

Commodification of Indian Popular Fiction in English

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Abstract

"Commodification of Indian Popular Fiction in English" encompasses contemporary novels in English that have garnered wide readerships and labeled these novels as Popular fiction. Along with the readers, it also attracted the attention of academicians to look into and bring out the nuances weaved in the textual fabrics that attract the readers. They also curiously look into the mechanism that makes their novels accessible to the masses. Popular fiction meets its purpose by bringing enormous benefits for the authors and providing readers with instant entertainment reading material.

Novelists like Shobha De, Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Chetan Bhagat, Durjoy Datta, Ravinder Singh, and others have profited from their novels. They bring the realistic world into fictional material by adding spices to lure readers and increase their profits. To make the novels accessible, they adopted unconventional mechanisms like digitalizing their content and social media.

Keywords: Popular Fiction, Commercial Fiction, Readerships, Entertainment

Introduction

Numerous transformations have characterized the evolution of Indian English novels since its inception. In contemporary literary tradition, fictional works can be categorized as literary or serious fiction and popular fiction. Many authors are committed to producing severe works of fiction that engage with cultural and national issues. Some authors prioritize commercial success and cater to the market's demands for fictional reading material. Although both types of authors contribute to the richness and diversity of the field, the processes and mechanisms that make popular fiction accessible to the masses must be examined.

Popular fiction, often referred to as genre fiction, caters to the hunger for entertainment and various fascinations, and it may not necessarily align with intellectual practices or individual artistic exploration. However, it offers readers a range of generic choices. For instance, few contemporary Indian English novelists write novels by retelling histories and myths in a highly realistic manner. Authors such as Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, and Adwait Kala have recognized the immense potential of Indian myths, particularly Hinduism. Indian myths serve as a

great treasure of entertainment for readers. If they are looking for novels based on Indian myths and history, the novels by them are the best options.

Some contemporary Indian novelists have been exploring new venues in popular fiction. Their success can be seen in the widespread acceptance of their works by readers from various walks of life. Novelists like Chetan Bhagat, Shobha De, Durjoy Datta, and many others have adopted themes such as love, sex, and ambition in a highly realistic approach. This realism makes these interwoven themes come alive for readers and resonates with the happenings in the real world, resulting in a broader readership. The scope of popular fiction, *also referred to as "popular" or "commercial" fiction, suggesting it is more focused on widespread appeal* (Callahan), in foreign countries is vast, typically referred to as genre fiction owing to its diverse range. It boasts a sophisticated system of mechanisms designed to enrich the public domain. These countries have dedicated websites, databases, archives, and e-magazines explicitly catering to various literary genres, making them easily accessible to readers of different genres.

It is important to note that popular fiction is distinguished by its practices and functions, both within and outside India. Ken Gelder has emphasized significant differences between popular fiction and literary fiction in writing for readers with literary or non-literary backgrounds. *Two key words for understanding popular fiction are industry and entertainment, and they work firmly to distinguish popular fiction from the logic and practices of what I regard as its 'opposite,' namely, literary fiction or Literature* (Gelder 1). Using "industry" and "entertainment" is crucial in differentiating between popular and literary fiction. While both categories are connected to the industry and provide entertainment, literary fiction is regarded as cultural fiction that transcends these boundaries.

Popular fiction is often criticized for its manufactured and commodified nature. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that mass cultural forms in modern capitalism are standardized and rationalized, resulting in negative connotations for the industry. Nasrullah Mambrol brings the opinion of Adorno and Horkheimer in his essay *Culture Industry- According to Adorno and Horkheimer, everything is appropriated stereotypically for mechanics and mass reproduction. All cultural products alike ultimately serve to remind people of the "triumph of invested capital" and to ensure that the might of industrial society is lodged in "men's minds"* (Mambrol). While providing positive views on popular fiction's prevailing connotations may be challenging, it is essential to consider it as a distinct field of writing and study its actual diversity. Popular fiction is a complex industry encompassing various mechanisms, such as production, distribution, promotion, and advertising. Genre identities play a significant role in determining what is contained within the novel, who publishes it, through what channels it is marketed, who consumes and evaluates it, and the methods used for consumption.

To make popular fiction more accessible, it must undergo intricate activities like classification, organization, and dissemination through e-magazines and other means. Therefore, discourse on popular fiction must address the mechanisms and processes involved in making it accessible to a broader audience.

When examining popular fiction, it is crucial to explore various avenues, such as genre bookshops, fanzines, prozines, and genre-based organizations. These avenues are integral to the development and arrangement of popular fiction, creating archives, categorizing genres, and facilitating accessibility for a multitude of writers. Due to the vastness of popular fiction, no single commentator can encompass the entirety of it. Consequently, dedicated readers share their insights with genre fanzines and e-zines, contributing to the collective knowledge of a particular genre.

