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POPULAR NOVEL COMES OF AGE IN INDIA

The first decade of this century was a fruitful one in so far as the genre of Indian English fiction on the whole is concerned, but it was particularly fruitful in the case of popular novel. It is not that such a variety of novel was totally non-existent in the twentieth century, but if the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, way back in 1981, is taken to be the starting point of a revolution in Indian English fiction of the serious variety, then Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004) can rightly be credited with having opened the floodgates of popular fiction in our country. Since his novel appeared on the stands, some 400 novels, a large number of them debut novels penned by young professionals, have been published, all of which goes to prove that the popular novel is now firmly entrenched in India. My paper studies the unprecedented growth that has taken place in this genre, its various divisions, themes, styles etc. and its importance for the overall literary scenario in the country.

A popular novel is defined as one that has a wide readership belonging to middle or "low-brow" category. In other words, such a novel "may not possess much literary merit" (Cuddon 685). It can be described as light fiction because of its simple theme and treatment, which do not tax the cerebral resources of the reader. It deals with subjects which relate to contemporary life but romance, fantasy and sex add to its appeal. The genre of popular novel, variously called kitsch, pulp, fun-read, leisure books, light read, metro read, quick-read is well-established now.

It might not be out of place to say that everyone has, at one point of time or another, read popular works of, say, Barbara Cartland, Agatha Christie, Erle Stanley Gardner, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Daniel Steel, Jeffrey Archer, Sidney Sheldon, J.K. Rowling et al and might remember characters like Sherlock Holmes, Perry Mason, Harry Potter et al for the rest of one's life.

Coming to the theoretical aspect of the popular novel, it is observed that there are several theories about trivial literature and yet no single theory seems capable of explaining its essence. After the demise of the grand narratives which formed the bedrock of high modernism, all that was left were language games and the readers were content with the contingent and contemporary rather than with the wild goose chase after the eternal and the universal. The popular novel is eminently suited to this mindset.

Some scholars believe that popular novel promotes status quo-ism with regard to distribution of power, while some others believe popular literature to be the site for negotiation and contestation in a society always on the move. Popular fiction, being the

beloved child of postmodernism, may not brook a poetics, for it would already and always be deconstructed.

Popularity, per se, is strongly linked to geographical territory. What is popular at one place may not be popular at another place. This means the socio-cultural conditions prevailing at a particular place play their part in shaping the choice of subject matter and style that shall click with the readers in a big way. Popular literature, therefore, has a local flavour, a regional touch or an ethnic outlook. However, it should not be interpreted in a strict or narrow sense. For the young professionals, the world is a globalized village so that a London street may be as acceptable to him as a Mumbai *galli*.

The commonest observation about popular fiction is that it is formulaic and stereotypical, and it uses artifacts that have often been used. It may also be called formulaic in the sense that the prospective reader approaches it with a certain measure of foreknowledge of what exactly he is to find in it. In this, it can be contrasted with serious or literary fiction which may not conform to this pattern. There is an element of thematic or stylistic mystique built around a canonical work and a reader may prefer to go by a reviewer's recommendation in choosing a work to read, for it cannot be predicted like popular fiction.

A writer may dabble in the writing of popular fiction even though s/he has been known for writing serious fiction. Salman Rushdie wrote *Kohinoor* to humour his child and Anita Desai did similarly in case of *Diamond Dust and Other Stories*. Khushwant Singh has also lent his pen to this genre even though his novel *Burial at Sea* sits ill at ease with his *Train to Pakistan*.

So far as the subject matter or theme is concerned, separating serious fiction from the popular poses problem at times because any theme taken up in serious fiction can also be taken up in popular fiction. The subject matter of popular fiction is of contemporary interest. Entertainment is the chief motive for which people turn to popular fiction. It should not be taken to mean that serious fiction is tasteless and boring. For sure, one can come across very engrossing serious fiction as also very boring popular fiction.

For the layman, visual media is the most preferred means of entertainment. If the society is hooked on the stuff shown on the idiot box like family intrigues, myths and light spiritualism, then these are also dealt with in popular novel. The ingredients of the popular fiction in India also have an affinity with the Bollywood movies. Both excite the common reader/viewer and keep him engrossed so that at the end of it, he feels it was a good 'timepass'.

