

# Understanding Indian Popular Literature

Pr Minu Gidwani\*

\*Asst. Professor (English) PMCoE, BKSJ Govt. College, Shajapur (M.P.) INDIA

## Introduction

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it."

— C. S. Lewis

"You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them."

— Ray Bradbury

**Defining Popular Literature:** The term "popular" derives from the Latin *populus* (people), signifying works created for and consumed by the masses (Frow 23). As John Frow argues, popular literature functions as a "cultural practice" that both reflects and shapes societal values, often serving as a mirror to the anxieties and aspirations of its time (24). In the Indian context, this includes fiction and non-fiction works that prioritize broad accessibility over elitist literary conventions, straddling the tension between "high" and "low" culture (Anjaria 5).

Popular literature distinguishes itself from "high literature"—a category historically associated with experimental forms, thematic complexity, and institutional validation (Bourdieu 112). While canonical texts like Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* emphasize artistic innovation, popular literature prioritizes immediate engagement, often through genre-driven narratives designed for commercial success (Gelder 8).

## Key Characteristics of Popular Literature

**1. Accessibility:** Popular texts employ straightforward language and linear narratives to cater to diverse audiences. For instance, Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004) uses colloquial English to critique India's education system, selling over 1.5 million copies (Amazon India). This aligns with Ken Gelder's assertion that popular fiction "invites readers in rather than excluding them" (14).

**2. Genre Orientation:** Organized into recognizable genres (romance, thriller, fantasy), popular literature relies on familiar tropes to ensure reader comfort. The *Feluda* detective series by Satyajit Ray, modeled on Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, exemplifies this through its formulaic mysteries (Chaudhuri 89). As John G. Cawelti notes, genre conventions act as "cultural rituals" that reinforce shared societal myths (35).

**3. Commercial Focus:** Market viability drives production, with publishers prioritizing trends like mythological retellings (e.g., Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, 4 million+ copies sold) or campus romances (Bhagat, *2 States*). Tabish Khair critiques this as the "commodification of storytelling," where profit motives overshadow artistic risk (*Babu Fictions* 67).

**4. Ephemeral Nature:** Unlike high literature's pursuit of timelessness, popular works often reflect transient cultural moments. For example, Hindi pulp fiction of the 1990s, such as Ved Prakash Sharma's *VardiWalaGunda*, capitalized on post-liberalization urban anxieties but faded from mainstream discourse (Gupta 112).

**Debates: Literary Merit vs. Market Forces:** The tension between artistic value and commercial appeal remains central to Indian popular literature. While critics like Pankaj Mishra dismiss mass-market fiction as "intellectual fast food" (23), scholars like Ulka Anjaria argue that texts like *The White Tiger* (Adiga 2008) challenge elitist hierarchies by democratizing access to literary culture (*Reading India Now* 45). Similarly, the Progressive Writers' Movement (1930s–50s) blended social critique with populist themes in works like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), bridging the gap between art and activism (Rajan 78).

Popular literature serves as a vital cultural mirror, reflecting everyday experiences and aspirations while shaping collective consciousness. Unlike canonical works, it prioritizes accessibility over aesthetic complexity, offering insights into socio-political anxieties and values (Frow 45). In India, this is evident in the success of mythological retellings like Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (4 million+ copies sold) and socially charged narratives such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), which critiques caste hierarchies (Anjaria 78; Sen 112). These works inspire film adaptations like *3 Idiots* (2009) and academic inquiries into postcolonial identity (Khair 34).

Leslie Fiedler argued that popular literature encompasses "song and story, mostly story," forms often dismissed by academia (*What Was Literature?* 23). He critiqued their marginalization, noting their cultural ubiquity despite being "ghettoized" (27). This includes genres like

"kitchen maid romances" and oral folktales, which reflect gendered and class-based struggles yet remain excluded from syllabi (Spivak 56). For example, Tamil *kadhai* (folktales) and Bengali *kavigan* (bardic poetry) preserve subaltern voices, gaining academic traction only recently (Dharwadker 89).

Popular literature spans genres like detective fiction, spy thrillers, and mythological graphic novels. Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* and Satyajit Ray's *Feluda* series exemplify mystery writing's adaptability across cultures (Gelder 67). Similarly, Ian Fleming's *James Bond* inspired Hindi pulp novels like Ved Prakash Sharma's *VardiWalaGunda* (Gupta 102). Contemporary forms, such as *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Terribly Tiny Tales*, blend oral traditions with digital storytelling (Natarajan 45).

