

## **Politics of the Bestseller and the Temporality of Tradition**

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### **Abstract**

Literature has eternally been celebrated for its plurality of voices and its spectrum of diversity. However, with a climate of continuous surveillance and changing trends, this diversity is threatened. The praxis of power today is helmed by the market, which has redefined the axiom “to make it sell.” Earlier no one judged a manuscript by how many copies it would be expected to sell or if the work was “timely” rather, it used to be about a universal timelessness. The wave of marketization into the public sector shifted the concern towards achieving the “best effect” for a packaged product. The Post-Modern climate of commercialism saw a rise of the best seller which redefined the literary tradition based on the market economy. Consequently, literature came to be valued as a profit-making commodity, trying to meet the requirements of a society. The effort to carve a niche, therefore, became a trap for both.

This vein of marketing and the best-selling success of a book did not necessarily ascertain the parameters of its merit. It was an effort of the editors, reviewers, publishers, agents, and the author to construct a bestseller. Tracing the spur in readership in India with the advent of Chetan Bhagat in 2004 to the present times, this paper aims to read the politics of the bestseller and the changing notion of tradition from timelessness to temporality.

**Keywords:** Best-seller, Commercialisation, Immortality, Literary Fiction, Popular Fiction, Post-Modernism, Temporality, Timelessness, Tradition

“All great literature is only partly the reflection of a particular year or generation: it is also a timeless thing, which can never become old fashioned or out of date...” (Widdowson 48). Definitions of literature have varied over time: however, what essentially remains is its ability to reflect life along with the changing realities of society. Therefore, even if the literature of a particular age derives from the socio-political and economic context of that time yet its basic impulse of humanity resonates at a universal level. Here, universality not only means relatability but also suggests a timeless appeal. However, not all works of literature achieve this status. Timelessness has often been the attribute of the canon. However, the post-modern shift in time and space has destabilised the canon and paved

the way for multiple literature pieces. This break away from the tradition and the subsequent wave of commercialism gave birth to a “culture of literature” governed more by literary agents, editors, publishers, reviewers, retailers than the author to achieve the best-packaged product. Fiction was not a matter of topical interest: however, the market society corrupted non-market values by evaluating everything for sale. This climate saw the rise of the “bestseller” which redefined the literary tradition based on the market economy.

The concept of a bestseller is not new: however, to evaluate it only on the basis of the highest number of sales is to overlook the politics of its construct. Over the years, the meaning of the term has become more layered and political. Initially, it referred to a book that sold more copies than the others in a stipulated time. They were primarily working on fiction, but over time it began to be seen as a pejorative term and suggested a book of low literary value. With the changing dynamics of the term, today it has come to be associated with a book which has hit one of the major bestseller’s list, either printed in the Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA TODAY, New York Times, or Publisher’s Weekly. In addition to this is a new trend, hitting the Amazon Bestseller’s list. However, how far do these markers suggest the worth of a book is still a question? There are no justifiable reasons to ascertain as to why a worthy book fails to make a mark, or for the ones which do, are they really justifying their reward?

This paper aims to dissect the evolving construct of the bestseller in India from 2004, a year which saw an unparalleled rise in readership with the advent of Chetan Bhagat to the present times. To understand the impact of commercialism and the growing politics of the construct, this paper would trigger thoughts around the following premises: first, how far is it relevant to call popular fiction, literature? Second, if literature is said to be the reflection of life, then to what extent does the bestseller reflect the concerns and crisis of the times? Third, if a commercial trend that change with the change in time allows space for a work to become an immortal piece of art?

To begin with, it is important to mark a distinction between two holistic categories the paper essentially realises that of literary fiction and popular fiction, respectively. While the post-modernist thought had led to the collapse of those antitheses between high and low, elite and popular, yet what is literary has been deeply rooted in our colonial mind-sets. While popular fiction is quick to be valued as a means of relaxation or distracting one from work whereas: a work of literature is valued for its own sake. It’s primarily evaluated for having an artistic or intellectual value, deployed through various usage of language, which is not ordinary. Until the advent of printing, getting hold of a literary work was not easy. Selective bookstores and libraries were the storehouses of such works, which were not accessible to all. However, with the inception of printing, selling books became a capitalist trade so

much that the primary relations of production between the writer and the reader were essentially commodity relations. This “print capitalism” moreover, turned into a global culture in recent times with the access to internet which made everything available for all. Gradually this platform became a global market that infused people with the idea of being noticed, getting attention, to sell. This intention of selling made the task market-oriented. This imposed culture was a trap for both the author as much as the reader. The compulsion of the market made every other story look alike, which targeted a particular section of society, catering primarily to the market economy.

