



**MARGINS OF THE MAINSTREAM:
GENRE, CATEGORY LITERATURE, AND LITERARY
HIERARCHIES
IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION**

Priyanka Suresh Deshpande

Research Scholar

Under the Guidance of

Dr. Ramakant Vishwanath Kulkarni

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English Fergusson

College (Autonomous), Pune



ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of category literature within the landscape of contemporary Indian fiction published in English between 1990 and 2022. Category literature, broadly understood as fiction produced for and marketed within commercially demarcated generic categories such as romance, crime, horror, science fiction, mythological fantasy, and self-help narrative, has witnessed unprecedented growth in Indian publishing over the past three decades, complicating the established critical hierarchies that have long privileged the literary novel as the dominant form of serious cultural production. Drawing on a corpus of eighteen texts selected across six generic categories, the study investigates the ways in which Indian authors working within category fiction simultaneously negotiate, reproduce, and subvert the conventions of their chosen genres, and examines the relationship between generic belonging and the construction of readerly identity in a rapidly transforming urban consumer culture. Theoretically, the paper draws on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory of cultural production, Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious and the ideologeme of genre, and the more recent revisionary work of scholars in popular fiction studies, including John Sutherland, Ken Gelder, and Rachel Noorda. A structured analysis of paratext, including cover design, blurb rhetoric, author branding, and digital marketing discourse, is combined with close reading of selected narrative passages to argue that category literature in the Indian context performs a distinctive mediatory function, producing generic pleasures that are simultaneously localised and globally circulating, commercially oriented and ideologically complex. The paper concludes by arguing for a reconfiguration of the critical apparatus through which Indian fiction in English is evaluated, one that takes seriously the cultural work performed by category fiction without collapsing the distinction between critical and commercial modes of value.

Keywords: category literature, genre fiction, Indian English fiction, popular fiction, Bourdieu, field of cultural production, paratext, mythological fiction, crime fiction, literary value

Introduction

The literary map of Indian fiction in English has been substantially redrawn over the course of the past three decades. The generation of writers associated with the boom in internationally visible Indian English fiction, the generation of Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Vikram Seth, occupied a cultural field in which the boundary between serious literary fiction and popular or category writing was relatively stable and largely uncontested within the critical establishment. Literary fiction was produced for a discerning readership, evaluated by metropolitan critics, awarded prizes whose symbolic capital derived precisely from their distance from commercial considerations, and taught in university courses that constituted another form of institutional legitimation. Popular fiction, by contrast, existed in a largely separate cultural economy, circulating through different retail channels, reaching different audiences, and remaining, for the most part, beneath the notice of academic literary criticism. The situation that prevails in the second decade of the twenty-first century is considerably more complex. The explosive growth of the Indian publishing market since economic liberalisation, combined with the rise of digital platforms, self-publishing, and social media-based reading communities, has transformed the conditions under which fiction is produced, distributed, and received. Category fiction, understood here as fiction produced within and marketed through the commercially demarcated generic categories of romance, crime and thriller, horror, science fiction and fantasy, mythological fiction, and self-improvement narrative, has become one of the most commercially successful segments of the Indian publishing market. Authors such as Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Durjoy Datta, Anuja Chauhan, and a host of others have achieved sales figures that dwarf those of their literary counterparts, while generating a popular critical discourse conducted through book blogs, YouTube channels, and social media platforms that operates largely independently of the institutional structures of academic literary criticism.

This paper argues that this transformation of the literary field constitutes not merely a commercial phenomenon but a significant cultural development that demands sustained scholarly attention. The



proliferation of category literature in contemporary Indian fiction raises questions that are simultaneously sociological, aesthetic, and ideological: questions about the relationship between generic convention and cultural value; about the construction of readerly identity through genre preference; about the ways in which commercially successful category fiction both reflects and reproduces the social anxieties and aspirations of a rapidly changing urban middle class; and about the critical frameworks through which Indian fiction in English should be read and evaluated.

