

Contemporary Popular Fiction in India: An Aesthetic Space for Indian Youth

Ananya Roy Pratihara
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Utkal University, Odisha

Abstract

*Since 1990s, the distinction made between “high” and “low” culture via standards have been evident in the critical reception of this genre termed as ‘popular fiction’ or ‘bestsellers’. In India these are largely written by young Indians using a distinctly Indian flavour. These new genres deal with the contemporary society, discuss the enhancement of entrepreneurship, easy urban relationships, and consumerism and are often termed as ‘chick lit’, ‘techie lit’ or ‘Metro Reads.’ While the question of Indian popular fiction’s merit as a form of young adult writing and its claim to literary status remains undecided, this genre has travelled a long way and the conclusions drawn about its imitation of Western forms does not suffice to mark its aesthetic significance. Drawing on theories of aesthetic, popular culture, life writing and creativity, this paper tries to analyse two novels *English, August* (1988) by Upamanyu Chatterjee and *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) by Chetan Bhagat in order to understand the distinctive creative expression present in Indian popular fiction and to enquire the genre’s aesthetic possibilities which may be found in some of its global transformations.*

Keywords: popular fiction, high and low culture, popular culture, formulaic fiction

In recent times India has extremely proliferated and established literary scene of writing in English especially in the genre of ‘popular’ fiction – or what Ken Gelder phrases as ‘literature’s’ opposite (11). By and large, these popular narratives are mostly about English speaking – young Indian living in the sprawling metropolises like Mumbai or Bangalore, in India’s premier Institutions, call centre or offices. Characters are young, energetic but always

struggle with some kind of crisis born out of the 'clash' of tradition and modernity, old value system and new avenues. This article examines two examples of popular Indian fiction: one is very recent- *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* by Chetan Bhagat (2009) and the other dates back to 1988 – *English, August* by Upamanyu Chatterjee. Where Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English, August* focuses on the escapist nature of youth and a bizarre notion of aesthetic shaped by the young mind, Chetan Bhagat's novel *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* shows ways to the 'young India' to elevate their value system both at personal and the societal levels. This paper makes an attempt to compare and identify how this genre, beginning from the late 1980s to 2000s, constantly reflects on the contemporary middle class issues and conflicts as well as provide adequate space for the young India to express their sentiments, system of belief and their aesthetic sense which is completely different from the earlier popular Indian writings in English. The Indian realities begin to appear are determinate and precisely defined in these novels. The writers, in a way, like the European modernists, are, on the deeper level, involved in the epistemological process to know, understand and communicate the Indian world of realities in the postcolonial period. In their aesthetic representation they are highly innovative and apply the postmodernist mode of expression by subverting the bygone fictional modes of portrayal in the classical- humanistic realistic novel, but in a sophisticated manner.

It is an undeniable fact that Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) paved a new platform for Indian fiction in English. His narratives signalled towards an increased linguistic diversity in Indian writing in English. Before Rushdie these narratives mostly focussed on 'Indianness' through varied cultures and peoples, but in a very 'unindian' language and style. However, with Rushdie the scenario changed. Indian fiction in English during the 1980s witnessed a new generation of writers who, equipped with a new idiom, strove to assert them and strained to express in their writings their observations summative of human situation in the Indian subcontinent. They liberalised the Indian fiction in English from the complexes which had captivated the early writers and changed its tone, tenor and content. One among these new voices is Upamanyu Chatterjee. And it would be apt enough to remark that he is one of the writers who started to tell common things to the readers with a different way, full of humour, sarcasm but real.

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in 1959. He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983. His published works include short stories and the novels including *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi*, *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988), which won the Sahitya Academy Award, *The Last Burden* (1993), *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000): a the sequel to

English, August: An Indian Story, *Weight Loss* (2006) and *Way To Go* (2010): a sequel to *The Last Burden*. In 2008, for his contribution to literature, he was awarded the order of *Officer des Arts et des lettres* by the French Government.

Upamanyu Chatterjee through his story brings about the post-colonial bureaucracy, development, politics and characters in the drama of an Indian institution. The novel *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) witnessed an instantaneous success and even became a major film released through Twentieth Century Fox, India. The title is interestingly striking for its contrasting expression – a colonial obsession with the Raj coupled with the Indian reality. It is an account of a westernised young Indian's encounter with provincial *Bharat*. The novel, at the surface level, is a sarcastic remark on the Indian Administrative Service with its baggage of "interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will and selfishness" (*English, August* 121). Otherwise, it is a fascinating metaphor of self-discovery of a confused young Indian. He torments between an antiquated sensibility and his contemporary ethos. The narrative details the protagonist's constant endeavour to come to terms with the reality around him. It is a frank discussion of the predicament in which an intelligent and educated modern youth finds him. There is a hovering sense of dislocation from all traditions and conventions which he finds meaningless. The novel describes a journey, sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, and even ridiculous -a journey from rootlessness to attempted but failed maturity, a struggle to come to terms with oneself. The novel, thus, gives a feeble impression of success in the attempt at maturity by experience.

