

INDIAN ENGLISH PULP FICTION IN PRESENT PERSPECTIVE: A SMART BALANCE OF COMMERCIAL POPULARITY AND LITERARY STANDARDS

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Abstract:

The phrase, Pulp Fiction, refers to the literature printed on cheap quality pulp paper. The fascination towards Indian pulp-fiction in English today edifies striking progress sustained by the adroitness of the pulp fiction writers who aspire to persist on the interests of their avid readers. These writers have to strive to secure their popularity by catering to their challenging interests or expectation in making their choice of the pulp fiction at every purchase. Considering these fundamental purposes of creating literature as the significant parameters to validate a literary piece, my paper examines the Indian English pulp fiction produced recently by the popular writers like Shobha De, Sujata Massey, ChetanBhagat, AshwinSanghi, Ravinder Singh, PiyushJha, Durjoy Dutta, Brinda Narayan, Sudha Murthy, Swati Khushal, Neelesh Mishra, Amish Tripathi and Nikita Singh. The commercial approach and progress of the best-selling Indian English pulp fiction should not be misinterpreted for its lacuna of literary standards. Consideration of the pulp fiction as an additional genre in Indian English shall definitely unveil an arena of scope for emerging writers in future.

Key Words: *Pulp fiction, literary standards, self-comprehensiveness, commercial approach, box-office.*

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- Dr. Jyoti Patil

The new technologies of modern age like printing, radio, cinema, television, computers, mobile, internet and information technologies resulted into the present day mass culture. These technologies have drastically changed the relationship between art and audience, erecting barriers to a direct interchange between author and the reader. The techniques and technologies of marketing bestsellers were sharpened in the interwar period and it was in 1920s and 1930s when the term pulp fiction was used for the first time with reference to American magazines and paperback produced on low quality papers.

Popular fiction is generally distinguished from literary fiction, known as Pulp fiction or Paperback fiction and viewed as low literature. The so-called popular works of an age may seem classics to sensitive readers in a later age. Most of the people are attracted towards pulp fiction today. Direct influence of pulp fiction is more on the public. But today, there appears a shift towards accommodating this sort of novels more. Bright, attractive magazine covers and the familiar shelf headings have a great impact on the minds of readers. In the contemporary scenario, the publishing houses and the book markets are occupied and dominated by pulp fiction with specific strands.

Popular fiction is a cultural nexus for a historically determined and evolving relationship whose understanding requires us to reflect on the period, the people and the state of book production as well as the books themselves. A corollary of course is that a text having popular use at one time does not therefore necessarily preclude the possibility of it having other uses or values at other times. Yesterday's popular fiction

can be today's literature. Popular fiction manifests in a variety of genres such as science fiction, crime fiction, detective fiction, horror fiction, romance fiction etc. The pulp fiction is supposed to be formulaic, commercial, sensational, melodramatic and sentimental. It always appeals to the mass audience, who evince to have low academic taste in literature.

During the early period of the 20th century, pulp magazines turned up in the market. It was an escape from the realities of the depression of the two world wars. Pulp fiction reflects popular culture of a superficial character. Previously, it is believed that people who are occupied with these kinds of novels, are considered to be loiters. The genres of pulp fiction, science fiction, detective fiction and romance fiction are very much popular among the public today. Science fiction includes future science and technology and outer space as major components. At times, it has a stint of comedy mingled with action and mystery. Detective fiction is synonymous with mystery and crime having investigation as setting. Romance fiction is currently the best-selling genre among all other genres now. A popular novel, according to J.A. Cuddon is the one that has wide readership belonging to middle or low-brow category. Such a novel may not possess much literary merit. According to him, many a best seller, historical novel, novel of sensation, thriller and novel of adventure has been so described. There are some western popular writers like J.K. Rowling, Agatha Christie, Erle Stanley Gardner, Barbara Cartland, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Dan Brown, Nicholas Sparks so on and so forth. Literary and popular texts may be distinguished in a classical sense.