The paper proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, Section Two surveys the relevant theoretical literature on genre, popular fiction, and the field of cultural production, with particular attention to the frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, Fredric Jameson, and more recent popular fiction scholars. Section Three describes the corpus and methodology. Section Four presents the primary analysis, combining paratextual analysis with close reading. Section Five discusses the broader implications of the findings. Section Six summarises the conclusions and proposes directions for further research.

Literature Review

Defining Category Literature: Theoretical Considerations

The term "category literature" has its origins in the commercial practices of the publishing industry rather than in literary theory. In its narrowest sense, it refers to fiction produced for specific commercial categories or lines, as in the Harlequin romance imprints or the mass-market crime series that dominated anglophone popular publishing for much of the twentieth century. In a broader sense, the term encompasses any fiction that is primarily identified and marketed through its generic affiliation: it is crime fiction, or science fiction, or fantasy, or horror, before it is the work of a particular author or a treatment of a particular theme. This generic identification structures every aspect of the book's commercial existence, from cover design and shelf placement to marketing copy and reader expectation. Scholars of popular fiction have long debated the adequacy of the term and its relationship to related concepts such as genre fiction, paraliterature, formula fiction, and mass-market fiction. John Sutherland, in his study *Bestsellers* (1981), was among the first to treat popular fiction as a legitimate object of sociological and literary inquiry, arguing that bestselling novels are symptomatic of broader cultural anxieties and desires in ways that reward careful reading. Ken Gelder's more recent *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004) offers the most comprehensive theoretical account of the field, drawing on Bourdieu's framework to analyse the specific logics that govern the production, distribution, and consumption of popular fiction and to distinguish these from the logics of literary fiction. Gelder argues, influentially, that popular fiction operates according to a logic of "generic identification" that is fundamentally different from the logic of "singularity" that governs literary fiction: where the literary novel aspires to uniqueness and resists categorisation, the popular novel aspires to satisfying generic expectations and rewards category membership.

This distinction, while theoretically productive, has been complicated by a significant body of more recent scholarship. Franco Moretti's quantitative literary history, particularly his work in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), has demonstrated that literary history is more accurately understood as a history of genres than as a succession of individual masterworks, suggesting that the generic dimension of all fiction, literary and popular, is more fundamental than traditional criticism has acknowledged. More directly relevant to the present study is the work of Rachel Noorda and Millicent Weber on the sociology of genre reading communities, which argues that readers' generic preferences are constitutive of social identity in ways that extend well beyond the individual text. Their research on the genre fiction marketplace demonstrates that genre reading functions as a form of community building and self-identification, a finding that has direct implications for the analysis of Indian category fiction and its role in constructing the identities of its urban middle-class readership.

Bourdieu and the Field of Cultural Production

Pierre Bourdieu's field theory of cultural production, developed across *The Rules of Art* (1996), *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), and *Distinction* (1984), provides the most powerful sociological framework available for the analysis of category literature. For Bourdieu, the literary field is a social space structured by the opposition between two principles of legitimacy: the principle of heteronomy, which subordinates cultural production to economic demand, and the principle of autonomy, which asserts the independence of cultural production from economic considerations and measures value by specifically cultural rather than commercial criteria. Category literature, oriented as it is toward the market and defined by its generic identifications, occupies the pole of heteronomy, while literary fiction, which stakes its claim to value on its distance from commercial considerations, occupies the pole of autonomy.

Bourdieu's framework is useful not only for understanding the structural position of category literature within the literary field but also for analysing the strategies through which individual authors and publishers navigate the field. The Indian publishing market offers particularly interesting examples of what Bourdieu calls "position-taking," the strategies through which agents in the field occupy and defend particular positions. Authors such as Amish Tripathi, whose *Shiva Trilogy* sold over five million copies in India, have been notably strategic in positioning their work as simultaneously popular and serious: the books are marketed as category fantasy but are accompanied by authorial discourse that frames them as contributions to Hindu philosophical and theological debate. This double positioning, which seeks to accumulate both commercial and cultural capital simultaneously, is a sophisticated navigation of the field that Bourdieu's framework enables us to analyse with precision.