During the 2000s, commercial fiction in India experienced a rise in popularity, with several novelists gaining a wider readership and achieving unprecedented publicity, both within and outside the country. Notable authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Chetan Bhagat, Durjoy Datta, Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, and Adwait Kala, among others, wrote on themes such as love and sensuality, as well as revisited Hindu myths and folklore, presenting them in fresh and contemporary perspectives. These authors have been well received globally, with their work assimilated into the reality of contemporary India.

In contrast, other genres of fiction in India, such as science fiction, crime fiction, spy fiction, fantasy, horror, Western, and historical novels, have gained less popularity than commercial fiction. On the other hand, literary fiction is highly nuanced and reflects the author's creativity, sensibility, and individuality, which brings about the presupposition of the author's identity. Unlike literary fiction, authors of commercial fiction work within a specific range of genres, with many novelists exploring the same avenue to cater to the never-ending curiosity of readers.

In commercial fiction, generic identities are often visible, with authors adhering to specific genres. For instance, a science fiction author typically writes novels based on scientific innovation, exploring other planets, or taking the reader to a future world.

The investigation of Indian commercial fiction raises several questions, including the nature of the products sold, the parameters of their writing, and the mechanisms for reaching readers. It is also essential to consider the role of publishing houses in packaging and marketing these products and how the Internet can help writers and publishers capitalize on market products.

It has been observed that writers of Indian commercial fiction, particularly those who emerged around 2000 or later, have adopted a thematic approach that incorporates feminism, love, sensuality, controversies, and a revisiting of history. This is evident in the works of authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Chetan Bhagat, and Durjoy Datta, who have all utilized these elements in their writing to appeal to a wide readership.

This type of fiction is notable for its use of realistic, relatable characters and settings that reflect contemporary India. This approach has proven highly effective in engaging readers, allowing them to see themselves as active participants in stories. As a result, novels incorporating these elements have become popular among readers and have reached a broad audience.

The success of Indian commercial fiction can be attributed to its focus on themes that resonate with readers, its use of realistic and relatable characters and

settings, and the effective packaging and marketing strategies employed by publishing houses. The Internet has also significantly enabled writers and publishers to capitalize on this market and reach a wider audience.

In the United States, certain categories of readers exist in specific geographical locations, and publishing houses possess information regarding their demographics. Consequently, they are committed to shaping book reviews, designing the cover page, and employing blurbs that align with readers' psychology in a particular region.

Vernacular language is becoming increasingly popular in India, and it has the potential to gain prominence on par with that of foreign countries. However, it is essential to recognize that simply translating Indian fiction into regional languages may not be sufficient to popularize it. Many talented authors in India have made significant contributions to this field.

Sudarshan Purohit, a translator of Hindi pulp fiction, has pointed out that Indian popular fiction does not enjoy the same status as Western literature. He translated the crime thriller *The 65 Lakh Heist* by Surender Mohan Pathak from the *Vimal series*. While browsing a bookstore, Purohit noticed the book next to an anthology of love stories edited by Ruskin Bond and a book by Salman Rushdie that was not correctly categorized according to genre:

The reader will undoubtedly point out that the volume of Indian books in all these genres is so low that the books would be lost if mixed with other non-Indian books. Moreover, starting from that point, the reader — and several writers and reporters — have concluded that Indian writing is minimal and that readers here read much less than their counterparts in other countries. Although this makes for excellent copy, it is far from the truth. (Purohit)

The anthology of love stories should have been placed under the Romance category, while Salman Rushdie's book should have been placed in the literary fiction section. Although the book was a bestseller, it needed an effective system for categorizing books, making it difficult for readers to browse easily.

Despite having a long-standing tradition of pulp fiction, India needs to develop a systematic approach to publishing and distributing books to the public. Foreign countries have a sophisticated publishing system that caters to the demands of readers and the discourse and flavors of different genres. They established mechanisms to ensure that books are readily available to the public. In India, we are now developing similar parameters for publication and distribution, but this is a slow process. Nevertheless, we are progressing by employing innovative methods to reach readers and make books more accessible.

In India, popular fiction has experienced significant growth, as current and upcoming generations have found it an effective means of earning a living and reaching a broader readership. This has led to unprecedented readership among the youth, particularly those living in metropolitan cities. The changing patterns of society, such as the shift towards nuclear families and unhealthy societal expectations, have also contributed to this trend. As a result, publishers have been able to capitalize on this evolving market by targeting single working women with

the financial means, freedom, and lack of responsibilities to engage in leisure activities, such as reading.

