



Chetan Bhagat's Novels As Popular Fiction

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ABSTRACT

From the ancient times, sacred books of literature in Sanskrit and regional languages reflect India as multilingual, multireligious and multicultural nation. In our myth and religion land has been represented as a place to inhabit. In modern context, with migration from one place to another, land has also become a source to describe dislocation, alienation and suffering. It is the life of multitudes of individuals and societies that collectively forms the dominant ethos of an era and finds due expression in various forms of art. The art of fiction lies in the way it savours of humanity in whatever age it is written. Indian English novel, a sibling of its western counterpart was in its early stages influenced by the western art form of the novel. In the later phase of the twentieth century a new term Post-Colonial Literature came into literary jargon. With the advent of the new millennium it has been witnessed that young authors are dabbling in commercial or popular fiction and setting new benchmarks for bestsellers. Chetan Bhagat is one of those new-age Indian novelists who have redefined the concept of bestsellers in India. There are several parameters of computing the bestseller quotient. Applying the theoretical paradigms of popular literature versus high art to the fiction of Chetan Bhagat reveals that the author is a highly successful story teller as all his novels in a row have far exceeded the benchmark of a bestseller.

Keywords: Literature, the Art of Fiction, Millennium Writings, Chetan Bhagat, Popular Fiction.



From the ancient times, sacred books of literature in Sanskrit and regional languages reflect India as multilingual, multireligious and multicultural nation. The land is considered deity (mother Earth) and has been worshipped by people in different forms. The uniqueness about our culture is unity in diversity. In our myth and religion land has been represented as a place to inhabit. Man is a social animal, so depending upon different geographical location; people have adopted different lifestyle to adjust the climate of the location. In addition to that, religion of the people, political and economic conditions of the place contribute to mark their unique identity. A community is identified by its culture. In modern context, with migration from one place to another, land has also become a source to describe dislocation, alienation and suffering.

Culture is a polysemic concept; it means different things to different people. The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy describes the term culture as “The way of life of a people, including their attitudes, values, beliefs, arts, sciences, modes of perception and habits of thought and activity.” (324). Culture’s growth, inheritance and transmission are through communication-in the form of language, symbols, literary and artistic forms.

The question of art versus commerce has polarized literary discourse and garnered enough critical attention to generate feisty debate about the superiority, relevance and perennial nature of one over the other ever since the concept of mass production for mercantilism originated. English novel as a literary genre of fiction has its inception in eighteenth century in England. Since then it has gained acceptance as a pioneering and voguish art form due to the possibilities it opens up for creative people to register crucial aspects of life in all its many-hued dimensions. It is the life of legions of individuals and societies that collectively forms the dominant ethos of an era and finds due expression in various forms of art. Novels like any other genre of literature, is also an aesthetic expression of hopes, aspirations, ambition, desire, frustration, an attempt to communicate, to lay bare the repressed emotions, giving the reader access to the deep recesses of the author’s psyche. Novel inheres a close connection between men and manners and offers a panorama of society as it actually exists, fictional masking



Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



notwithstanding. It has been the most effectual agent of people's moral imagination and hankering. The art of fiction lies in the way it savours of humanity in whatever age it is written.

Indian English novel, a sibling of its western counterpart was in its early stages influenced by the western art form of the novel. It had its origin towards the end of nineteenth century. Literary giants like R. K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand, and Raja Rao invested it with glory and Indian flavour that gained international recognition. William Walsh says that these three writers 'established the assumptions, sketched the main themes, drew the first models of the characters and elaborated the peculiar logic of the Indian novel in English.' (Walsh 4). In the later phase of the twentieth century a new term Post-Colonial Literature came into literary jargon. Known alternatively as Commonwealth Literature or Third World Literature it was the literature written by the colonized people. It refers temporally to the period after independence and conceptually to cultures affected by European imperial expansion from the time these cultures were colonized up to the present day. These writings present counter narratives to European imperial discourses.