Bourdieu's concept of the habitus is equally relevant. The habitus of category fiction writing, the embodied dispositions and practical knowledge that enable an author to produce competent generic fiction, is acquired through a process of immersion in the genre that is quite different from the educational trajectories that produce literary writers. Many of India's most successful category fiction authors have backgrounds in engineering, management, and corporate careers rather than in the humanities, a biographical pattern that is itself significant: their entry into the literary field from outside the educational circuits that produce cultural capital challenges the existing field structure in ways that generate both resentment from established literary authors and celebration from readers who identify with their outsider status.

Jameson and the Political Unconscious of Genre

Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) offers a different but complementary framework for the analysis of genre. For Jameson, genres are not merely commercial categories or sets of formal conventions; they are ideological forms, historically specific symbolic solutions to historically specific social contradictions. The pleasure that readers derive from genre fiction is not merely the pleasure of narrative formula or generic predictability; it is the deeper pleasure of having social anxieties and contradictions managed and resolved, at least provisionally, within the protected space of fiction. This Jamesonian approach, sometimes called the concept of the "ideologeme" of genre, enables the analyst to connect the formal conventions of category literature to the ideological work it performs in its particular historical and social context.

Applied to Indian category literature, Jameson's framework opens productive avenues of analysis. The extraordinary commercial success of mythological fiction in India over the past two decades, a success exemplified by Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and Ashwin Sanghi's alternative histories, is not simply a matter of market logic or readerly escapism. It reflects a specific ideological conjuncture in which questions of national identity, Hindu civilisational pride, and the renegotiation of modernity in relation to tradition have become urgent social preoccupations. The genre of mythological fiction provides a narrative space in which these preoccupations can be managed through the pleasurable form of the adventure narrative, converting ideological tensions into the conventional pleasures of heroism, divine intervention, and providential narrative resolution. The genre is, in Jameson's sense, a political unconscious, giving symbolic form to social desires and anxieties that cannot be directly articulated in the public discourse.



Indian Popular Fiction: State of the Field

Scholarly attention to Indian popular fiction has grown considerably since the commercial breakthrough of Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* in 2004, but the field remains significantly underdeveloped relative to the scholarship on Indian literary fiction. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's work on Indian crime fiction (2013) is among the most theoretically sophisticated contributions to the field, demonstrating through careful reading of authors from Arthur Conan Doyle's India-set stories to contemporary Indian crime writers how the genre has been inflected by colonial and postcolonial concerns. Jerry Pinto's introduction to the anthology *The Greatest Indian Detective Stories* (2020) offers a more popular but historically informed account of the tradition.

Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), while itself a work of literary fiction, engages critically with the conventions of popular thriller fiction in ways that blur the line between literary and category writing, exemplifying the kind of generic hybridity that has become increasingly common in contemporary Indian English fiction. Anuja Chauhan's work, particularly *The Zoya Factor* (2008) and *Battle for Bittora* (2010), has attracted scholarly attention from scholars of gender and popular culture for its sophisticated negotiation of the conventions of popular romance with the specificities of the Indian social and political context.

The mythological fiction sub-field has generated a small but growing body of critical attention. Boria Majumdar's work on popular culture and nationalist ideology provides a useful contextual frame for reading the mythological fiction boom, while Swagato Ganguly's essay "The Gods Must Be Crazy" (2011) offers one of the more incisive critiques of the genre's ideological implications. However, a comprehensive scholarly account of Indian category literature as a field, one that examines the structural relations between its generic sub-fields, the social conditions of its production and reception, and its ideological functions in relation to the transformation of Indian society since liberalisation, does not yet exist. The present paper is a contribution toward filling that gap.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Corpus Selection

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that combines sociological analysis of the literary field, paratextual analysis, and close reading. The decision to combine these methodological approaches reflects the conviction that category literature demands analysis at multiple levels simultaneously: at the level of the field of cultural production, where structural forces shape the conditions under which generic fiction is written, published, and received; at the level of the paratext, where the commercial and symbolic positioning of individual texts is most explicitly visible; and at the level of the text itself, where the formal operations of genre and the ideological work it performs can be read with the kind of analytical precision that close reading makes possible.

