

**AN APPRAISAL OF INDIAN PULP FICTION IN ENGLISH: A BRIEF  
STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF DE, BHAGAT & TRIPATHY****Satyajit Pal****M.A. (English), B.Ed**

**Abstract:** Pulp fiction is a twentieth century American phenomenon which is a popular genre in the art of fiction. In America it provided an affordable entertainment to the working class people who were unable to buy expensive classic fictions of the day. Later, its popularity among the readers influenced the writers across the world. Naturally, the Indian writing could not keep itself away from its magical influence and the wave of its popularity touched the Indian writing also. This paper would discuss the Indian pulp fiction in English with a special emphasis on the writings of Sobha De, Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathy. It would focus different aspects of their writing like the innovation in themes and use of language which make them distinct from the other pulp writers and bring immense popularity among the readers. It would also try to investigate the causes of their popularity in the Indian book market.

**Keywords:** Pulp fiction, Classic fiction, Popular culture, Entertainment, Chutnification, Indian Writing.

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The term “Pulp fiction” refers to the fiction dealing with lurid or sensational subjects, often printed on rough, low-quality paper manufactured from wood-pulp. The term was originally coined to describe the early nineteenth-century magazines and novels (dime novels) that were printed on cheap or pulpy papers. It first flourished in America in the beginning of the twentieth century. During that time a huge amount of creative writings on the subjects of mysterious ghosts, pretty girls, sex intrigues, exotic places, strange villains, and larger than life heroes were published on cheap, low quality papers in low price to provide an affordable entertainment to the working class people who were unable to buy expensive classic fictions of the day. Though originally it was an American phenomenon, later it became popular in Britain also. Magazines like “Weird Tales” and “Ace Magazines” were some of such pulp fiction magazines. Pulp fiction contained many genres, including sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. Some popular pulp fiction writers who contributed regularly in the contemporary Pulp magazines were H. Rider Haggard, Edger Rice Burroughs, H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert E. Howard, Talbot Mundy and Abraham Merritt. In the beginning of his career Charles Dickens also wrote for the popular British pulp magazines. Many other famous and well-known classic writers like

Dickens took the help of Pulp magazines to get a break-through in their career as writers. Some popular American and British pulp fictions are Edger Rice Burroughs' *The Tarzan of the Apes*, R D Ronald's *The Jombie Room*, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Michel Crickton's *Jurassic Park*, H.Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* etc. The pulps were available in every possible genre of fiction like detective, adventure, spicy, spy/detective as well as many other smaller genres. Later, the concept of pulp fiction had been adapted and presently the term denotes some popular, cheap, and spicy fictions in any genre of literature.

As a genre of literature pulp fiction got its popularity very rapidly and gradually it spread its magical charm throughout the whole world within a very short period of time. Naturally, the Indian writing could not keep itself away from its magical influence and the wave of its popularity touched the Indian writing also. But the nature of the term 'pulp fiction' is very problematic in the Indian English context. To give a clearer demarcation of the genre one has to understand pulp fiction in terms of both quantity and quality. "In quantitative terms, it denotes cheaply published fiction aimed at the mass market...In qualitative terms, pulp fiction often stands for either "bad literature" or literature with a simple narrative, written in an easily accessible style" (Tabish Khair) and the language of these pulp writers is an important territory which gives their works an Indian flavor helping them to project a comprehensive vision of highly complex, multilingual and multicultural society that India is.

In the late- twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty first century the tendency of writing pulp fiction among the Indian English writers has become almost double in

comparison with the early decades of the twentieth century. At present in any crowded Indian metropolitan city pulp fictionists are usually seen in each nook and corner of the streets or in a pub or in a coffee house chatting with their fellow mates. The increasing number of pulp fiction writers in the market of Indian English literature is very much enthusiastic, but from the perspective of quality most of them are insignificant and unknown. Now the time has come to reconsider the cause of their popularity in the Indian market. Pulp fiction is always a popular phenomenon not only in India but in Europe and America also because of its sensational subjects, easy handling of themes, use of common dictions in language etc. Therefore, they can easily draw the attention of the common mass of readers who are hardly interested about the literary value of text. In this hasty phase of postmodern life of people a busy person can hardly get any leisure time to probe into the nitty-gritty of a classic text. So, they take a pulp to get an affordable entertainment on their way to office or on their way back home. Again, we know that the pulp fiction deals with the popular culture which is another significant point of their popularity. In a simple way popular culture can be defined as a culture that is well liked or widely favoured by many people. The perspectives, ideas, thoughts or knowledge, attitudes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture of the early to the mid-twentieth century and the emerging global mainstream of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century may entirely come into existence as a popular culture. Different modes of entertainment like theatre, movies, music, TV etc., sports, news, politics, fashion/ clothes, technology, and even slang language are some common categories of popular culture. Due to its consensual acceptance throughout the mainstream, popular culture is often viewed as trivial and

has been discriminated from the high culture or elite culture. John Storey in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* suggests that popular culture is “the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture” (p-6). Again in this respect he says, “Popular culture ...is a residual category, there to accommodate texts and practices that fail to meet required standards to qualify as high culture.” (p-6). As a result, it has been criticized rigorously time to time by various non-mainstream sources (most notably religious groups and countercultural groups) which deem it superficial, consumerist, sensationalist, or corrupt.