This new culture of literature was based on one-way communication, i.e., the author bought from the reader the story and sold it back to them in return for a profit. The story, therefore, changed every time with the change in trends, fashions, and tastes of the consumer. It became a commodity: it no longer took into consideration the significance, the responsibility of stirring change in society. This newly emerging culture which dominated every sphere of life, leads us to a very pertinent question about the role of money and markets in society. With the advent of growing commercialism, there’s hardly anything that money cannot buy. While money couldn’t buy literature for entertainment, there came a visibly rooted transition in the purpose of literature. It gave birth to a new tradition that saw a clear shift from timelessness to temporality. In other words, it was easy to mark a distinction between the popular and the literary. As Aaron Meskin, in his essay “Popular Fiction,” points out, “there is nothing more to being popular than being widely liked, appreciated and approved of” (120). As distinct from the literary, popular fiction was undervalued as low art. However, the paper here does not refer to the genre in general but to its commercial aspect of marketing the bestseller. “Bestseller” as a term has become so poignant in everyday language that it appears to be a category in itself and is also often interchangeably used for popular fiction. However, the term is used to create a marketing image, i.e., a book becomes a bestseller mainly because an authoritative source says it is, which improves its chances of selling to a much wider audience. However, this could not be a parameter to evaluate the merit of work as the larger purpose is to sell.

The materialist nature of the term and its rampant usage has diluted its importance in the literary arena. This thought leads to the primary concern of the paper as to how far be it relevant and justified to call popular fiction literature? The following proposition has two clear demeanors: first, in considering the relevance of popular fiction vis-à-vis literature, one associates an elitist position to the latter and works through the binary of the literary and the popular. However, in not doing so, it is to take liberty with the canon in the post-modern world. For the past few decades, as marketability and revenue production has taken precedence over all other considerations, scholars of humanities and literature have faced the need to justify their works. Amidst this changing trend and the need to

stay relevant, what emerged was compromising literature which inevitably refused the domain of the literary nor could benefit the popular.

This newfound trend made popular synonymous with entertainment, mass art, low art, or junk fiction. This understanding questioned the relevance of popular fiction vis-à-vis literature. To derive an answer to this question, it becomes important to understand what encompasses literature? For long, literature was invariably linked to the canon, against which other writings were evaluated. On the one hand, literature is defined to be a work of merit with artistic value. On the other hand, popular literature is assumed to be lacking in merit and is an ordinary work of leisure. The gap between the two is so much so that the latter does not even find space in public libraries which claim to have a collection of “literary” works. This inevitably raises the question of whether a work of popular fiction, not literature? What makes it less literary? There can be two possibilities in this regard: one, if a work reaches a feat of being the bestseller does that inevitably realises its merit? Second, if a work fails to make a mark in the said category, does that necessarily mean it is devoid of merit? For over centuries, the concept of a bestseller has captivated writers, publishers, and even the general public. Is this phenomenon a complete accident or the result of a carefully executed marketing strategy? Is still a question to ponder?

While several attempts have been made to identify as to why the whole world seemed to be reading the same book at the same time. What is mass readership saying about the books readers want to read? Tracing the trajectories of the bestselling books in India from 2005 to the present times, some common parameters and techniques of construction can be identified. To be a bestseller is no longer a matter of mere chance rather has become a preconceived and a predetermined construct. With the advent of Chetan Bhagat in 2004, the market sale for Indian fiction in India escalated from thousands to millions. However, this has not been an overnight transformation rather was resultant of careful market analysis and of surpassing the dominant gaze. Bhagat managed to shift the spectrum with his first book by pricing it for Rs. 95 back then, an audacious risk to attract young readers. A successful book today is a well-packaged product that is determined by its mass appeal. Consequently, the appearance of a book has come to play a very significant role in determining its success rate. Therefore, the authors invest in a professional strategy to get an exclusive cover designed with an interesting title. While the title is kept intriguing yet it isn't complex, as seen in Bhagat's strategy, which includes a number in his titles as a mark of distinction. In order to ensure a wider audience for a book, readability becomes another significant factor. The bestselling writers have consciously broken away from the elitist, jargonised language of the canonical work rather use lucid language and easy vocabulary to make work more communicable. Moreover, unlike the classics, which have an interwoven plot with a multiplicity of themes and characters, these works are usually devoid of

layered issues rather chose to focus on the journey of the protagonist, often a middle-class individual stuck between the pangs of daily living. This is evident in Bhagat's approach, which wants to share people's minds, to have them wean off social media and make them interested in reading and therefore carve a linear plotline.