The novels written by Indian English Novelists in the post liberalization era depict the transformation of culture and society in modern India at the turn of the century. With the advent of the new millennium it has been witnessed that young authors, generally graduates from top notch technical institutes and business schools like IITs, IIMs, DCE, etc. are dabbling in commercial or popular fiction and setting new benchmarks for bestsellers. These alumni of the famous elite institutes of India may not have set out to be writers in the first place, but they are catering to the fast growing market for commercial fiction. The sales of their books are spiraling way beyond the standard benchmark of five thousand copies and within a few months of release their books are hitting the staggering hundred thousand mark. The concluding two decades of the twenty first century witness the emergence of a large number of Indian novelists in English. Shashi Deshpande, Dina Mehta, Namita Gokale, Nina Sibal, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh etc. are able to maintain their identity by showing strong hold on theme and style both.



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The novels of millennium too have some elements of trash culture, a term coined by Richard K Simon. A distinctive cultural function of the novel is to give narrative form to cultural and social values. The writers of the present decade do the same. It is liberal in the sense that it offers its readers the occasion to accept, reject or modify some of their culture's conventional values and structures. Through their writings, the writers express their views on society but their main focus remains on youth and national development issues. All writers are youth icon as they have instilled reading habits in Indian youth because their novels are simple love stories having allied themes. Their style is informal as there is frequent occurrence of slang. This slang is employed as a medium of creative expression in diverse cultural contexts.

Chetan Bhagat is one of those new-age Indian novelists who have redefined the concept of bestsellers in India. He belongs to that tribe of management professionals who have taken to writing as a full time career. Born and brought up in Delhi in a middle class family and educated in IIT, Delhi and IIM, Ahmedabad he quit his eleven yearlong cushy and lucrative banking job in Hong Kong to follow his passion of writing. He has written eight bestsellers and a nonfiction book so far viz. *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *Two States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), *Half Girlfriend* (2014), *One Indian Girl* (2016), *The Girl in Room 105* (2018), *What Young India Wants* (2012) and a collection of essays *Making India Awesome* (2015), and *What Young India Wants* (2012). As a motivational speaker he has delivered a number of memorable speeches in different institutes of higher learning. He won the Society Young Achiever's Award in 2000 and the Publisher's Recognition Award in 2005. Chetan Bhagat holds the distinction of having found himself a place in the *Tie* magazine's list of "World's 100 Most Influential People" in the year 2010. He has been hailed as the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history by *The New York Times*. Apart from writing novels, Chetan Bhagat writes columns for major Hindi and English newspapers viz. *Dainik Bhaskar* and *The Times of India* respectively.

Most of Chetan Bhagat's novels have been adapted into films. His debut novel *Five Point Someone* was adapted into a Bollywood blockbuster named *Three Idiots* in 2009. His second



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novel *One Night @ the Call Center* too was an instant hit. This book was Chetan's first novel to be made into a movie named *Hello* in 2008. His next novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life* provided screen play for the Hindi film titled *Kai Po Che* which was released in 2013. His fourth novel named *Two States: The Story of My Marriage* is on the anvil to be adapted into a film with the title *Two states*. According to Chetan Bhagat there are three sides to him – Chetan the entertainer, Chetan the writer and Chetan the reformer. He is a youth icon but his icons are Aamir Khan, Farhan Akhtar, Woody Allen and Rob Reiner from the entertainment industry, Hemingway, Orwell and R. K. Narayan among the writers and as for his reformist aspect there are a number of icons from Mahatma Gandhi to Barak Obama.

The mass market author Chetan Bhagat is a globe trotter and having travelled through seventy five cities in India he seems to have acquired a fairly good amount of firsthand knowledge of what young India wants or does not want. He dreams of a progressive India and takes up burning issues bothering contemporary India such as student suicides, rampant corruption, ill governance, etc. All this forms part of his first notification book *What Young India Wants* (2012). Therein he avers that young India does not want social crusades. He made this comment in the context of Anna Hazare's movement against corruption, which he had supported earlier but realized that such crusades were difficult to sustain. He sums up that young India wants a good job and a good girlfriend.