Though Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife*, the first Indian English novel, was written sometime in 1864 in British India Taru Dutt’s *Bianca* is widely regarded as the first Indian English pulp fiction which was written in 1878. But much before of writing *Bianca* the pulp fiction had become a popular phenomenon in vernacular Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, Tamil etc. which were larger languages spoken and read by the ‘masses’. K.K. Lahiri’s *Roshinara* and K. Chakraborty’s *Sarata and Hingana* (1895) are some pulp fictions that were written during this time. Though pulp fiction is a popular genre it did not get so much craze during the period of colonial India. The upper middle class educated Indians treated pulps with negligence and even keeping a pulp in their book shelves was considered as a highly disrespectful matter below their dignity and status. Beside this, among many other reasons, the illiteracy of women in English during the colonial era was a major factor in lacking popularity of pulps. When women’s education started in the late nineteenth century they were not taught in English at the beginning, rather they were instructed in their mother-tongues. This issue of gender played a vital role in making a difference in terms of popularity between the English

novels and the novels of Indian languages. The famous critic Meenakshi Mukherjee has also pointed out the fact: “This issue of gender is a major factor in differential trajectories of these two sets of novels: in English and in Indian Languages.” (p-18). The writers of pre-independence era did not concentrate into the problems of women in our society as well as they lack the Indianism in their writings. This was another reason of their downfall as a writer.

In the post-independence era the entire scenario has been changed and the readers have observed a new horizon in the area of Indian English pulp fiction writing. This transformation is brought in by Shobha De, India’s most commercially successful English language author, who is often regarded as India’s Jackie Collins. De is author of more than a dozen titles, all of which start with the letter “S” like *Sultry Days*, *Starry Nights*, *Strange Obsession*, *Socialite Evening* etc. All of her novels depict social issues of women like marriage, sex, exploitation and human relationships. She upholds the upper middle class society as well as the glitz and glamour of the filmy world of Bollywood. She is a true observer of the slice of the Indian urban life.

Later a notable emergence of an entire school of pulp fictionists is observed in the panorama of fiction writing in Indian English literature and the most striking of them are Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathy, the best seller authors of Indian English fiction. The adventurous and spicy theme of their stories, low quality of paper and cheap printing of their novels make them overnight popular among the literary and non literary groups of reader across the world. These writers being hardcore realists believe that art has no purpose to serve except pure entertainment. Though it is Sobha De who transforms the term into a popular genre by her path-

breaking style and theme of writings, Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathy, the new sensation in the heart of Indian English pulp fiction, take it to a new height in the domain of Indian English literature. Though Bhagat and Amish much differ to each other in their writing of fiction and treatment of themes, both are best to be treated as pulp fiction writers from the point of view of both quantity and quality of their writings. When Amish explores the rich heritage of Indian mythology in his writing, Chetan Bhagat is highly modern and contemporary in his theme. Amish is known for his three books of Shiva Trilogy: *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. All of his books are based on Hindu theology and religion. Unlike Rushdie who uses myth as a kind of shorthand to convey concepts Amish elaborately works out on Indian myth as in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* which employ myth as a framework. His Shiva trilogy is completely based on the Hindu myth of Lord Shiva. *Immortals of Meluha* (2010), Tripathy's first novel, is a fantasy on the myth of lord Shiva. The story is set on the fictional land of Meluha. It is followed by *The Secret of Nagas* (2011), the second novel of Shiva trilogy, where he has rewritten the myths of Hindu Goddess Kali and deformed God Lord Ganesh. His next novel *The Oath of Vayuputras*, the final novel of Shiva trilogy, deals with the myth of "Somras", the holy drink of Hindu Gods. In his works Tripathy very cleverly has utilized the Hindu myth to give a way of his fantastic imagination. Postmodernism gives the birth of micro narratives and Tripathy's works are basically micro-narratives of the Indian mythology. He mingles the mythological facts with his own fantastic ideas to give a way of a beautiful series of story.

