



CONTESTING THE LITERARY VS. POPULAR QUESTION: WITH REFERENCE TO CHETAN BHAGAT'S FICTION

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Abstract: Chetan Bhagat is considered as a popular writer, especially among the youth. He is successful as his books are sold in great numbers. This shows that, he has induced a readership among the Indian youth. These are the days when people turn to modern gadgets than books, but surprisingly, the number of books published each year did not decrease either. Bhagat shows optimism by having a steady fan following by sustaining considerable readership. As a columnist and user of social media, he remains in the limelight through his participation in the recent debates. Bhagat proves himself to be an important writer of the day by reaching young readers. It can even be called that the popular fiction can be studied considering Chetan Bhagat as a landmark.

Keywords: Popular fiction, Literary, Chetan Bhagat.

Delhi University proposed to include Chetan Bhagat's first novel *Five Point Someone* in its syllabus. This was offered in the English department as an elective last year. If approved, students of the English department in Delhi University would have got a chance to study Chetan Bhagat's novel along with some other popular fiction such as J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and Louisa M Alcott's *Little Women*.¹ Chetan Bhagat himself was pleased for the proposal and shared his opinion over twitter. He expressed that "Literature is about being open minded, reading the classics as well as the contemporary"². What followed next explained how popular fiction is received. There were many discussions in the media and several critics did not consider Bhagat for academic study. There are faculty members who recommend not to add Bhagat's fiction to the syllabus, whereas, on the contrary: there are critics who endorse his fiction as fit for the youth as well. Dr Swati Moitra rejects Bhagat's novels as fit for the syllabus. She claims that his novels are normally used as an example of how not to write a novel. In supporting her argument, she points that other than Bhagat writes bestsellers, there is nothing to celebrate in his writings. The reason for not picking his fiction for the syllabus is not

"elitism", as this reason is pointed out by Bhagat but she says, because the syllabus is constituted and for the reason of coherence in the syllabus. (Benita)

Contrary to the rejection by some teachers and critics, Dr.Mitra Mukherjee Parikh encourages the study of popular fiction. Some years ago, Mumbai's SNDT University chosen Bhagat's fiction *Five Point Someone* for its popular fiction paper in MA English. The reason for this inclusion is said to understand the need of studying major changes in the literature. Mukherji in support of popular fiction suggests that the studying of popular fiction allows the students to study and question the idea of literature. She supports her choice of Chetan Bhagat's fiction as:

I can't say I am a fan of Five Point Someone. He takes on issues too simply in most parts of the book. That said, I personally feel there is a protracted effort from him to identify and isolate a question for the middle class mind. (Benita)

Chetan Bhagat holds 'elitism' responsible for rejection of his book later from the proposed syllabus. His objections include the fact about the audience of 'elite' literature. Bhagat claims that his books are for a wider range of audience than the limited 'privileged audience' of elite literature. This argument of Bhagat allows us to investigate the

possible pre requisites that are necessary for reading fiction. According to him novels are for general public, this is supported by his use of simple language in his fiction. Unlike popular fiction, literary novels are different not only because of its unique treatment of themes, but also because of its language. The syllabus framing committee decides on what text to study on the basis of the course and program outcomes of the students. If the committee thinks that by studying Chetan Bhagat's fiction, students could enhance their communication skills and kindle a taste for reading, then there is nothing wrong in it. Reading his novels may lead students to read other popular fiction as well. Many critics were anxious about why other contemporary popular writers were not considered, but the text book framing committee retains the liberty of selecting a text of its choice.