There is little scope in popular literature to seriously discuss issues – social, political, economic or cultural. The conclusions arrived at in popular fiction are supported by facile logic as resorted to by a man in the street. Thus, in Bhagat's *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, the writer paints the picture of gory communal clashes and comments that there is no effective reconciliatory mechanism in case of communal riots (71), without any serious analysis of the problem or of the mechanisms available and their inadequacy etc.

In India, popular novel targets young readers, mostly students and professionals, for it is they who read and understand English. It targets the young readers with little time but with plenty of penchant for reading. There are many divisions made like Chick-lit, lad-lit, Tech-lit, Campus-lit, Career-lit etc. Major themes in this fast-emerging genre are campus and office comedies, professional life, live-in and extra-marital relationships, and practically anything that could be of interest to youth. Then there are the all time favourites like crime fiction, thrillers, adolescent fiction, fantasy, erotica etc.

Most readers of popular works do not look for literary merit and merely take to it as a means of entertainment. In most of the popular novels, action becomes most important. Characterization, setting and literary language are of secondary importance. Mostly, it is the chatty style of college-goers that appeals to young readers. Take an example from Varsha Dixit's *Right Fit Wrong Shoe*: "Irritating life out of him was as natural to her as salt to a Bloody Mary or *kanda to paav bhaji*." The use of quotes from Hindi movies has been an old practice as one would mark in Shobha De's non-fiction work *Spouse*: Chapter One: "Touch and Go / Aa gale lag jaa." Similarly, the use of SMS lingo is widely done in popular fiction. As a product of postmodern times, popular fiction shares the irreverence towards icons and distrust of fetishes. Aravind Adiga in his *The White Tiger* mocks the deities as 'arses' (187).

Style-wise, Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* has been dubbed 'SMS speak' novel for its excessive use of slang-ridden teen-talk. A look at the titles would show that Arunabha Sengupta's *Big Apple 2 Bite* (2007) uses SMS lingo in the title, while Soma Das's *Sumthing of a mocktale* (2007) and Smita Jain's *Kkrishna's Konfessions* (2008) blatantly defy the lexical code. It seems as if like the irreverence towards the great figures of past, linguistic iconoclasm is also on the rise.

A popular novel may not have any serious message to convey, but entertain it must or it will lose the market. Wit and humour are essential ingredients of such novels. The pace of the story must come up to the expectations of the reader. It cannot linger on too long in order, say, to dwell on psychological fine points. Jhumpa Lahiri's works, viewed from this angle, cannot be subsumed under the rubric of popular fiction.

When I talk of the coming of age of popular novel in India, what I mean is that the ratio of the popular novel vis-à-vis the serious novel has gone up in the current century and that it has also attained a measure of legitimacy and is here to stay. M.K. Naik had commented about Shobha De's 'pulp writing': "Sagas of bed-hopping, chronicles of high society and low ethicality, drawing room manners and barn-door morals...would perhaps be an apt description of them." (Naik 115). Time has put the stamp of respectability on popular fiction for the time being.

Chetan Bhagat, as an Indian English novelist, has achieved the distinction of having sold maximum copies – more than 2,50,000 of each of the two novels – *Five Point Someone* (2004) and *One Night @ The Call Centre* (2005). The figure is higher than that of any other novel falling in the category of Indian English Novel. This, however, is not the sole

novel having performed the feat. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* too, has sold similar number of copies. (Das) The winning of the Man Booker award did help Adiga, but we are told that Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* sold some two lac copies. Even debut novels like Karan Bajaj's *Johnny Gone Down* sold 40000 copies (Bansal) – something unimaginable until a decade ago.

Elizabeth Lowell, a prolific American popular fiction writer, suggests that the writer of popular fiction is guided by the proclivities of the readers who pay money to buy books. Even as the popular writers have their fan clubs, the publishers too carry on large-scale surveys to find out what actually can sell in the market. Hefty advances are given to promising or proven writers, hype created, books launched with much fanfare and awards manipulated to prop a work of an author. More than the contents, packaging is what matters most in the marketing of popular fiction: a striking title, glossy cover and eye-catching illustration may appeal to a common reader. Look at some of the titles: *You've got to be kidding, I am Broke...! Love Me, Of course I love you...till I find someone better, If God went to B School, would Love follow Him there?* There is a mass market now for such books and given the volume of sales, the price is quite affordable, since there exists a symbiotic relationship between the price and the sales of a book.