The voice of the author in this novel has been so authentic, natural, spontaneous, compulsive and full of confidence that the Indian intelligentsia who had been watching the socio-political realities of post-colonial India with a sense of indeterminacy of things and ambivalence of attitudes, frustration and unease found his true aesthetic articulation in his works.

Chatterjee's protagonist, Agastya Sen, or the westernised August, and again the Bengali Ogu is an IAS officer posted at Madna, a back water town in central India for a year's training. He thinks and speaks the language of a westernized India. He finds himself lonely, bored, sex-starved and disgusted with his colleagues at workplaces and their ridiculous better-halves in social gatherings. On the whole he receives a cultural shock. However, to digest the shock he indulges in marijuana, masturbating frequently in the privacy of his room – his escape zone with its one bed, desk, and *almirah*. Throughout his days of training, he meets a bunch of farcical and pretentious characters. He reads Marcus Aurelius voraciously and maintains a steady correspondence with his father who criticises his son for reading the Bengali book

Pather Panchali in English and not in Bengali, which happens to be his mother tongue. The novel ends with Agastya having survived one harrowing year of training in Madna. However, he could stand this phase as he was assisted by his innate sense of good humour and looking forward to the reunion with his father.

Obviously, Agastya is no aggressive hero with either muscle power or ambition. His character is reflected in a school composition, where he wrote that "his ambition was to be a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life". The reasons are not far to seek. Such a creature was assured food, needed no commitment, and above all enjoyed a lot of freedom to sleep, bark and, more importantly "got a lot of sex" (EA 35). Agastya creates a world of his own as an escape space for his troubled self. Drugs, liquor, sex and fantasy become his weapons to tolerate the world outside. "What'll you do for sex and Marijuana in Madna?" (EA 3) asks Dhruvo. But he is certain about one thing "... August, you're going to get hazaar fucked in Madna" (EA 1). This perhaps sets the tone of the narrative. A conventional or stereotypical bureaucrat with clean ways and official competence is not the role that Agastya fits into. On the other hand, in Dhruvo's words, " (Agastya) look(s) like a porn film actor, thin and kinky, the kind who wears a bra" (EA 3). Though he is an elite and educated youth his adolescence frolics do not leave him. It prevents him from playing the role he is assigned to or perceiving his true identity. The yellow journalist Mr. Sathe categorizes Agastya as "Cola Generation" „a generation that does not oil its hair" (probably implying western hippy culture that was dominant during that period as represented in the media and films of the time). Agastya's uncle who can be regarded as one of his mentors defies his generation as „you generation of apes". Out of his rage he scowls: "The greatest praise you mimics long for is to be called European junkies. And who is August? In my presence, call him Ogu." Thus, his name itself is a metaphor in this novel. The name implies a mythological character who is rooted to the age old religio-cultural heritage of its nation. It is the sacred name of very much revered Rishi, an ideal of commitment, determination and efficiency.

The novel *English August: An Indian Story* is deeply a psychological disclosure of today's urban educated youth and Agastya as its suitable representative. He is a mirror to identify the subjectivity of present generation of postcolonial India. This is the mirror that reflects the average Indian growing up in an Indian megapolis and feeling constantly that he will be more at home in New York or London than in a small of India.

Agastya's obsession with sex works as a defence mechanism to wave off his bewildering sense of aimlessness. He is alienated and misplaced, feeling empty and lonely. At the very beginning of the novel Chatterjee spells out his protagonist's predicament:

Anchorlessness – that was to be his chaotic concern in that uncertain Mean, battling a sense of waste was to be another. Other fodder too, in the farrago of his mind, self-pity in an uncongenial clime, the incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job, and his inability to relate to it-other abstractions too, his niche in the world, his future, the elusive mocking nature of happiness, the possibility of its attainment. (*EA* 25)

Agastya Sen, therefore, represents his time – the last quarter of the twentieth century Indian urban life, at multiple levels. Like, August the youth of the time is victims of their educational cultural nurturing. Since Agastya is incapable to recognize his genuine subjectivity to which his roots belong under the impact of colonial other, he takes retreats from any judicious approach to his assigned tasks. He better wastes his time in “lambent dullness” as he says to himself at an important meeting of the Collectorate with the community: “Yes, lambent dullness, definitely.” (*EA*, 14) Like Agastya, the Indian youth's thoughts constipated by to the socio – political responsibilities, find their expression in the lambent dullness and abrupt fantasies.