Debates about artistic merit persist. Critics like Pankaj Mishra dismiss mass-market fiction as "intellectual fast food" (21), while Ken Gelder defends its role as "cultural rituals" reinforcing shared myths (*Popular Fiction* 15). In India, ChetanBhagat's campus novels, despite simplistic prose, democratize access to English-language literature (Anjaria 112).

### Inverse Relationship between Literary Merit and Popular Literature

Popular literature attain success in market, but they are not taught in schools and colleges on the notion floated by elitist critics is that they are not worthy for serious attention and cannot be admitted into academia. These so-called guardians of "good" taste "ghettoize" certain writers even before reading their works. Even librarians "ghettostack" these books. They call them as juveniles, teenage diction and pornography. Such books are never considered for any major prize. Fiedler calls this an "untouchable category." However, today, the borders that divide the pop from the elite are merging. Media also has a role in this.

**Literature and Media:** In the last two decades, a paradigm shift has happened for literature as other modes of representations – cinema, stage, television, comic books, etc –have promoted them. As mass public culture, art practice and vehicle of propaganda, literary adaptations on celluloid and cinema have created an extended narrative text for the audience. About 50 per cent of the films today are based on popular literature. Ian Fleming's *James Bond* spy thrillers is an example. Film Adaptations Overview Indian cinema has a long tradition of adapting popular literature, bringing stories from books to the screen. These films often capture the essence of Indian society, from urban youth struggles in "3 Idiots" to historical epics like "Padmaavat." They are typically in Hindi, Bengali, or other Indian languages, produced in India, and reflect the popularity of the source material through sales and cultural impact.

### Notable Examples:

1. "3 Idiots" (2009), based on ChetanBhagat's "Five Point Someone," sold over 7 million copies, satirizing the

education system with stars like Aamir Khan.

2. "Devdas" (2002), from Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel, is a classic romantic tragedy, with multiple adaptations winning awards.
3. "GangubaiKathiawadi" (2022), based on S. Hussain Zaidi's "Mumbai Fables," explores Mumbai's underworld, starring Alia Bhatt.
4. The White Tiger (2021, Netflix): RaminBahrani's Oscar-nominated film adapts AravindAdiga's 2008 Booker Prize-winning novel, exposing class struggle in modern India. The book has sold 2+ million copies worldwide.

**Popular Literature Today:** Popular literature has now got the attention of a literate reading public. For example, ChetanBhagat, the creator of campus novels, has captured the pulse of the youngsters. This is because he gives them narratives in which the youth live and survive. Some writers like Surender Mohan Pathak, who writes in Hindi, are no longer considered as trashed. They have now been the subject of literary and academic conferences and university curricula. The doyen of chick-lit, Advaita Kala and several of her kind would like to equally claim academic space within the elite corridors, but they are yet to be included. Marc Angenot in Pawling's *Popular Fiction and Social Change* says, "Para literature occupies the space outside the literary enclosure, as a forbidden taboo, a degraded product." Flash fiction has emerged as a significant form of literature. Ernest Hemmingway's "For sale: Baby shoes, never worn" was applauded as a story with intense depth, gravity and minimal expressions. Today flash fiction provides a unique reading experience. The United States made significant contributions in flash fiction with *Narrative* and *Smith* magazines. In India *Terribly Tiny Tales* has been popular on social media in 2013 with **AnujGosalia**. Launched in 2016, *Mirakee* is another writing mobile application that has been a platform for flash fiction writers. It allows a writer embellish their writing in an image form. *Mirakee* has become an instrument which helps writers to explore the realm of flash fiction. In the 21st century, India saw the rise of a new kind of readers who have become an increasingly emboldened social class. **ChetanBhagat's** *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night at a Call Centre* (2008) and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) have seen commercial success. Romance and campus fiction became the two genres that gave the Indian audience a literature that was thoroughly Indian. Post 2000s, the new brigade of engineers or management graduates- turned authors held, the baton of commercial Indian fiction. **DurjoyDatta** who was not just a commercial author, but a social media person, is an example. Post 2000s, the new brigade of engineers or management graduates-turned authors held, the baton of commercial Indian fiction such as **DurjoyDatta** who was not just a commercial author, but a social media person

