to the situations and characters in the novels.

A national best-seller in India is almost always a combination of three things— an IIT tag, a quintessential love story, and eventual heartbreak. It is a foolproof campus novel with the requisite masala – humour, friends, cusswords, sexual innuendoes, professors, girls, examinations, and DU.

They are the sort of writers who couldn't get past the security guards outside plush publishing houses. Their books were thrown routinely into the slush pile. But now, as a new generation of readers, famished for books about themselves, buy them by the lakhs, smashing all bestselling records, they are sending publishers into a tizzy. Never before perhaps in

the publishing business have so many editors got it so wrong for so long.

So what's the secret? Love sells, especially in small towns. And when you combine love with the anxiety that goes with growing up in the New India—coping with board exams, parental aspirations, girlfriend troubles, job stress—it sells lakhs of copies.

Most of them are similar. They're written by young authors, usually just out of college—some are still in college or even in school. The protagonist is almost always male and north Indian. The books follow three general trends. There are thinly disguised autobiographical coming-of-age stories, with the writers admitting that they've based their books on diaries or their experiences in school or college. There are didactic novels, which use a story to hammer home what the author thinks is a big idea, but is actually a sophomoric generalization about sex, society or spirituality. And finally, there's the out-and-out wish-fulfilment novel—usually featuring a protagonist who is such an idealized self-image of the writer that the book comes across as painfully narcissistic (*Anatomy of Novel* 57).

Students, homemakers, computer engineers and bank presidents - anyone who can turn a phrase is picking up a pen to tell desi love stories. And these are set not in Corfu or the Australian outback but places like Coimbatore and Jaipur.

The themes of these romantic novels veer from the typical boy-meets-girl tale to more adventurous and explicit content. Take for example this excerpt from Nithya Sashi's novel *Legal Bond*:

She did a long lap and when she was about to return, she became acutely aware of being watched. She swam to the shallow end, stood up, and looked around. She didn't find anyone, though the door through which she had come was ajar. Had she not closed it? Suddenly, a soft musky smell

wafted towards her, close to her, within touching distance. Maya gasped and turned. Ravi had entered the water silently, like a cat on the prowl, and had enveloped her in his arms. (52)

Many of these books pay scant attention to grammar, sentence construction and punctuation, but perfect syntax is not what readers or publishers are looking for. And the latter offer a unique reason for this - that these books find a wide audience among youth in small towns and rural India, many of whom are also first-time readers.

We've spent decades convinced that India's diversity means there is no one story that all of India—or at least a large, varied majority of Indians—will want to read or hear, unless it's about Bollywood or cricket. But when more than a million people enthusiastically look forward to a book by Chetan Bhagat about regular people and banal lives, it is a sign that there is indeed some unity in our diversity. It isn't just the price that is persuading them to buy a book. After all, *The Secret of the Nagas* is priced at Rs295, which is Rs100 more than the price of *The Immortals of Meluha*, the first book of Amish's Shiva Trilogy. Yet, its sales figures are excellent, which shows that if readers like the writing, they aren't averse to paying more.

The emergence of popular fiction in India has significantly altered the literary landscape. It has succeeded in converting many non-readers into engaged readers. The appeal of popular fiction is more extensive than that of literary fiction on a global scale; nevertheless, this does not imply that other genres are being overshadowed. The pivotal question is whether authors of literary fiction can cultivate a dedicated readership that distinguishes them from bestselling authors (*Culture* 78).

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