Decisive publishing and timely launching also become important aspects of comparison in the process of the construct. Today in a market-driven time, a book's credibility is evaluated from the publisher's brand credibility. It also improves the chances of selling to a much wider audience automatically. Moreover, along with a credible publishing house backing up a book, launching it at the right place also plays a vital role. It is the launch that determines its reach towards the desired audience and also helps in generating maximum revenues. This is evident of the techniques adopted by various writers: for example, Chetan Bhagat's publishers at Rupa print his books at several locations and take millions of copies to bookshops for a countrywide release.

Moreover, as a part of the launching technique today, it has also become important for the author to carve his image. The insincerity of efforts Bhagat has familiarised himself to people through various mediums, be it books, newspaper columns, T.V. appearances, scripting, or social media presence. This has acquainted him to the masses worldwide and is the reason behind his popularity. Another factor essential in the making of a bestseller is to launch it timely. The phrase "timely launch" has garnered much importance amidst the publishers and authors who are opportunists of finding the right moment for launching their book in order to generate a predetermined impact.

This impact can be seen from the trajectory of the bestsellers. The trend of the bestseller gained momentum with the advent of the author Chetan Bhagat in 2004. While his debut novel *Five Point Someone* (2004) saw commercial success, however, it was his second novel, *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005) which brought a swerve in the market. Between 2005-2010 while on the one hand, the call-centre industry in India saw an offshoring phenomenon with the boom in consumerism. On the other hand, Bhagat became almost a household name overnight. According to *The New York Times*, the novel sold the entire print run of 50,000 copies in less than three days of its release and had set a record for the country's fastest-selling book. The popularity of his works had brought to the forefront the lives, aspirations, and struggles of the young middle-class people. It also paved the way for his contemporary writers Ravinder Singh and Durjoy Datta, who succeeded in the position of the bestselling authors in 2007 and 2008 with *I Too Had a Love Story*, and *Of Course, I Love You* respectively. On a larger canvass, while these writers influenced by economic reasons were redefining popular romance, on the other hand, the social and political issues of the times gave rise to a parallel universe of popular mythological fiction. In the wake of a newly elected central

government and the Ayodhya verdict, the literature of Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi came into the foreground. The former's *Devlok* (2016) and the latter's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-13) had sold millions of copies in a short span of time and yet continue to ring the bells. With a successful trail, these writers caught the nerve of the market and developed their popular literature, which was a calculated attempt around similar themes with varied lenses. It is evident of their trajectories while the former was writing *Sita* (2013), *Shikhandi* (2014), and *My Gita* (2015).

On the other hand, the latter produced *Ram Chandra Series* (2015-19). In this growing battle of being popular, one often tends to overlook the contribution of those writers who were not chasing popularity, yet their works become one. The prime example of this category is the author Arundhati Roy whose work profile clearly doesn't portray a market or a strategy but speaks for itself, for the society at large.

While to timely publish a book is an important parameter to ensure a good economic status yet social factors also become significant to be taken into consideration to ensure the desired impact. It includes efforts like making the market of a book user-friendly, ensuring e-versions of the texts to make it disabled-friendly. Also, to have a pan-Indian reach, the authors also publish their novels in regional languages. Many famous authors like Chetan Bhagat, Ravinder Singh, and Preeti Shenoy, etc have published regional translations of their works.

In the wake of commercialisation and the increasing competitiveness of the lookalike culture, the bestsellers essentially seem to adopt certain compulsive techniques to rescue their space. To justify the making of a construct, it becomes essential to monopolise the market. In this effort, it becomes important for these authors to essentialize a hold on various forms of media communication. As a part of launching to have the book displayed across media platforms acquaints the readers with the project and builds their curiosity. This is evident when Flipkart bought the most expensive newspaper space to advertise its exclusive online retail, as seen a month before the release of Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*.