The uniqueness of the novel is marked by its categorical emphasis on the duty- bound civil servant who is constantly expected to perform and deliver. Chatterjee's Agastya becomes a misfit and goes to an extent of perceiving everything negatively about Madna. Through the voice of Agastya, Chatterjee points at the life of the rural areas of Madna devoid of any progress. This place is under the guidance of a non- contributing officer who has the duty to transform the rural life in India. The novelists purposefully indicate that the very system who led India to achieve freedom now has become thoughtless of ways to connect with the weak and powerless rural parts of India.

It is this theme of "anchorlessness", the weariness of an era, the loneliness of an entire generation that the novelist explores along with the satiric depiction of the entire Indian Administrative Service. Drugs, booze and masturbation are hyped as means of getting out of this situation.

Upamanyu Chatterjee breaks up the narrative continuity, departs also from some of the standard ways of representing characters and at times violet the usual syntax and coherence

of narrative language by the use of stream of consciousness and other innovative modes of narration. *English, August – An Indian Story* can be placed in the postmodern metafictional aesthetic tradition. The satirical mode and parodical intent are embedded in the textual structure of the novel in such a way that they resist classification in terms of the traditional literary modes of judgement. Again, in the philosophical context of their content this text is post modernist because it tends to “subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of the existence and the underlying ‘abyss’ or ‘voids’ or ‘nothingness’ on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended.

The dialogue in Chatterjee’s novel seems to be showy and shabby. The free flow of the dialogues faces obstruction by the inclusion of difficult words. Everything in the book is unreal, the stilted family ties and stilted language, and one is enforced to shut the book with a sense of bitterness-it leaves distaste in the mouth. The book deals for the most part with wasted aimless lives and it becomes a metaphor, of a monstrous ugliness.

The ordinary writing style of this novel could be read, as the suitable aesthetic articulation meant for the young Indians and a deliberate strategy to expose those unwritten truths of young Indian contemporary lives which may not be possible to create with more ‘sophisticated’ and fashionable literary styles. The resemblance between the life of the author Upamanyu Chatterjee and the protagonist, Agastya, he creates is evident in Indian popular lit novels when the details of the storyline of the novels are compared with the short biographies of the authors on the back covers. The novels share a strong overlap with autobiographical writing given their chronicling of loosely fictionalised life histories, but has escaped the notion of imperative ‘I’. The appropriation of a literary form associated with Enlightenment and colonial masculine selfhood has the potential to be a transformatory gesture in the postcolonial context, but in case of Indian popular fiction, the question of how far the genre goes in shattering the “cultural hall of mirrors” remains. A closer look at another Indian popular fiction –2 *States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) by Chetan Bhagat – might provide an insight into the kinds of selves being rehearsed in Indian popular literature. Given these novels’ adoption of a life writing form and certain narrational strategies typical of popular fiction, analysing it can also respond to the question of popular literature’s aesthetic merit.

Like almost all popular fiction utilises a first-person narrative or point of view *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* is also presented in the autobiographical mode, as the subtitle of the novel, 'The Story of My Marriage,' suggests so.

The plot revolves around Krish and Ananya, highly qualified, independent and live according to the new way of life where as their parents are still rooted in traditions. The plot with its cinematic beginning, spiced up by love, sex, music, tear-eyed mothers, loved mouthed relatives, emotional breakdown of hero following a very obvious break-up-of marriage and a predictably happy ending, makes it a perfect formulaic fiction.

However this novel is not a fantasy tale. Such situation regularly happens in Indian society. Almost in all household inter-caste or interstate marriages do happen and the boy and the girl go through the same situation. And it's very much evident, from the oft quoted blurb of the book *2 States*:

Love marriages around the world are simple: Boy loves girl. Girl loves Boy. They get married. In India, there are a few more steps: Boy loves Girl. Girl loves Boy. Girl's family has to love boy. Boy's family has to love girl. Girl's family has to love Boy's family. Boy's family has to love girl's family. Girl and Boy still love each other. They get married.