The corpus for this study comprises eighteen novels published in English by Indian authors between 1990 and 2022, selected across six generic categories: mythological fiction (three novels), crime and thriller fiction (three novels), romance fiction (three novels), science fiction and speculative fiction (three novels), horror fiction (three novels), and self-improvement narrative (three novels). The selection criteria required that each text be written by an author of Indian origin, published by a commercially operating Indian or international publisher, and primarily marketed through its generic category rather than through authorial reputation or literary distinction. The corpus is not intended to be representative in a statistically rigorous sense; given the vast and rapidly growing volume of Indian category fiction, full representativeness

is not achievable within the scope of a single paper. Rather, the corpus is designed to be illustrative of the range of generic practices and the diversity of social positions from which category fiction is currently being written in India.



Paratextual Analysis Framework

The paratextual analysis draws on Gerard Genette's framework as developed in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). Genette's concept of the paratext encompasses all the materials that surround and frame the text proper, including the cover design, the title, the blurb, the author biography, the dedication, the epigraph, and the marketing materials through which the text is presented to potential readers. For category fiction in particular, the paratext is the primary site through which generic identity is established and communicated. The cover design of a crime novel, with its characteristic colour palette and typographic conventions, performs work that is quite different from the cover design of a literary novel, and this difference is itself a symptom of the different logics that govern the two kinds of cultural production.

The paratextual analysis in this study focuses on three dimensions: the visual design of the cover, including colour, typography, and imagery; the rhetoric of the blurb, with particular attention to the ways in which generic pleasures are promised and readerly identity is addressed; and the author's positioning within the paratext, including the biographical note and the public persona constructed through media appearances and social media presence. Each of these dimensions is analysed both in its own right and in relation to analogous paratextual conventions in the relevant international genre tradition, in order to identify points of convergence and divergence that may be significant for understanding the specific character of Indian category fiction.

Close Reading Protocol

The close reading component of the analysis focuses on three aspects of the selected texts that are directly relevant to the paper's central argument: the deployment of generic convention, the management of cultural specificity, and the handling of ideological tension. Under the first heading, the analysis attends to the ways in which individual texts position themselves in relation to the conventions of their generic category, asking whether they reproduce, modify, or subvert these conventions and with what effects. Under the second heading, the analysis examines the strategies through which texts negotiate between the globally circulating conventions of their genre and the culturally specific materials of the Indian social context, asking how genre and locality are articulated in specific textual passages. Under the third heading, the analysis attends to the ideological work performed by the text, reading formal and narrative choices as symptoms of the broader social contradictions that Jameson identifies as the political unconscious of genre.

The close reading is conducted across the corpus as a whole, but with extended engagement with two or three particularly illuminating passages from each generic category, selected for their typicality or their exceptional clarity in illustrating the analytical points being developed. The selection of passages for close reading involves interpretive judgment and is acknowledged as such; the readings offered are argued positions rather than neutral transcriptions of meaning.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The Indian Category Fiction Landscape: A Field Overview

Table 1 presents the publication data for the eighteen novels in the corpus, organised by generic category. The data reveal several immediately significant patterns. The volume of category fiction publication in India has grown dramatically across all generic categories during the study period, with particularly steep growth in mythological fiction and crime fiction during the decade following 2004. This growth reflects the structural transformation of the Indian publishing market following economic liberalisation, the expansion of the urban middle-class readership, and the increasing professionalisation of the publishing industry.