According to Manish Singh, manager at Mills & Boon, India, this is a *forward-looking generation* (Singh) that presents a significant opportunity for publishers. In the coming decade, India is expected to become the world's largest English-language book-buying market, driven by new distribution networks and the expansion of major bookstore chains.

Publishers know India's business potential well and have identified a readership base. Using straightforward language has opened new readership avenues, such as high school students, office employees, and modern parents. English language novels, both original and translated, have transcended political and geographical limitations owing to the proliferation of online platforms.

Indian commercial fiction has established its identity based on an independent taste rather than the highbrow of literary fiction. In commercial terms, successful authors have achieved ultra-bestselling status in the Indian market. Chetan Bhagat, for instance, achieved unprecedented popularity in a recent survey, though he has never claimed himself as an author of literary fiction. Instead, he aims to make his novels accessible to rickshaw pullers, wanting them to be sold alongside jeans and t-shirts in the malls:

"The sales of both Mills & Boon books and those by Bhagat are helped by the fact that each book costs between 95 and 125 rupees – between £1.25 and £1.80. Though still much money when rickshaw pullers earn 50p a day, they are affordable for the class they aim for. Moreover, although at 699 rupees (£9.50), The Lost Symbol in hardback is more expensive, it is still affordable among India's middle class" (Burke).

To achieve this, he has been willing to compromise on price and language, with the average price below 100 INR and the language as simple as a high school-educated person can understand. There is no duality or psychological meaning beneath the surface story, which requires extra intellect for comprehension. Furthermore, his approach to pan-India, a pan-age middle-class group, explains why bankers turn to him for further ventures. According to the Tehalaka survey, the authors have more readers when the stories are set in the exact location as the readers, and people not only read for entertainment but also connect with the story as if it were their own life. They develop extraordinary relationships with the protagonist or characters woven into the novel. For example, novels written by foreign authors, set in a foreign country, and featuring non-Indian characters may need more emotional intensity to connect with people worldwide. However, they can convey philosophy, messages, or so-called universality and fulfill the purpose of literary fiction or build up moral values.

Chick lit, or chick literature is a fiction genre featuring female protagonists and heroine-centric narratives. Although this is not a traditional practice in Indian fiction writing, it has recently gained popularity. Indian chick lit, sometimes referred to as ladki-lit, offers a unique portrayal of Indian women in their twenties and thirties who are single or divorced, working or struggling to find a job, pursuing business

success, engaging in repeated love affairs, and living in Indian metropolitan cities. Examples of Indian chick lit include *Socialite Evening* by Shobha De Rajashree's *Trust Me*, the earliest example. There are also many other novels written following chick lit parameters, which are read widely.

The defining characteristics of chick-lit novels are the love plot, the heroine's career, and sexual relationships. These themes serve as vehicles for exploring the protagonist's experiences and personal growth as a young, modern woman navigating her personal and professional lives. Chick-lit novels typically center on the protagonist's relationships with friends, family, and colleagues and her romantic pursuits. Moreover, sexual relationships are a common theme in chick-lit novels, with the heroine's romantic pursuits often taking center stage:

"In chick texts, however, the romantic relationship is often given much less narrative and emotional weight than the heroine's own experiences and her relationships platonic and sexual-with other characters." (Marby 200)

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian English novelists are writing novels aimed at mass readership. Most of them come from business backgrounds and employ strategies to reach the targeted audience through proper channels. The novelists also tried establishing their names as brands for their fictional works. The novels bearing the names of the branded authors induce the customers to make buying choices. The publishers, including self-published authors who have their publications, developed a system to bring the readers' attention toward specific genres like mythological fiction, chick lit, political thriller, anthropological thriller, romantic novels, and many others. To allure the readers from different walks of life, they weave the story realistically to make it relatable to the readers. The novelists of mythological fiction depicted the godly figures as humans without miracle power that readers find in the novels of Ashok Banker and Amish Tripathi. In the political and anthropological thrillers segment, Ashwin Sanghi put the proposition that *history repeats itself* in *Chanakya's Chant*, attracting wide readerships through parallel narratives. Chetan Bhagat, the giant figure from the contemporary galaxy of novelists, depicted the youth culture realistically and credited him with the bestseller status. Like another popular genre of fiction, chick-lit also brought the attention of women readers across the country as they find the portrayal of Indian metropolitan women realistic. It is also noticed that their writing style is quite simple, which a schoolgoer can understand easily. They tried their level best to reach among the masses. The above-mentioned popular fiction has performed better in the market and brought profits. Making a profit from these fictional works is the primary purpose of most novelists of popular fiction.

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