Moreover, the authors had to continue to make efforts to time and again launch their book at different places and circumstances in order to avoid stagnancy in recorded sales. In other words, to ensure the long run of a book, the author has to find ways and means to keep it alive in the memory of the audience and not become an obsolete product. For example, Ravinder Singh got his *I too had a Love Story* (2008) published in the U.K. by Transworld Publishers, Penguin Random House after ten years of its publication in order to ensure a mass appeal and a sustained market for his product. In the wake of commercialisation and globalisation, the drive of these writers to write a novel is not merely to tell a story rather, a major reason is to earn a livelihood. Therefore, for most of them, their story is

primarily a product, and they adopt every possible marketing fad to ensure its sale. Writer Ravinder Singh confessed in one of his interviews that he had not even read a single book before he wrote his first novel.

Writing today has not just remained an academic phenomenon rather has become commercialised to an extent that there are software people use to write their novels or hire a writer to write their stories. The shift in the socio-economic culture has brought this shift in the purpose of writing. Consequently, many doctors, engineers, celebrities are using their brand value to publish their bestselling books. This attempt at de-personalised writing raises concern towards its value and purpose. While a work of literature comes with a sense of responsibility to reflect the concerns and crisis of society, therefore, how far does these motive driven books justify the meaning of literature?

This brings to fore the second proposition, the essential feature of literature as a reflection of society. An individual is a product of his surroundings therefore, a work of art cannot be created in a vacuum. It is thus impossible to find literature excluding the attitude, morale and values of societal living. However, to say “the society” is to invoke an entire tradition whose contemporariness has been deeply rooted in the set of values and beliefs made and remade over the years. The role of a writer is to be aware of this tradition: it is what T.S. Eliot has called a “historical sense,” i.e., to have “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the temporal and the timeless together is what makes a writer, traditional” (Eliot, “Tradition” 47). This sense of temporality not just makes a writer acutely conscious of his place in the time of his contemporaneity but also creates awareness of its continuum.

As society evolves, a new tradition evolves, which is a product of the socio-economic realities of that time. In this process, one drifted almost without realising from being market economies to becoming market societies. While market economy was working towards effective production however, it soon came to dominate every aspect of life. Now market thinking and market values became the determining factors in the functioning of society. Everything around was now measured in terms of its utility and consumption. It was a wave of “timeliness” surpassing “timelessness.” Publishers considered themselves opinion-makers and decided if the work was “timely” enough to be published in the present and how it should be packaged for its best effect. Therefore, for a work to be called the bestseller it had to achieve that best effect. How much role does the meticulousness of the story and its aesthetics perform remained still a question to ponder? However, One thing could surely be determined that it was just some percentage of the package and not the only thing required.

This conscious following of trend can be clearly reflected in the trajectory of the best-selling writers. Chetan Bhagat who featured amongst world’s 100 most influential people’s list in 2010, came up with

2 States in 2009, which was a story about the protagonists from two different states, falling in love but have to face trials to convince their families for an inter-state marriage. In 2011 his *Revolution 2020* discussed the issue of corruption in education system in India through the differences in the track of two friends: Gopal and Raghav having same aspirations but belonging to extreme social backgrounds. This was followed by *Half Girlfriend* in 2014, which showed the difficulty of a rural Hindi speaking boy who falls in love with an English-speaking affluent girl. This trajectory of Bhagat's love stories against different backdrops continued in his subsequent works *One Indian Girl* (2016) and *The Girl in Room 105* (2018). Though his novels were set against the backdrop of pertinent issues of today's Indian society yet the lookalike love plots dilute the seriousness of the issues more often. In recent years Bhagat has seemingly experimented to foray in different genres yet the quintessential nature of the plots remains the same. His risk-taking graph is low. Moreover, the frequency of his novels beginning from the popularity of his career has been rampant. He published his first novel in 2014, followed by the subsequent novels in 2005, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018: almost every year a novel was published without risking the breakdown of his image. It was a clear indication of the need for creating a public image, to set a pattern, to be able to decode the market formula, to desperately carve a niche. To compare his trajectory with another popular fiction writers namely Amitav Ghosh or Arundhati Roy who's gradually progressing works are not an attempt at hit and trial rather addresses poignant issues of culture, history and contemporaneity. Their works were clearly not "chasing popularity" and are not a part of the lookalike culture. The popularity which the novels got in return was in effect an acknowledgement of their merit which not only sold but was very much "popular."

