



POPULAR FICTION IN INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH: A CRITICAL REVIEW FOCUSING ON CHETAN BHAGAT

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Abstract

This paper looks at how popular fiction has grown in Indian Writing in English, especially through Chetan Bhagat's books. Popular fiction has moved from fancy literature to stories that everyone can read, showing changes in India after economic reforms. Bhagat's simple style, everyday topics, and huge sales make him stand out, but some say his work lacks deep meaning. We review his style, themes, and influence, showing how he makes English books more open to all while questioning what "good" literature is.

Keywords

Popular Fiction, Indian Writing in English, Chetan Bhagat, Narrative Simplicity, Youth Culture, Commercial Literature, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Indian Writing in English started long ago with early books like travel stories in the 1700s and grew during British rule and after independence. Today, popular fiction is big because of globalization and a growing middle class. Unlike complex books by authors like Salman Rushdie, popular fiction is fun, easy to read, and sells a lot. Chetan Bhagat is called the "voice of young India." His novels like *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) have sold millions, turned into movies, and started talks about making English simpler in India. This simplified review explores popular fiction in Indian Writing in English, with a focus on Bhagat, and how his stories connect cultures but get criticized for being too basic.

History of Popular Fiction in Indian Writing in English:

Indian Writing in English began nearly two centuries ago with the first book by an Indian in English, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1793), a travel narrative by Sake Dean Mahomed. The first Indian English novel was *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, marking the start of fiction in this genre. In the 19th century, early works included novels by Lal Behari Dey like *Govinda Samanta* (1874) and by women such as Toru Dutt's *Bianca* (1878) and Krupabai Sathianadhan's *Saguna* (1887-88), which often dealt with social issues and native life.

The 1930s saw a major growth in Indian English fiction, led by the "Big Three": Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. Their novels, such as Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) on caste issues, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935) set in the fictional town of Malgudi, and Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) on Gandhian ideals, made Indian Writing in English more popular by focusing on rural India, social disparities, and Indian sensibilities. These writers emphasized the "Indianisation of English," blending local culture with the language.



Post-independence in the 1950s-1970s, fiction shifted to psychological and personal themes with authors like Anita Desai and Arun Joshi, while women writers like Kamala Markandaya added rural realism. The 1980s brought global recognition with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), introducing magic realism. However, popular commercial fiction truly rose after India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, with authors like Shobhaa De offering gossip, urban tales, and later Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi creating mass-market hits blending mythology, romance, and everyday issues. This era democratized reading, as "commercial fiction has democratized Indian fiction since reading is no more considered exclusively a scholarly habit" (Sharma, 45-58). Bhagat's works, influenced by this shift, turned Indian Writing in English into a bestseller phenomenon, often adapted into films.

Literature Review:

Popular fiction in Indian Writing in English boomed after India's economy opened in the 1990s, creating more publishers and readers wanting real-life stories. Experts say this type of writing uses "Hinglish" (mix of Hindi and English) to reach regular people. Bhagat mixes serious ideas with easy reading, making a new kind of bestseller in Indian English books.

Critics call his English "like Hindi," with simple words that sound like how Indians talk, making him a symbol of "New India." But some compare his stories to Bollywood movies – predictable with romance and happy endings – focusing more on sales than art. His books touch on youth issues like dreams and corruption, but they're seen as shallow. Still, he gets credit for getting young Indians to read more.

Analysis with Focus on Chetan Bhagat:

Narrative Style and Language:

Bhagat's writing style is marked by its simplicity and accessibility. He often relies on short, direct sentences, conversational slang, and familiar Indian cultural references, which together create a narrative voice that feels natural and easy to follow. A clear example of this can be seen in *Five Point Someone*, where the narrator reflects: "We were not just studying engineering, we were learning to survive" (Bhagat, *FPS*, 23). This line captures how Bhagat blends global influences—such as a casual, Americanized tone—with the everyday pressures of Indian student life. Because of this hybrid style, his novels appeal to a wide readership, including readers who may not be highly proficient in English. His language makes them feel included in the literary space, breaking the traditional perception of English fiction in India as elitist or academically demanding. However, this same simplicity has led critics to argue that Bhagat's works sometimes reduce complex social and emotional issues to overly straightforward narratives. To them, the accessible style risks oversimplifying serious themes, making the novels resemble light, commercial fiction rather than deeper literary explorations.

Thematic Concerns:

His stories deal with real issues like school, jobs, love, and society. In *Revolution 2020*, he shows corruption in education, and *Half Girlfriend* talks about class differences. A quote from *2 States* highlights inner conflict: "The world's most sensible person and the biggest idiot both stay within us. The worst part is you can't even tell who is who" (Bhagat, *2SSMM*, 169). These show young India's hopes and struggles, but endings are often too neat, sticking to stereotypes. Many books become hit films like *3 Idiots*.

Another quote from *One Indian Girl* stresses self-reliance: "Don't be serious, be sincere" (Bhagat, *Speech*). This motivates readers but is seen as basic advice.

Cultural and Commercial Impact:



Bhagat is more than just a novelist; he has established himself as a public intellectual, motivational speaker, and newspaper columnist who captures the aspirations and anxieties of modern, urban India. His influence extends far beyond the world of fiction. With more than ten million copies of his books sold, he has played a major role in revitalizing the Indian publishing industry and expanding the readership for English-language fiction. One of his most significant contributions has been the encouragement of hybrid or mixed-language storytelling, where English is blended with Hindi and other Indian linguistic elements. This approach reflects the speech patterns of contemporary Indian youth and makes literature feel closer to everyday life.

However, this widespread popularity has also attracted strong criticism from traditional literary circles. Many conventional critics argue that Bhagat's success marks a decline in the artistic and linguistic standards associated with 'serious' or 'classic' literature. They view his informal style, straightforward plots, and mass appeal as signs of commercialism rather than literary depth. Yet, Bhagat's work demonstrates that popular fiction can be a powerful platform for addressing social issues, personal struggles, and cultural change. His novels show that meaningful ideas do not need to be reserved for elite academic readers; instead, they can be communicated through accessible stories that resonate with a broad and diverse audience across India.

Conclusion:

Popular fiction within Indian Writing in English has increasingly become a mirror of the country's rapid social, economic, and cultural transformations, and few authors have contributed to this shift as prominently as Chetan Bhagat. His novels have expanded the readership of Indian English fiction by making literature more accessible to people who were previously distant from the English literary sphere. Bhagat's straightforward narrative style, relatable characters, and engagement with contemporary issues—education, relationships, class aspiration, and youth culture—have earned him both enthusiastic admiration and strong criticism. While readers appreciate his ability to capture everyday experiences in an easy, conversational manner, critics argue that his stylistic simplicity compromises literary depth. Nevertheless, his impact lies in opening the doors of literature to a wider and more diverse audience.

Future scholarship can benefit from situating Bhagat's work within a broader landscape of popular Indian fiction by comparing him to other bestselling authors such as Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, or Durjoy Datta. Such comparative studies would highlight how different writers use popular forms to engage with mythology, history, modernity, or youth culture, thereby offering a richer understanding of the role of popular fiction in shaping public imagination.

Ultimately, Bhagat challenges the long-standing division between 'serious' literature and 'popular' entertainment. His success illustrates that storytelling intended for mass readership can still carry cultural significance, provoke reflection, and document social realities. In doing so, he pushes for a more inclusive and expansive understanding of Indian Writing in English—one that acknowledges the value of both literary artistry and widespread readability.

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