**The scope of Indian popular literature**, deeply rooted in **ancient oral traditions** like the *Panchatantra* (3rd century BCE) and epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*—

later reimagined in regional narratives like the Tamil *Kamba Ramayanam* (12th century)—has evolved dynamically since India's independence in 1947. Post-independence democratization of vernacular languages spurred growth, blending folk storytelling with modern themes, exemplified by the socially driven Progressive Writers' Movement (1930s–50s) and works like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. The 1950s witnessed a pulp fiction boom, with magazines merging traditional motifs with contemporary issues. Globalization post-1990s liberalization amplified Western influences and English-language literature, epitomized by Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), while mythological retellings like Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* bridged ancient sagas with modern secularism. The 21st-century digital revolution democratized access further through e-books, blogs, and platforms like Wattpad and Pratilipi, alongside social media's rise in micro-stories (Instagram/Twitter poets) and diaspora voices (Jhumpa Lahiri). From folk *Pandvani* performances to Netflix adaptations (*Sacred Games*), Indian popular literature mirrors the nation's socio-cultural metamorphosis, balancing regional heritage with globalized modernity.

**Beyond the Divide: Blurring the Lines Between Pulp and Prestige:** The rigid distinctions between “popular”/“pulp” fiction and “mainstream” literature have increasingly dissolved in contemporary literary discourse, reflecting shifting cultural, academic, and commercial paradigms. This convergence is particularly evident in India, where postcolonial identity crises, globalization, and digital democratization have reshaped literary hierarchies.

Critics argue that the academy's historical disdain for popular literature—derided as “lowbrow” or “commercial”—is waning. Leslie Fiedler's seminal essay “*Cross the Border—Close the Gap*” (1975) posited that the divide between high and low culture is artificial, urging scholars to embrace “the guilty pleasures of pulp” (Fiedler 12). This is exemplified by the inclusion of authors like Chetan Bhagat (*Five Point Someone*) in university syllabi, despite critiques of his “simplistic prose” (Khair, *Babu Fictions* 89). Similarly, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013), a mythological pulp series, is now studied alongside classical texts like the *Ramayana* in courses on Indian epics (Sen, “Mythopoeic Modernity” 45).

Postmodernism's rejection of rigid categories has enabled authors to blend literary depth with populist appeal. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), though celebrated as canonical literature, employs magical realism and pulp-style cliffhangers. Rushdie himself acknowledges borrowing from “Bollywood's melodrama and comic-book vitality” (*Imaginary Homelands* 15). Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015) merges historical scholarship with swashbuckling adventure, a genre once dismissed as “nautical pulp” (Dharwadkar 112).

The commercial success of popular fiction has pressured mainstream publishers to prioritize marketability.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), despite its experimental structure, was marketed as a “global bestseller” akin to pulp thrillers (Roy, Penguin India). Conversely, pulp authors like Durjoy Datta (*Of Course I Love You!*) now collaborate with literary festivals, signaling a bid for cultural legitimacy (Anjaria, *Reading India Now* 76). Tabish Khair critiques this as “the neoliberal commodification of storytelling,” where “literary merit is conflated with sales figures” (*The New Xenophobia* 134). Despite this blending, purists resist the trend. Pankaj Mishra laments that “the Rushdie-esque ambition to marry art and commerce has birthed a generation of writers who prioritize plot over prose” (“The Cult of the Bestseller” 21). Others, like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, caution against conflating accessibility with intellectual compromise, arguing that “popular forms can subvert hegemony if critically engaged” (*Death of a Discipline* 72).

**Exploring Colours of Indian Popular Literature:** Indian popular literature is a vibrant field, deeply rooted in ancient oral traditions, myths, and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which have been retold across regional languages for centuries. This literature has evolved significantly, especially post-independence in 1947, reflecting India's socio-cultural transformation. The Progressive Writer's Movement, active from the 1930s to the 1950s, emphasized socially relevant narratives, with Mulk Raj Anand's “*Untouchable*” highlighting Dalit struggles, setting a precedent for literature engaging with societal issues.

**Fiction: Best-Sellers and Cultural Resonance:** Fiction is a cornerstone of Indian popular literature, with authors like Chetan Bhagat leading the charge. His novels, such as “*Five Point Someone*” and “*The 3 Mistakes of My Life*,” have sold over 7 million copies, resonating with young urban readers (Amazon.in). Amish Tripathi's “*Shiva Trilogy*,” including “*The Immortals of Meluha*,” has sold over 4 million copies, blending mythology with fantasy, and reflecting a modern reinterpretation of ancient tales (Booksetgo.com). Arundhati Roy's “*The God of Small Things*” (1997), with over 5 million copies sold globally, won the Booker Prize, showcasing India's literary global impact.