The proposal of prescribing popular fiction to the syllabus has raised several questions that includes, Why Chetan Bhagat, Agatha Christie or J.K.Rowling can't make it to the syllabus. This question leads us to the popular versus literary debates. This contested sites of identifying, considering and understanding 'popular' and 'literary' is discussed right from the time when different genres evolved. William Stowe discusses how popular fiction is considered as an escape, a distraction or a diversion to turn our attention from popular subjects. Similar ideas are presented in Briggs's "The Politics of Popular Culture" as well. We can observe that there are two points of view here; the one presented above is an 'elitist' view of looking at popular fiction. The other argument considers popular fiction as "a manifestation of people's preoccupations, an affirmation of their values and choices, even, in some cases, the vehicle for a symbolic act of defiance against oppressive conditions".(Stowe,646)

The discussion of popular and literary novels is not new. Its historical significance dates back to the nineteenth century. If we take the example of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or Melville's *Mobydick*; it didn't find very impressive sales figures. In the same period, people were influenced by Maria S.

Cummins's *The Lamplighter*. If Only 7,800 copies of *The Scarlet Letter* and 3,000 copies of *Moby Dick* were sold during the 19th Century, the sales figures of *The Lamp Lighter* exceeded over one lakh copies. Hawthorne is stunned to see the mystery of innumerable editions of this book and blames the public for being occupied with such trash. The opinion of Hawthorne suggests that *The Lamplighter* was a product of "scribbling women" but it was successful in satisfying 19th century popular fiction readers. Contrary to Hawthorne's idea it was considered as one of the most original and natural narratives. (Williams) *The Boston Daily Atlas* concluded that "Cummins has evidently a highly cultivated and refined as well as an original and imaginative mind, and writes with ease."³ Though Hawthorne considered Cummins's fiction an ordinary and later complained the popular reading public of consuming trash; the author was considered original and only second to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in popularity. (Williams 72)

The 'literary' debates were explored in the past by such critics as, Max Horkheimer and Adorno; whereas 'populist' arguments were discussed by critics like Richard Slotkin, John G Cawelti and Janice Radway. The elitist tried to discard popular as 'bad art'. Edmund Wilson⁴ considers detective fiction can't be included to the list of fine books and calls it as rubbish. He, along with Dwight Macdonald concludes to this argument on the assumption of their superior taste. (Stowe,1986,p.646). The first concern about popular culture is what or who determines popular culture. Where does popular culture come from? Does the emergence of culture in commodity forms mean that criteria of profitability and marketability take precedence over quality, artistry, integrity and intellectual challenge? The arguments of differentiating popular and the literature are presented by various critics differently.

The necessity of an in-depth analysis of 'text' is necessary for a student of literature; in such analysis a 'text' can be tool to such study. Any text of competence can act as a tool for the better

understanding of the new approaches to literature and while selecting this tool we may not distinguish a text on the basis of genre debate. Though we divide books as popular and literary, the markers of “high” and “low” still in place, the cultural politics of crossing over performed by individual contemporary texts needs to be assessed by careful in depth analysis. Katherine Larsen points that we should stop making distinctions and embrace the blending and now, when the distinctions between the genres are fast blurring, the celebration of the ordinary through popular fiction finds a valid place in literary study.

Popular culture is not considered earlier as a serious topic for scholarly analysis, because it is formulaic, it is produced for commercial gains, it's about ordinary and day to day lives of ordinary people, produced for mass consumption etc. There are several debates about the distinction between popular and high art. What makes the distinction is an important question, is it the place or space where it appears? According to Stowe, it is essential to include all popular forms for the propagation of culture:

Detective fiction, like all popular art is also and primarily, entertainment. Readers come to it for relaxation, for escape, as they often say, not for self-improvement, and certainly not for social criticism. Readers are also, however discriminating. They know what they like, and they vote for it with their pocketbooks. They read critical columns and fun magazines and support their favourite writers. Like it or not, readers of detective novels and romances and sci-fi thrillers, like tv viewers and sports fans, are participating in the ongoing propagation of culture, in the symbolization of social values and structures. (Stowe, 1986, pp 646)

Popular culture scholars believe that their subject is not only appropriate for serious study but it is an important one as well. It is self-evident that anything which looms so large in the lives of most citizens of the developed nations at least should be of interest to scholars and, since much of it involves forms of the arts and letters, to humanities scholars in particular; it should be considered as a work of art.