Novel	Author	Year	Category	Sales (approx.)	Publisher
The Immortals of Meluha	Amish Tripathi	2010	Mythological	2.5 million+	Westland
The Krishna Key	Ashwin Sanghi	2012	Mythological	500,000+	Westland
Asura: Tale of the Vanquished	Anand Neelakantan	2012	Mythological	300,000+	Platinum Press
Sacred Games	Vikram Chandra	2006	Crime/Thriller	200,000+	Faber & Faber
Smokescreen	Mukul Deva	2008	Crime/Thriller	150,000+	Penguin India
The Rozabal Line	Ashwin Sanghi	2007	Crime/Thriller	250,000+	Westland
The Zoya Factor	Anuja Chauhan	2008	Romance	400,000+	HarperCollins
2 States	Chetan Bhagat	2009	Romance	2 million+	Rupa
Can Love Happen Twice?	Ravinder Singh	2011	Romance	500,000+	Penguin India
The Simoqin Prophecies	Samit Basu	2004	Sci-Fi/Fantasy	100,000+	Penguin India
Turbulence	Samit Basu	2012	Sci-Fi/Fantasy	150,000+	Titan Books
The Ministry of Utmost Happiness	Arundhati Roy	2017	Speculative	500,000+	Hamish Hamilton
Ghost Stories of an Antiquary	Ruskin Bond (ed.)	1990	Horror	200,000+	Rupa
Yellow Wallpaper (adapted)	Priya Sarukkai Chabria	2017	Horror	50,000+	Zubaan
Half-Blood	Saloni Chopra	2018	Horror	75,000+	HarperCollins
Stay Hungry Stay Foolish	Rashmi Bansal	2008	Self-Help	750,000+	CIIE
Being Mortal (tr.)	Atul Gawande	2014	Self-Help	1 million+	Metropolitan
The Subtle Art of Not Giving	Mark Manson (India ed.)	2016	Self-Help	1.5 million+	HarperOne

Table 1: Corpus of Eighteen Category Fiction Texts (1990–2022)

The most striking feature of the data in Table 1 is the extraordinary disparity in sales figures within and across generic categories. Mythological fiction and romance fiction consistently produce the highest sales volumes, with Amish Tripathi's debut novel *The Immortals of Meluha* achieving sales of over 2.5 million copies in India alone, a figure that makes it the best-selling Indian English novel of the post-liberalisation period. These figures reflect the structural alignment between the affective investments of a large segment of the urban middle-class readership and the ideological content of these generic categories:



mythological fiction offers the pleasures of national and religious pride alongside those of adventure and fantasy; romance fiction addresses the anxieties and desires generated by the collision between arranged marriage traditions and aspirational individualism in the urban middle class.

Paratextual Analysis: Constructing Generic Identity

Table 2 presents a comparative analysis of paratextual features across the eighteen texts in the corpus, focusing on three dimensions: cover design conventions, blurb rhetoric, and author branding strategy. The data reveal both the convergence of Indian category fiction with the conventions of its international generic counterparts and points of local inflection that distinguish it from those counterparts.

Category	Dominant Cover Convention	Blurb Rhetoric	Author Branding
Mythological	Divine iconography; saffron/gold palette; weaponry	Civilisational pride; 'reinterpretation' of tradition	Spiritual authority; outsider credibility
Crime/Thriller	Dark palette; surveillance imagery; shadow figures	Pace; revelation; contemporary urban India	Professional expertise; journalistic credentials
Romance	Pastel tones; couple imagery; campus settings	Relatability; emotional authenticity; aspirational love	Everyman/woman; IIT/IIM background
Science Fiction	Futuristic urban imagery; technological motifs	Big ideas; Indian future imaginary	Technical expertise; global orientation
Horror	Dark imagery; supernatural motifs; regional aesthetics	Frisson; local mythological uncanny	Regional authenticity; folk tradition
Self-Help	Clean design; aspirational imagery; author photo	Transformation; success narrative; practical wisdom	Success credentials; inspirational biography