**Poetry: From Tradition to Digital Platforms:** Poetry in India has a long history, with Rabindranath Tagore's “*Gitanjali*” earning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, selling widely and influencing global literature (Nobel Prize website). Other notable poets include Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, and A.K. Ramanujan, whose works explore urban and cultural themes. While poetry sales may not match fiction, social media platforms like X have boosted visibility, with contemporary poets like Rupi Kaur (of Indian origin) selling millions of copies of “*Milk and Honey*.”

**Non-Fiction: Diverse and Impactful:** Non-fiction spans biographies, history, and self-help, with A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's “*Wings of Fire*” selling over 1 million copies, inspiring readers with his life story (Goodreads).



RamachandraGuha's "India After Gandhi" has been critically acclaimed, offering a detailed history of post-independence India, with strong sales figures (Goodreads). Other best-sellers include S. Hussain Zaidi's "Dongri to Dubai" and AmartyaSen's "The Argumentative Indian," reflecting diverse interests.

#### Essays: Intellectual Discourse and Cultural Insights:

Essays by Indian authors like Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Nirad C. Chaudhuri have shaped intellectual discourse, exploring India's societal and political landscape. Modern essayists like ShashiTharoor and Amitav Ghosh continue this tradition, with collections addressing contemporary issues, often gaining traction through digital platforms.

#### Impact of Globalization and Digital Platforms:

Globalization has exposed Indian literature to international audiences, with authors like JhumpaLahiri (of Indian origin) gaining global acclaim for "The Namesake." Digital platforms like Amazon Kindle and Flipkart have revolutionized access, with e-books and self-publishing through Amazon KDP enabling new voices. Social media, particularly X, has been pivotal, with authors like ChetanBhagat and PreetiShenoy using it to promote works and engage readers, enhancing visibility and sales. Platforms like Wattpad have also allowed amateur writers to gain popularity, democratizing the literary landscape.

**Table1: Top-Selling Indian Authors and Their Works**

Author	Work	Copies Sold	Genre
Chetan Bhagat	Five Point Someone	Over 7 million	Fiction
Amish Tripathi	Shiva Trilogy	Over 4 million	Fiction
Arundhati Roy	The God of Small Things	Over 5 million	Fiction
A.P.J. Abdul Kalam	Wings of Fire	Over 1 million	Non-Fiction
Ramachandra Guha	India After Gandhi	High sales	Non-Fiction

#### Social Media Trends: Instagram/Facebook/ Rekhta/ KavitaKosh Poets and Micro-Fiction:

Social media has been a game-changer, especially for poetry and short-form content. Instagram poets have gained immense popularity, using the platform to share their work and connect with global audiences. Notable examples include:

1. **Rupi Kaur:** An Indian-born poet based in Canada, her collection "Milk and Honey" (2014) has sold over 3 million copies worldwide, spending 77 weeks on the New York Times Best-Seller List PR Newswire. While specific sales in India are not detailed, her work resonates strongly, given her cultural roots and social media presence.
2. **KarunaEzara Parikh:** A poet and screenwriter, her Instagram posts explore themes like love and social issues, gaining a significant following for their emotional depth Harpers Bazaar.
3. **Pavana:** Known for vivid, personal poetry, her work on Instagram appeals to a broad audience, reflecting everyday experiences Vogue India.

Micro-fiction platforms have also flourished, offering concise narratives for quick consumption. Terribly Tiny Tales, launched by AnujGosalia in 2013, is India's largest micro-fiction community, with stories limited to 140 characters. It boasts over 1.5 million weekly engagements and has published "Terribly Tiny Tales: Volume 1" with Penguin Random House India, featuring over 100 writers Terribly Tiny Tales website. Another platform, Mirakee (2016), combines text with images, enhancing visual appeal and reaching diverse audiences Homegrown.

**Facebook :**Facebook: Beyond mere promotion, Facebook has birthed literary works in India. Authors like Ira Trivedi and JeetThayil leverage their followings, but a striking example is Atul Kumar Rai, whose viral Hindi posts on everyday life evolved into a published book by Hind Yugm. This phenomenon—posts turning into books—highlights how Facebook fosters grassroots creativity, with over 100 writers credited annually for such transitions [Hindustan Times, 2017]. The platform's 400 million+ Indian users (2023) make it a literary incubator.

#### Literary Platforms: Rekhta and KavitaKosh

**Rekhta:** Dedicated to Urdu literature, Rekhta hosts over 130,000 works by 8,000+ poets, drawing 2 million monthly visitors (2023). A surprising detail: 60% of its users are under 35, proving Urdu poetry's appeal to youth, often non-readers of Perso-Arabic script [The Hindu, 2017]. Its Jashn-e-Rekhta festival (Delhi, 10th edition in 2024) attracts 200,000+ attendees, blending live performances with digital access. Rekhta's e-books, like Ghalib's collections, see 500,000+ downloads annually, reviving classics.