On the other hand, Bhagat is the author of five bestselling novels: *Five Point Someone*, *One Night @ the Call Center*, *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, *Two States*, and *Revolution 2020*. Four of these novels have inspired Bollywood films (including *3 Idiots*, *Kai Po Che*, and *Two States*). In 2008 The New York Times called Bhagat “the biggest selling English language novelist in India’s history.” Bhagat’s first novel *Five Point Someone* focuses on how our educational system has stifled the creativity of the students by forcing them to value grades more than anything else. His second novel *One Night @ the Call Center* deals with the theme of anxieties and insecurities of the rising Indian middle class, including questions about career, inadequacy, marriage, family conflicts etc. Unlike his other novels Bhagat here employs the dramatic technique of “dues ex machine” in the form of a phone call from God to give a decisive turn in the story. In his third novel *Three Mistakes of My Life* he tells ‘a story about business, cricket and religion’. His next novel *Two States* is semi auto-biographical and it tells the story of a couple coming from two different states in India, who face hardships in convincing their parents to approve of their marriage. His final novel *Revolution 2020* is concerned with a love triangle, corruption and a journey of self discovery. He is famous for his engaging story and simple Indian English language with occasional touch of his unique register. The post-independence modern pulp novelists have focused on the contemporary issues and problems of Indian life.

Unlike their predecessors post modern novelists like Sobha De, Chetan Bhagat upholds the problems and multiple issues that the new young generations are actually facing in the harsh reality of their life. They also investigate the problems of women and present ‘new’ women who



are more smart, intelligent, and professional than the stereotype women folk seen in the writings of their predecessors who had a belief and faith in the patriarchal ideologies prevailed in the society. But these 'new' women have the ability to compete a shoulder to shoulder fight with their male opponents in the society. Whether it is Priyanka or Esha or Radhika in Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center* or Aarti in his *Revolution 2020* all represent the same concept of 'new' woman. They don't follow the stereotype concept and conservatism about sex. Rather, without being too much aesthetic and orthodox about sex they celebrate it and utilize it as a step to raise themselves up in their career. Both De and Bhagat advocate the problems of the upper middle class women who reside in various Indian cities and struggle for getting job, name, fame and establishment. If we go through the novels of Sobha De we can find various underlying ideologies that are instrumental in continuing women's oppression in the society.

The contribution of language using in the pulp novels of modern Indian authors is a significant aspect to the perspective of their popularity. Repudiating the imperial English of the earlier authors they show a fundamental departure from the basic principles that constitute the chastity of British English. They use very common, simple vocabulary which is even understandable to less educated people. To Indianize their language they borrow various terms from the regional languages like Hindi or Urdu. There are many such terms in the novels of Chetan Bhagat like 'Dhaba', 'Dainik', 'Shadi', 'Baba', 'sahib', 'didi', 'Dusshera' etc and the names of various Indian foods like 'paranths', 'naan', 'daal', 'samosa', 'shahi paneer', 'gulab jamun' etc. He again dexterously exploits the code languages which are often used in the cyber world: IIT, CCD, MLA, AIEEE, VNN, WASG, NRI, FAQ (frequently asked questions) are some

such terms. Using colloquial speech laced with slang Bhagat creates a new, highly original fictional language which appropriately suits the language of modern generation of India. On the other hand in the works of Tripathy we get the chutnification of Sanskrit words also with that of English and Hindi: 'Somras', 'Shakti', 'Namaste', 'Varna', 'Dharma', 'karma', 'pandit', 'Rishi', 'Parmatma' etc.

From the perspective of their economical success one may say them successful but still they remain on the periphery of literary discussion and are marginalized as literary artists. They could hardly earn any praise from a literary critic, rather they are neglected as philistine writers. This conflict between "literary" and "nonliterary" is an age-old issue as it was once faced by the great Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee also. When the works of great literary giants like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore were highly complimented as classics, the literary works of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee were treated as literature of inferior quality. Though he was always a bestseller and very popular among the less educated people of rural Bengal, it took much time to consider him a literary artist. Like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and many other literary artists the works of Chetan Bhagat are rich with the colour of realism which is the most important feature of every popular writer. His stories are very much contemporary and keep the tempo of modern life. One who tastes the flavour of his writings could easily equate his or her life with that of the characters of his novels. A student who reads the novels of Chetan Bhagat can more easily identify with the characters like Ryan Oberoi or Alok Gupta of *Five Point Someone* than Raju of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. This association of the readers with the pulp fiction makes it a popular genre.

In the present scenario of Indian English literature the pulp fiction is very attractive and quite interesting phenomenon that dominates the Indian book market and has thrown a challenge to the western writers. Being interested with the commercial success of the Indian pulp fictionists, the new generation of writers is inclining to write pulp fiction. Ravinder Singh and Sachin Garg, some young Indian authors who represent this new generation of writers, have already started their journey as pulp fictionists being immensely popular among the readers with their vibrant, personal writing. They are not afraid to experiment with their writing to reach the expectation of the readers. What one day was inaugurated with the hand of Sobha De, the first successful Indian English pulp writer in the realm of Bombay cinema and film-writing, now rested on the shoulders of some new promising Indian English pulp writers like Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathy, Ravender Singh and Sachin Garg. So the Indian English pulp fiction is placed on a firm pedestal and has lots of possibilities in future.

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