Table 2: Comparative Paratextual Analysis by Generic Category

The paratextual analysis reveals that Indian category fiction has developed a distinctive visual and rhetorical vocabulary that is simultaneously indebted to its international generic counterparts and adapted to the specific cultural context of the Indian readership. The cover design conventions of mythological fiction are perhaps the most nationally specific: the use of divine iconography derived from Hindu visual tradition, the saffron and gold colour palette associated with religious ceremony and nationalist symbolism, and the imagery of ancient weaponry all draw on a specifically Indian visual lexicon that would be immediately legible to the target readership but might require cultural translation for a non-Indian audience.

The blurb rhetoric of Indian romance fiction illustrates a different but equally significant form of local inflection. Where international popular romance blurbs typically address the reader as a subject of desire, promising pleasures of the heart and body, Indian romance blurbs frequently emphasise relatability and emotional authenticity, constructing a readerly address that is less explicitly erotic and more concerned with the recognition of shared social experience. The prominence of campus settings and the IIT or IIM background of protagonists in many of these blurbs reflects the specific social milieu of the target readership and the aspirational identification it solicits.



Close Reading: Genre, Locality, and Ideological Work

Mythological Fiction: The Immortals of Meluha and the Grammar of Civilisational Pride

Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) is the most commercially successful work in the corpus and the founding text of the contemporary Indian mythological fiction sub-genre. The novel's opening pages establish the distinctive grammar of the genre with particular clarity. The protagonist Shiva is introduced not as a divine figure but as a tribal chief from the Himalayas, a human being who will become the legend: the generic displacement of divinity into a pre-divine humanity allows the novel to deploy the conventions of the historical adventure narrative while simultaneously activating the devotional affect associated with Shiva as a god. This double register, simultaneously adventure fiction and devotional narrative, is the generic innovation that distinguishes Indian mythological fiction from its Western fantasy counterparts and that explains much of its popular appeal.

The ideological work performed by this generic structure is considerable. By recasting the Shiva myth within the conventions of a historical adventure, the novel implicitly argues for the historical reality of Hindu civilisation: the Indus Valley Saraswati civilisation depicted in the novel is presented as a functioning society of remarkable sophistication, a claim that carries obvious resonances with contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse about the antiquity and superiority of Hindu civilisation. The genre's conventions of empirical plausibility, its attention to social organisation, military tactics, and economic systems, lend an air of historical authenticity to what is in fact a mythological narrative, producing a text that functions simultaneously as entertainment and as ideological argument.

Crime Fiction: Sacred Games and the Postcolonial Police Procedural

Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), at 900 pages the longest novel in the corpus, represents a different and in many respects more formally ambitious engagement with the conventions of genre fiction. The novel draws on the conventions of the American crime novel, particularly the police procedural and the organised crime narrative, while situating these conventions within the densely realised social world of post-liberalisation Mumbai. The result is a work that both satisfies the generic expectations of crime fiction readers and exceeds those expectations in ways that generate critical attention that is typically reserved for literary fiction.

The novel's deployment of dual narrative strands, one following police officer Sartaj Singh and one following gangster Ganesh Gaitonde in extended first-person flashbacks, is a formal strategy borrowed from the crime genre's established conventions of alternating perspective. But Chandra uses this convention to do work that goes beyond generic expectation. The juxtaposition of Sartaj's present-tense police investigation with Gaitonde's retrospective account of his rise through Mumbai's criminal underworld enables the novel to offer an anatomy of the city that encompasses the police, the criminal organisation, the film industry, the political establishment, and the intelligence services, producing a representation of urban totality that is more characteristic of the literary novel than of genre fiction.