The loss of essence in this trend setting world clearly reflects a gap between the reader and the writer. For these writers writing is a strictly professional activity. The fast paced-ness of these books engages the reader just momentarily to know what is next and to instantly turn the page. This rapidity of their nature doesn't allow the reader to engage with the issue and therefore for the same reason fail to trigger a thought process. This drift away from the purpose of literature saw the rise of commercial fiction which went farther in its reach, was merely plot driven, entertaining and fast paced as reiterated by Karthika V.K., former Chief Editor at Harper Collins.

Following the trajectory, it is easy to conclude that to be popular is to be with the times. The purpose of art has changed today i.e., rather than seeking universality the artists' intentions are governed by the audience, the market. In other words, whatever sells becomes the new trend and to ensure the growth of their profession, the artists have to change with the change in commercial trends based on mass opinion. However, to give agency in the hands of the other is to negate their selves, their

expressions, and their creativity. The changing commercial trends doesn't let the writer decide and discover his/her art rather force them within constraints to produce a certain "type." To what extent does this process allow freedom of mind for an artist is another question?

This leads to the final argument as to what extent this rapid change allows work to be immortal. According to the trend before a consumer could relish the experience of a book, there are speculations of their forthcoming book. How important is it to allow a work to be situated in a particular time and space, in the present? Understanding the need to justify a work of art irrespective of the changing trends is the responsibility of a writer. However, the bestselling trend seems not to be wary of this responsibility as there is nothing to justify. Their stories come from the audience themselves, who approve of their works through a silent business of numbers. For example, Ravinder Singh one of the best-selling romance writers after the immense success of his first novel, *I too had a Love Story* (2007) caught the knack of a "type" that would sell and thereafter came up with works on similar lines namely- *Can Love happen twice?* (2011), *Love Stories that touched My Heart* (2012), *Like it, Happened Yesterday* (2013,) and others. However, the larger question is whether this patterning of the series an impediment to the growth of the work? After years of publication, will it still be remembered for what it was, or will it be the author who established himself/herself as the best-selling author be one to be remembered? The bestsellers have a peculiar trait that they're sold primarily for their stories. Once the story is revealed to the reader, he/s doesn't have any further investment in the book. Moreover, that story soon fades away with the arrival of the next book. This swift process of demand and supply has relegated the position of literature to that of mere story and storytelling. What holds importance is the final product while the process from conception to distribution is nullified. Therefore, the ability of a work of art to surpass all ages and be immortal is not the fate of the best sellers, they're a product of "commodity fetishism" (Marx 39). It is not merely the purpose of art that has changed over time but also the definition of what is interpreted as art has changed too. Moreover, in this technology-driven world, the idea of immortality is an insignificant thought as immortality is dependent on memory and memories are being displaced in this fast paced-ness.

Also, for a work to reach the status of immortality is to achieve the state of being a classic. A classic remains so in all ages, it doesn't cease in its universal appeal at any given time and resonates with everyone largely. Thus, a bestseller that reaches immortality will inevitably be a classic. To be immortal is to be remembered forever. In this digital world media plays a significant role in etching a work in people's memories forever through the medium of screen. Therefore, with the trend of filming a novel, it has become easier for the authors to cross that path of immortality and make their works resonate with the audience worldwide. A film heightens the emotion of words on screen and

is successful in bringing a reconciliatory catharsis which a textual reading may not be able to achieve. For example, to read Chetan Bhagat's *2 States* and to watch Abhishek Verma's adaptation of the same are two different experiences. While merely reading a story of an interstate marriage was not a new affair and would not have left an impression to be able to remember it forever. However, after the film, the story reached universal immortality. Similarly, reading *Five Point Someone* would not have given an experience a *3 Idiots* did.

Thus, in the wake of the changing trends, the preoccupation with being accepted and the race of growing business, the stories should not suffer. Stories are the essence of our civilisation and comprise life elements: it becomes the responsibility of the storytellers to be aware of the present bait and not let the market succeed in making us believe the façade. While it is equally important to be with the times but today in a post-post-modern world when everyone else is hoarding trends, literature should also make it new by not setting one.

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