In literary arena, for more than a decade, a shining period initiated by Arundhati Roy's Booker prize success in 1997 with *The God of Small Things*, Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize in 2003, Kiran Desai's Man Booker prize in 2006 and Aravind Adiga's similar achievement in 2008, India has been enjoying an English language literary boom. A newly buoyant middle-class, better travelled, more curious and with more disposable income, has been devouring books like never before. Almost every year now it appears

that there is a new trend, pulp fiction one year, chick-lit or sari fiction the next, as Indian publishers find new ways to tap into the market and reach out to more readers. But in literary fiction, story and character take a backseat to style, theme, and imagery.

The 21st Century India is producing crime novels, comic-strip books, historical drama and memoirs such as *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta's seminal account of Mumbai. There are books set around the campus of the country's famed technology institutes. "I think it is a very healthy sign that many new writers are satisfied to write for local audiences and don't try to cater to foreign tastes", says Mumbai-based Amit Varma, another journalist-turned-author whose first novel, *My Friend, Sancho* was nominated for Man Asian Literary Prize.

Beginning with nineteenth-century romances, such as Toru Dutt's *Bianca*, K. K. Lahiri's *Roshinara* and K. Chakravarti's *Sarata and Hingana*, it moves forward to a consideration of twentieth-century pulp forms, including detective fiction, science fiction and fantasy fiction. Indian English fantasy writing, if not hard-core science fiction, remained alive but not highly visible throughout the twentieth century. Some of it appeared in popular magazines and at least sometimes it can be found in novel form: Rushdie's *Grimus* (1975) can hardly evade the tag of fantasy fiction. More recent science fiction and fantasy fiction includes Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), which won the Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Award in 1997. Such novels are not pulp but, like much of the genre-fiction and some of the pulp-fiction examined here, they use generic conventions to tell a story of socio-historical complexity and depth. Ashok Banker is probably the contemporary Indian English writer who is best known for being primarily a writer of fantasy fiction. His recent novels *Siege of Mithila* (2004) and *Prince of Ayodhya* (2002) may be based on the Ramayana, but they also owe part of their inspiration to Tolkien and his brand of epic fantasy. The word detective in most of these contexts as the term detective fiction overlaps with spy novels, though again it is not always easy to differentiate between literary and pulp elements.

It was only with the advent of the socialite-columnist ShobhaDé in the 1980s that the term pulp fiction came to be applied seriously to Indian English novels. Why is it that the description pulp fiction came to attach itself to ShobhaDé's novels, when it could have been applied to numerous earlier novels? There are various possible answers to this question. One is that the rise of Dé can be connected in many ways to the rise of Rushdie. This is not a reference to the fact that the success of *Midnight's Children* opened the portals of Indian English publishing wider than the oeuvre of R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai and Raja Rao had been able to do in the past, but to the fact that the languages of both Dé and Rushdie are rooted in the growth in numbers of a certain kind of Indian urban middle class. One can argue that the language concocted by Dé in her Stardust film columns was in some ways a pulp variation of the languages concocted by G.V. Desani and Rushdie to accommodate their various versions of Indian realities. Once again, at least in the case of the post-Independence Rushdie-Dé generation, the traffic was probably two-way: Dé was made possible by the same sociolinguistic factors that created Rushdie, both published their early novels in the 1980s.

As already indicated, the rise of interest in Indian English fiction has led to the publication of many pulp-like novels by Indians or people of Indian origin who write in English. Sujata Massey is another successful Indian English writer of pulp or genre fiction. She has published seven novels to date in the thriller genre and is known among genre fans as 'the creator of the Rei Shimura mysteries': *The Salaryman's Wife* (1997), *Zen Attitude* (1998), *The Floating Girl* (2000), *The Flower Master* (2001), *The Bride's Kimono* (2001), *The Samurai's Daughter* (2003) and *The Pearl Diver* (2004). Winner of significant genre awards, like the Macavity Award for Best Novel (for *The Flower Master*) and the Agatha Award for Best First Novel (for *The Salaryman's Wife*), Massey has as much of an international following as Dé in India. If Dé's fiction pulses with the half-realized social and cultural issues of urban and metropolitan India, Massey's fiction is perhaps more self-consciously topical within a cosmopolitan scenario.