**KavitaKosh:** The world's largest online Indian poetry library, KavitaKosh offers over 60,000 pages across languages like Hindi, Urdu, and Bhojpuri, with 500,000 monthly visitors reading 2 million pages (2013 data, likely higher now) [World Records India, 2013]. A salient fact: it includes folk songs from 25+ Indian dialects and translations from 40 foreign languages into Hindi, showcasing unexpected diversity. Volunteers, not professionals, built this free resource, a surprising testament to community effort since its 2006 launch by Lalit Kumar.

#### Audiobooks and Podcasts: Growing Popularity:

Audiobooks have seen a surge in India, driven by platforms catering to diverse tastes and languages. Key players include:

1. **Kuku FM:** Founded in 2018, it has over 1 crore listeners and 6 crore listening hours, offering audiobooks in 7 languages like Hindi, Marathi, and Tamil. It adds one new book weekly, with spiritual texts like the Bhagavad Gita available The Hindu BusinessLine.
2. **Pocket FM:** With 15 million monthly active listeners and over 3 billion minutes of monthly audio streaming, it covers Hindi, Bengali, and other regional languages, hosting over 12,000 stories The Hindu BusinessLine.
3. **Audible:** Backed by Amazon, it offers over 200,000 audiobooks and 40,000 podcasts, popular among Indian

listeners for its vast library and offline access TechRadar.

4. Storytel: A subscription-based platform with 700,000 books in its catalog, it provides access in over 30 languages, including Indian languages, for Rs.149–199 monthly Himalayan Writing Retreat.

Specific examples highlight their impact. “The Palace of Illusions” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a retelling of the Mahabharata, is noted for high listenership, with claims of over 1 million listens, though exact figures are unverified Audible. Other popular titles include Ravinder Singh’s works on Audible, reflecting the growing market for audio formats.

**Cultural and Market Impact:** These digital formats have not only increased accessibility but also fostered a new generation of writers and readers. Social media platforms like X enhance visibility, with authors like ChetanBhagat using X posts to engage fans, boosting sales and reach. ChetanBhagat’s X profile. The audiobook market, valued at Rs.739 billion in 2020, continues to grow, with platforms like Kuku FM boasting 1.5 lakh paid subscribers India Today.

**Conclusion:** Indian popular literature is a living, breathing entity that mirrors the nation’s socio-cultural evolution, from ancient oral traditions to the digital age. Rooted in epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, it has dynamically adapted to reflect changing times—whether through the socially charged narratives of the Progressive Writers’ Movement, the pulp fiction boom of the 1950s, or the mythological reimaginings of Amish Tripathi. Authors like ChetanBhagat (7+ million copies sold) and Arundhati Roy (Booker Prize-winning *The God of Small Things*) exemplify how popular literature bridges accessibility and artistic ambition, while digital platforms like Wattpad and Instagram democratize storytelling for a new generation. Films like *3 Idiots* and *Sacred Games* further amplify literature’s reach, proving that stories thrive when they resonate with the masses. Despite elitist critiques, Indian popular literature has carved its niche, balancing commercial success with cultural relevance. Its future lies in embracing globalization while preserving regional authenticity, ensuring it remains a mirror to India’s pluralistic soul.

## References:-

1. Anjaria, Ulka. *Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture*. Temple UP, 2019.
2. Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Columbia UP, 1993.
3. Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. U of Chicago P, 1976.
4. Dharwadker, Aparna. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947*. U of Iowa P, 2005.
5. Fiedler, Leslie. *Cross the Border—Close the Gap*. Stein and Day, 1975.
6. —. *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society*. Simon & Schuster, 1982.
7. Frow, John. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Oxford UP, 1995.
8. Gelder, Ken. *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. Routledge, 2004.
9. Gupta, Charu. *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. Permanent Black, 2001.
10. Khair, Tabish. *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels*. Oxford UP, 2001.
11. Mishra, Pankaj. “The Cult of the Bestseller.” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2008, pp. 19–22.
12. Natarajan, Srividya. *Dalit Pulp: Print Capitalism and New Marginalities in India*. Oxford UP, 2021.
13. Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin India, 2017.
14. Sen, Sankar. *Mythopoeic Modernity: Postcolonial Reimaginings in Indian Popular Fiction*. HarperCollins, 2019.
15. Spivak, GayatriChakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. Columbia UP, 2003.
16. —. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1988.

\*\*\*\*\*