(Rollin, 1989, p 98.) James Campbell convinces the importance of popular by remarking the magnitude of context in which such popular art is studied, as:

One of the most contentious debates in the academia has been the distinction between high art and popular culture: a distinction that many would argue is now arbitrary as the boundary between the two blurs and blends. What constitutes popular culture and why popular culture matters can be hard to define and how one answers those questions depends upon the era in which one asked them.

(Campbell, p.3)

Literature that serves only the need of a class in the society may not do justice to all readers. For majority of readers the literature shall be realistic, so that readers connect themselves with it. If we consider that any written work of artistic value can be considered literature, then why make further divisions on the basis of style of writing, reading public groups, content and language. Moreover, popular can be enjoyed in its own space rather than considering or defining it by comparing it to 'Literary' texts. Popular fiction, sometimes called genre fiction should be considered for the artistic values and creativity available in it. The reason for its popularity can also be studied on the basis of its features such as the plot, cover, price etc., Popular fiction will be in an attractive cover, the blurb asks you to consider reading it, and it's cheap so that you can afford it. The books may be for an easy reading, it may not stay with you forever. These are the features of genre fiction that could be applicable to literary fiction in some conditions. A literary novel may have a gaudy, attractive cover; it may find a huge sales figure. In this way the feature which defines whether a book is popular or literary is fluctuating and in some situations some of the features can be applicable to both the genres of literature. The differences between the genres are fast decreasing, as the books are produced according to the audience's tastes and preferences. Earlier, it was considered that a text is literary novel if it is in the syllabus. Now, the popular novels finding place in the academic syllabus is a good sign. Popular fiction reader knows what

they are about to read, they know it's formulaic, they understand the fact that they are reading a similar kind of fiction; but still like to read it.

Literary novels are supposed to be the choice of authors, where as popular fiction is written to serve the needs of its audience. In popular fiction, reader's likes and dislikes, market surveys, history of the market for similar novels, a convention, a formula and a set of rules are essential for a popular fiction. It follows a style, it's driven by plot and the narrative is such that it keeps the story interesting till the end. The language is simple unlike literary novels where symbolic representations and rhetoric make the language more elegant and refined.

Chetan Bhagat is a fiction writer with the wide popularity, his books may be dejected by the critics for its non literariness, but its immense popularity must have been for a reason right? He is known for bringing a change a shift in the youth,

made them read. Bhagat is responsible for making youngsters go for reading. The readers preferred him for the simplicity of the language, new ways of storytelling and his handling of the various themes. Bhagat's works are a good choice for those who are thinking of getting into the habit of reading, because his fiction opens up a way for the literature in an easy way possible. His books are simple, good for light reading, easily accessible and of course entertaining. Bhagat's works can be studied for the simplicity of narration, language, depiction of ordinary and middle class lives. These texts may open up some of our discussions to the puzzling marketing, publication factors as well. Studying Bhagat in an academic atmosphere requires reading him unbiased. This studying may have to consider his books as a text in isolation and may be read without comparing relatively with the other authors.

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Footnote:

1. "Chetan Bhagat's novel may become part of DU syllabus". *The Hindu*, April 25, 2017
2. @Chetan Bhagat. "Am honoured DU added my books to their course. Literature is about being open minded, reading the classics as well as the contemporary." *Twitter*. 23 April 2017, 10:16PM, <https://twitter.com/chetan_bhagat/status/856187604869554182?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ndtv.com%2Foffbeat%2Fchetan-bhagat-in-delhi-university-english-syllabus-twitter-is-shocked-1685593 >
3. The Boston Atlas newspaper of Boston, Massachusetts, was published in daily and semi-weekly editions in the mid-19th century. John H. Eastburn established the paper in 1832
4. Edmund Wilson is an American writer and critic who is well known for his treatment of Freudian and Marxist themes.