SudhaMurthy is another prolific fiction author who espouses her philosophical views on charity, hospitality and self-realization through fictional narratives like *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read & Other Stories* and *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*. Other notable books by her are *Wise and Otherwise*, *Old Man and his God*, *The Magic Drum* and *Other Favourite Stories* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*. Marathi movie *Pitruroun* is based on a story by Sudha Murthy.

While, the pulp fictions of ChetanBhagat and Ravinder Singh climb to the next level of producing box office hits as feature films, why not a space be created for this genre of pulp fiction with a set of elevated literary norms. Bhagat's achievement is that he gave Indian stories to the casual Indian reader. Before the advent of Mr. Bhagat, India lacked market for books not because Indians don't like to read, but because the writers are not writing for a common Indian English reader. Bhagat has catered almost all the subjects of contemporary Indian society like education system, the trouble of campus life, corruption, politics, predicaments incorporate sector, filth of the fashion world, generation gap, the patriarchy of cricket, communalism, riots, politics in the name of religion, the ways of the business world, the problems of the inter states marriage, cultural clashes so on and so forth. Factually speaking, literature created in a specific period by nature, reflects the societal set up and its demands of that period. Undoubtedly, this aspect of literature not only enriches the self-comprehensiveness of its readers but also seizes their absolute interest towards it.

There are some other notable Indian English pulp fiction writers like Ashwin Sanghi who is the author of three best-selling novels, *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant* and *The Krishna Key*, Amish Tripathi who is known for his novels *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Ravinder Singh who has written eight novels entitled *I Too Had a Love Story*, *Can Love Happen Twice?*, *Like it happened Yesterday*, *Love Stories That Touched My Heart*, *Tell Me A Story*, *Your Dreams are Mine Now*, *This Love*

That Feels Right, Will You Still Love Me, and Piyush Jhawho has written crime and thriller novels, *Mumbaistan (2012, Compass Box Killer: An Inspector Vikrar Crime Thriller (2013, Anti-Social Network: An Inspector Vikrar Crime Thriller (2014), Raakshas : India's No. 1 Serial Killer (2016).*

The Hindu described Ashwin Sanghi as India's answer to Dan Brown. His previous works, *The Rozabal Line* and *Chanakya's Chant* are part of among the growing trend of historical thrillers and much like *The Krishna Key* have both been bestsellers. *The Krishna Key* is the story of Ravi Saini, a historian, who embarks on a quest to find Krishna's treasures to prove his innocence in the murder of his best friend. In a Dan Brownesque style, Sanghi takes you on a fascinating journey, revisiting every landmark vital to the plot detailing it with every possible evidence mankind can lay its eyes and hands upon.

Indian English pulp, like other post-colonial pulp, shares many features with contemporary pulp in general. It is however identified as Indian or Indian English on the basis of some prominent features of the cultural identity of the protagonists and characters. But others prove more recalcitrant. The majority of popular fiction forms like mysteries, thrillers, romances, science fiction novels, fantasy novels and mainstream bestsellers are heroic stories wherein protagonists draw upon their innate strength and virtue in order to battle the odds against them whether those odds are a subtle internal conflict or the villain like Lord Voldemort in Harry Potter series. However, typically the happy ending in popular fiction leaves us with the feelings of uplifted state. Even when the ending is ambivalent or negative, there's generally a sense of balance and rightness that is, or at least should be, satisfying to the soul. Popular fiction focuses on character and story, which in a well-written work are inextricably linked. Change one, and the other must change with it. It is character, not plot that is at the heart of the success of these stories. If they're page-turners, it's usually because we empathize with the protagonists so deeply that we have to keep reading to find out what happens to them.

Thus, it is evident that Indian English pulp fiction is today a hot cake and strikes a perfect balance between commercial popularity and literary standards.

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