Chetan Bhagat has contributed significantly to the sub-genre of the Indian campus novel in English. The publication of his novel *Five Point Someone* firmly placed him in the line of writers who have successfully dabbled in the sub-genre of campus fiction. He has chosen campus area as the setting of his various novels offering the panorama of contemporary life that the burgeoning Indian campus novel unfolds. His protagonists are young aspirants who find themselves culturally transformed in fast changing society of the post liberalized and globalized India. With the opening of the large number of colleges, universities, IITs, IIMs and medical college catering to the fast growing demand of higher education among India's urban and semi-urban youth, it is but natural that expression is given to this aspect of life.



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Chetan Bhagat is probably the first novelist to have written about the IIT or IIM campus in India. These novels add a new dimension to the campus novel by giving a peek into the fortresses of the top technological and management institutes of India where only the brainy can get admission. These novels contain stories of young aspirants pursuing big dreams, their travails, the menace of ragging, the struggle to survive in an extremely competitive system, messing up with their grade point averages, their frustration, their romance, love and marriage and questions of success and failure.

Chetan Bhagat's novels fall in the category of popular fiction and have attained the status of Bestsellers. Bestseller is a relatively new term used in relation to a category of fiction and has a similar connotation as blockbusters for films and chart toppers for recorded music. It is linked to instant fame, big money and overnight success for the authors but seems to be inversely proportional to the rating of the author on the literary horizon. There are several parameters of gauging the bestseller quotient and in the case of novels the factors inherent in creating a bestseller are mainly publishers, editors, reviewers, literary agents, libraries, retailers, a big budget and marketing techniques. The ultimate test undoubtedly is wide readership and sales to proclaim a novel a bestseller but the fact remains that it is the outcome of concerned efforts at various levels and a bestseller is perceived as the product of external forces more than the genius of the author. Hence, the debate that bestsellers are not high art but purveyors of Kitsch and popular culture has gained ground. Leo Lowenthal also says,

The academic disciplines which have been traditionally charged with the history and analysis of literature have been caught unawares by the impact of mass literature, the bestseller, the popular magazine, the comic and the like, and they have maintained an attitude of haughty indifference to the lower depths of imagination in print.' (Lowenthal 141)

According to Encyclopedia Britannica:

popular literature includes those writings intended for the masses and those that find favour with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is



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designed primarily to entertain. Popular literature unlike high literature does not have a high degree of formal beauty or subtlety and is not intended to endure. (218)

This is a broad and simplistic definition of popular literature.

Applying the theoretical paradigms of popular literature versus high art to the fiction of Chetan Bhagat reveals that the author is a highly successful story teller as all his novels in a row have far exceeded the benchmark of a bestseller. To attribute his success to the management of the sales of his books or an affordable pricing in the range of a hundred rupees would be gross injustice to the genius of the master storyteller. His detractors denigrate his art by adducing a simplistic explanation that he has mastered the formula of a bestseller. Some say that at a young age fortune has favoured him a bit too much while some others credit his simple everyday colloquial and hybrid language to be the magic formula to hook the young readers. All these may be valid points and the author himself does not refute the same. Nor does he claim any classy status for his fiction or literary achievement in terms of the language he has used in his novels. Through Shyam, the narrator and the authorial voice in *One Night @ the Call Center* he conveys:

My English is not that great – actually, nothing about me is great. So, if you are looking for something posh and highbrow, then I'd suggest you read another book which has some big many-syllable words. I know only one big many-syllable word, and I hate that word – “management”. (12)

About the constant sniping about his ‘Hinglish’ Chetan Bhagat tweeted ‘I don’t write in Hinglish. Simple English yes. Hinglish, no.’ One thing is certain that he has a huge connect with the readers and they love him as much as he loves them. One way of establishing instant connection with the readers is the use of the dramatic device of prologue and epilogue where the author makes a personal appearance to talk to readers about a character or an episode of the story thereby conflating the roles of the protagonists and the writer.

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