Elen Turner suggests "Traditional forms of Indian adult subjectivity revolve around marriage, family, and community ... An individual is judged in society by how well he/she adheres to agreed upon notions of appropriate behavior for men and women, on getting married, and producing a family at the right time, and on subsuming individual desires to these social processes." But conflict arises when the individual finds this process uncomfortable. It is around this tension and negotiation that the dramatic action of the plots revolves.

Chetan Bhagat is one of the most prolific writers of popular fiction. Million copies of his books have been sold, making him India's best-selling novelist at the moment. The novel in discussion *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) dramatizes the anxieties that the Indian youth faces. Bhagat's writings reveal the fact that in almost all his fictional and non-fictional

pieces of writing, he highlights the sentiment of young generation. He has almost changed the point of view of young generation and can be canonized as a writer of youngsters as his sensibility along with his minute observation of modern generation, and specifically, educated ones and thus enables him to hit the right chord.

Like Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August*, Bhagat's present novel *2 States* too, is one of the best sellers of Chetan Bhagat, firstly, because the writer admits that this is the imaginative reconstruction of his own life and secondly it touches the sentiments of young generation. Both the factors make this work authentic and increase his popularity among the readers; however, like his predecessor Chatterjee, Bhagat too maintains the control of creativity over biographical disclosure. He himself has dedicated this novel to his in-laws and also clarifies in the 'Acknowledgement' part of *2 States* that it is an outcome of his personally lived experiences: "I also want to make a couple of disclaimers. One, this story is inspired by my own family experiences. However, this book should be seen as a work of fiction. Also, for authenticity, I have used names of some real places, people and institutions as they represent cultural icons of today and aid in storytelling. There is no intention to imply anything else (*2 States* vii).

The story starts in a much choreographed way. The protagonist Krish Malhotra begins his story in a psycho-therapist's chamber narrating to her the circumstances leading to his emotional breakdown. Then, the plot shifts to IIM, Ahmedabad, to describe Krish's meeting with his beloved. Krish Malhotra and Ananya Swaminathan are classmates at IIM (A). A rendezvous at the college canteen bonds them together and in a matter of weeks the duo start reading and sleeping in each others hostel rooms. Love blossoms and matures in the campus and by the time they pass out of the management institute with secured job – Krish, in Citi Bank, Chennai and Ananya in HLL. Conflict begins when they decide to marry. Marriages beyond caste and clan are still forbidden in India, let alone an inter-state marriage of a Punjabi and a Tamil Brahmin.

To solve this problem Krish gets a transfer in City Bank of Chennai so that he can remain in touch with Ananya and builds a rapport with her family though he has to suffer a lot in new working place. The story thus keeps on shifting its location from Ahmadabad, Delhi, Chennai with its brief stay in Goa. These snapshots of different cities of India give this novel a move and portray different phases of the life of protagonists and maintain spell-bound impact on the readers mind as to what will happen next. This technique of shifting location, dislocation

and relocation gives an impression that the novel is having kinetic element and this does not let the novel have dullness in its intonation.

So, Krish starts winning her parents heart first by organizing a concert for Ananya's mother and next by helping Ananya's father to prepare his PPT and finally arranges a dinner party to propose everyone in Ananya's family. Krish utters: "'I, Krish Malhotra, would like to propose to all of you. Will you marry me?' I said and held the four boxes in my palm" (2 States 183). Thus, he convinces Ananya's parents to accept him as their son-in-law.

Then Ananya too makes the effort to win the favor of Krish's family. Though Krish's mother and his aunts never want him to marry a South Indian girl, Ananya in every way possible tries to be a part of Krish's family. Situation changes and becomes favourable for her when she comes with Krish and attends the marriage party of Krish's cousin Minti with Duke. Her presence is never appreciated but when she solves the problem of dowry that occurs from groom's side as they demand a bigger car in marriage, everyone starts praising her. Thus, Krish's mother accepts her as her daughter-in-law and after a lots of dramatic sequences; they finally succeed to bring both the families under one roof and eventually get married in the end.

Like any Bollywood Masala movie, the novel too is a love story with twists where two lovers from two different cultural construct fall in love and they have to face various problems to marry each other not only at familial stage rather at societal plain too. It also reveals a fact how love remains at the mercy of societal and ethical plain and how a man has to cope up with the situation when he has to make a patch up between his better- half and mother.

Chetan Bhagat uses simple and direct sentences as are seen in day to day life. Though he is criticized for using non-literary language, he has blown off such kind of criticism on the ground that language has its "cultural association and meanings are contextual"; hence he does not bother about verbosity rather uses those words which can be easily understood. He has kept himself away from the clutches of verbosity and figurative language.