In India, more than the reader or the writer, it is the publisher who decides what the reader is to get, as the chief editor of Random House is quoted as having said, "A large number of our best sellers have probably been commissioned"(Sudarshan). Apart from the hype and hoopla built around a popular work, the proscription of a book could also boost its sales as happened with Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, which, otherwise might not have appealed to public at large, devoid as it is of literary graces.

As explained above, popular novels thrive on the themes relevant to the times. In this respect, Chetan Bhagat's acumen in choosing suitable themes has to be recognized. His *Five Point Someone* (2004) belongs to the category of Campus Novel whose early practitioners include Prema Nandkumar, Rita Joshi et al. His second novel *One Night @ The Call Centre* (2005) deals with the contemporary life of the youth working at call centres. His third novel *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) cashes in on the craze for cricket in India. Bhagat's *Two states: The story of My Marriage* (2009), focusses on the problems of inter-racial marriage, while *Revolution 2020* contrasts an idealist youth with a go-getter type dazzled by the riches.

Bhagat's success has motivated a number of student writers like Anirban Bose, Farhad Zama et al, for whom the campus is the only source of exciting experience which they can conveniently take up in their debut novels. Once they have launched themselves with some success, the second work comes close on the heels, otherwise they give up. In Suman Hossain's *A Guy Thing*, references to SMS-ing, Orkut-ing, mobile-dating and online-chatting present the reality of life of young students. Hostel life, romance and studies weave the warp and woof of the novel.

Equally interesting is the workplace of the young professionals these days. Abhijit Bhaduri, Anish Trivedi, Ajay Mohan Jain have tried their hand at this type of novel. Sujita Nair, a former army officer-turned-writer has come out with her debut novel *She's a Jolly Good Fellow* (2010) which is a story of two women army officers who take on adversities, learning their lessons the hard way. Similarly, Bhavna Chauhan's *Where Girls Dare* (2010) which is about girl cadets at Chennai's Officers' Training Academy. There can be no two opinions about the fact that her description of life in the army should be authentic.

Romancing is the staple of youth, whether studying in college or working in a business organization. While Jaishree Misra's *Secrets and Lies* (2009) falls in the Chick-lit category, her other novels *Secrets and Sins* (2010), and *A Scandalous Secret* (2011) are powerful tales of passion. Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* (2008) is high on romance between an advertising executive and a cricket player. The story-line includes female bonding and booze parties that should remind one of the trail-blazer of yore – Shobha De. *Right Fit Wrong Shoe* (2009) by Varsha Dixit is a racy thriller of contemporary liberated lifestyle. Advaita Kala and Mayank Anand have also taken up this theme. Any number of novelists from Vikram Seth to Anita Jain have based their stories on the unique problem of finding a suitable match for the marriageable boy or girl.

Thrillers have always appealed to a large readership. Mukul Deva's spy thrillers, viz., *Lashkar: Into the Heart of Terror*, *Salim Must Die*, *Blowback* etc. are quite riveting. Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*, the winner of The Hindu Best Fiction Award 2010 is a science fiction thriller. Similarly, Kalpish Ratna, Arvin Chawla have come up with their debut novels in this field. Detective novels have been written by Madhulika Liddle, Saurabh Katyal, J. Dey et al. Crime and murder mysteries based on real life incidents like Siddharth Shanghvi's *The Last Flamingoes of Bombay* based on the infamous Jessica Lal murder case of Delhi and Farukh Dhondy's novel *The Snake* based on the life of the international criminal Charles Sobhraj attract many readers. Novels dealing with the underworld have been written by established writers like Vikram Chandra as also by newcomers like Mathew Vincent Menacherry.

Popular fiction reflects popular culture, which has been put at par with the elitist culture of yore by the postmodernist theoreticians. The leftist viewpoint as articulated by Stuart Hall is that culture is not the result of selected actions of some individuals but the outcome of cumulative actions of all and sundry. This was responsible for changing the perception of culture and negating the distinction between high culture and low culture. Going by the sales volume, one may mistakenly conclude that "In the world of Indian English publishing, kitsch has begun to dominate the mainstream" (Sudarshan). It is true that at present all types of novels are being published but this will not remain so for ever. As a publisher comments, "There will be two types of mass market fiction: books that are good and books that don't last" (Bansal). Even Stuart Hall alongwith Paddy Whannel, expressed the view in their joint work *The Popular Arts*, in favour of the categories of good and bad even in popular arts (Procter 23). As such, it would be in the interest of budding writers to focus on quality in popular literature, even though not aspiring to copy the canonical authors.

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