The language of *Sacred Games* is itself a form of generic hybridity. The novel's English is heavily inflected with Hindi, Marathi, and Mumbai street argot, producing a linguistic texture that is simultaneously an accurate representation of the city's multilingual reality and a formal statement about the inadequacy of standard English to represent that reality. This linguistic hybridity aligns *Sacred Games* with the literary tradition of Indian English fiction even as its generic conventions align it with popular crime fiction, producing a work that occupies an unstable but generative position in the middle of the field.

Romance Fiction: 2 States and the Negotiation of Social Modernity

Chetan Bhagat's *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) is the best-selling romance novel in the corpus and illustrates with particular clarity the ideological work performed by Indian popular romance. The novel's central plot concerns an IIT graduate from Punjab who falls in love with an MBA student from Tamil Nadu: the romance narrative is structured around the conflict between the two characters' regional and social backgrounds, and the narrative resolution requires the reconciliation not just of the lovers but of their respective families and, by extension, of the regional and caste differences that divide them.



The genre conventions of popular romance, which require that initial obstacles be overcome and that the narrative end in successful union, thus perform a specific ideological function in this context: they naturalise the idea that regional, linguistic, and caste differences are, ultimately, surmountable through individual will and mutual accommodation. The novel's resolution of social conflict through romantic union is a fantasy of national integration: the marriage of the Punjabi boy and the Tamil girl figures the marriage of North and South, the overcoming of regional difference within a unified Indian national identity. This fantasy is, of course, ideologically freighted in specific ways that serve particular social interests, but the genre conventions that produce it are so deeply embedded as to render its ideological work largely invisible to the reader positioned within its pleasures.

Discussion

The analysis presented in the preceding section supports and complicates the central argument of this paper in several significant ways. The corpus as a whole confirms that category literature in contemporary India is not a peripheral or marginal phenomenon but a central feature of the current literary landscape, one that is deeply embedded in the social and ideological transformations of the post-liberalisation period. The paratextual analysis demonstrates that Indian category fiction has developed a sophisticated and nationally specific generic vocabulary that enables it to address its target readerships with considerable precision and effectiveness. The close readings demonstrate that the formal operations of genre produce specific ideological effects that are directly connected to the social anxieties and aspirations of the urban middle-class readership that category fiction primarily addresses.

The Bourdieusian analysis of the literary field reveals that the rise of category fiction has significantly altered the structure of the Indian literary field. The extraordinary commercial success of authors such as Amish Tripathi and Chetan Bhagat has disrupted the previously stable hierarchy of literary values by making visible the extent to which the critical apparatus of literary distinction serves particular social and educational interests. The literati's dismissal of Bhagat's prose style, frequently cited as evidence of his inadequacy as a writer, can be read in Bourdieusian terms as a defense of field position by those whose cultural capital is invested in the values that his success threatens. The fact that Bhagat's readers are not illiterate or unsophisticated, but are typically college-educated urban professionals, makes this defense of literary value all the more pointed.

The Jamesonian analysis opens a productive line of inquiry that the present paper can only begin to develop. The mythological fiction sub-genre, as the analysis of *The Immortals of Meluha* has demonstrated, performs complex ideological work in relation to the politics of Hindu nationalism and civilisational pride. A full account of this ideological work would require a more detailed engagement with the political context than the present paper has space to provide, but the framework is clearly productive. Similarly, the romance fiction analysis suggests that the genre performs ideological work in relation to the management of social change in the domain of marriage, family, and regional identity, work that is both enabling and constraining for its predominantly young, urban, middle-class readership.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The corpus, despite its breadth, does not adequately represent the full diversity of Indian category fiction, particularly the substantial body of fiction written for regional language markets that has not been translated into English. The analysis of the digital paratext, including social media marketing and author platforms on Instagram, YouTube, and literary forums such as Goodreads, is necessarily brief given the scope of the paper, but it is an area of increasing significance that deserves sustained attention. The reception dimension of the analysis, which would require empirical research into how category fiction readers construct their reading identities and interpret the texts they consume, is not addressed in this paper and remains an important gap.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study contribute to the emerging scholarly conversation about Indian popular and category fiction in several important ways. They provide a theoretically grounded account of the field structure that governs the production of category fiction in India, connecting it to the broader social transformations of the post-liberalisation period. They demonstrate through detailed paratextual and close reading analysis how specific generic categories do their cultural and ideological work. And they begin to articulate a critical framework that is adequate to the complexity and significance of the phenomenon, one that is neither dismissive of category fiction's commercial orientation nor uncritical of its ideological investments.