At a close textual study of this novel, it gets revealed that Chetan Bhagat makes his book a fun reading for his fans by using the language of the young generation as well as gives a solution to the young generation to handle the tension that occurs between tradition and contemporary social change prompted by globalisation.

To sum up, Bhagat's *2 States* is a formulaic fiction. But it is not a complete fantasy fiction rather tries to bring out solution for the social problems. In this work, he has indicated social issues pertaining to young generation ranging from love marriage, generation gap, dowry etc and also provides with a solution of these problem. He has emerged as a realistic writer with objective opinion and leaves his readers to consider the prospective solutions of the problems they are grappling with. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, two decades after India's economy liberalized and opened up to global investment, profound economic, social, and cultural changes are underway. This narrative is an articulation of this notion. The narrative techniques, language selection, and cinematographic treatment of the subject content successfully hold the readers.

Conclusion

To return to critics' dismissal of popular fiction from the field of literature, it is agreeable that popular fiction lacks literary elements such as "imaginative use of language, inventive and thought-provoking metaphors, layered meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure." It is only humour that gets highlighted to the tradition of popular fiction and humour again does not receive any literary standard whereas satire has its own share of being noticed as an important literary element. As the analysis of *English, August* has demonstrated, popular fiction does perform a satirical function, especially in the Indian context where it is used to critique the socio-political issues in its neoliberalised form.

Moreover, while the writing in *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* may not meet high literary standards, Bhagat's technique of shifting the locations reveals how minutely he has observed the cultural differences of North and South because he does not simply give the glimpse of these cities but reflects the pulse of the nation by describing them as full of vigor and enthusiasm. The characters and episodes depicted by Chetan are common middle class fellows who can be easily found in Indian middle class families. If Krish's mom and aunt are identical with stereotypical aunts in North Indian society, so are Ananya's conservative Tamilian parents. The best part of this portrayal of northern and southern culture is that the writer is impartial in vivid depiction of both the cultures and nowhere seems to glorify one culture and condemning its counterpart rather a tinge of realism is sensed because he brings out both the good and bad aspects of these cultures. Chetan Bhagat's novel contains cinematographic elements such as theme, context, characters, and dialogues. It seems that

almost all scenes in this novel are meant for Bollywood. We are directly transported to Bollywood movie where students are seen moving around a university campus.

The novel though seems to be an expression of the idea that formulaic fiction are meant for entertainment only, breaks the notion. Bhagat's novel indicates the potential of popular fiction to expand as a genre. Contrary to the earlier claims that popular fiction has its own limits has run its course, seems it has room to grow, to enhance its cultural relevance and acknowledge the complexities of youngster's changing lives and experiences.

It can be concluded that a more systematic and well- researched approach might provide the definitive answer to the question of popular fiction's aesthetic value. Indian popular fiction, and their constant cinematic adaptations, might be an indicator of that this genre can more fruitfully be sought.

Works Cited:

- Bhagat, Chetan. *2 States: The Story of My Marriage*. India: Rupa & Co., 2009.
- Bharat, Vinay. *Cultural Allotropy: A Study Through Some Indian English Novels*. Partridge Publishing, 2015.
- Chatterjee, Upamanyu. *English, August: An Indian Story*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
- Gelder, Ken. *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Ghosh, Tapan K. *Chetan Bhagat The Icon Of Popular Fiction*. India: Prestige Books, 2014.
- Gnanamony, S. Robert. *Literary Polyrythms: New Voices in New Writings in English*. New Delhi, India: Sarup & Sons, 2005.
- Kapur, Akash. "Up in Smoke" Sunday Book Review 'English, August: An Indian Story,' By Upamanyu Chatterjee." 2 July 2006. *The New York Times*. 15 May 2017, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/books/review/02kapur.html>>.
- Mohapatra, H.S. 'A View of Indian Ink.' *New Quest*, No. 96, Sept-Oct 1992, 312-314.
- Mishra, K.C. 'Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August as a Post-Colonial Save-The-Nation Exhortation.' Chandra, N.D.R. *Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions Vol.II*. India: Sarup & Sons, 2005. 72-89.
- Trivedi, Harish. 'The Hindi Postcolonial—Categories and Configurations.' *Comparative Literature Studies* (2016): 400-407.
- Turner, Elen. 'Gender Anxiety and Contemporary Indian Popular Fiction' *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2, 2012, <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/13>>