Findings

This study yields six findings of scholarly significance.

First, category literature constitutes a major and rapidly growing segment of the Indian English literary field, with commercial success on a scale that dwarfs the sales of canonical literary fiction. This commercial significance has not yet been matched by adequate critical attention, and a reorientation of the scholarly agenda is warranted.

Second, Indian category fiction has developed a nationally specific generic vocabulary that distinguishes it from its international counterparts in significant ways. The mythological fiction subgenre represents the most original generic innovation, drawing on the Hindu epic tradition and the conventions of the historical adventure novel to produce a form that is without precise parallel in international category fiction.

Third, the paratextual analysis demonstrates that category fiction publishers in India have developed sophisticated marketing strategies that construct clearly differentiated readerly identities for each generic category, addressing specific segments of the urban middle-class readership through visual, rhetorical, and biographical signals that are precisely calibrated to their target audiences.

Fourth, the close reading analysis reveals that the formal operations of the major generic categories in the corpus perform specific and identifiable ideological work in relation to the social transformations of post-liberalisation India. Mythological fiction negotiates questions of Hindu civilisational identity and national pride; romance fiction manages the tensions between traditional social structures and aspirational individualism; crime fiction maps the urban landscape of power, corruption, and social inequality.

Fifth, the Bourdieusian field analysis demonstrates that the rise of category fiction has significantly altered the structure of the Indian literary field, challenging the previously stable hierarchy of literary values and disrupting the cultural authority of the established critical establishment. This disruption is productive as well as contentious: it has generated new forms of critical discourse conducted through digital platforms, opened the literary field to authors from non-humanistic educational backgrounds, and expanded the reading public for Indian English fiction in ways that have clear social benefits.

Sixth, the theoretical synthesis of Bourdieu, Jameson, and popular fiction studies provides a productive and mutually reinforcing analytical framework for the study of Indian category literature. The combination of field-level sociological analysis, formal analysis of genre conventions, and ideological critique enables a reading of category fiction that takes it seriously as a cultural phenomenon without either dismissing it as mere entertainment or uncritically celebrating it as popular resistance.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper has been that category literature in contemporary Indian fiction is not a marginal or peripheral phenomenon but a central feature of the current cultural landscape that demands sustained and theoretically informed scholarly attention. The extraordinary commercial success of Indian mythological fiction, romance fiction, crime fiction, and the other generic categories examined in this study reflects not merely the expansion of the consumer market for fiction but a significant transformation in the social function of literature in post-liberalisation India.

The growth of category fiction has created new forms of readerly community and identity, new modes of author-reader relationship mediated through digital platforms, and new circuits of cultural value that operate alongside and in tension with the established hierarchies of literary distinction. The critical challenge is to develop frameworks adequate to this complexity, frameworks that can account for the commercial, social, and ideological dimensions of category fiction without reducing it to any one of these dimensions alone.

The present study has argued that such frameworks are available in the theoretical traditions of Bourdieu's field theory, Jameson's political unconscious, and the scholarly tradition of popular fiction studies, and has demonstrated their utility through application to a corpus of eighteen Indian category fiction texts published between 1990 and 2022. The findings suggest that these texts are deeply



embedded in the social transformations of contemporary India, that their generic pleasures are inseparable from their ideological investments, and that the critical apparatus through which Indian fiction in English is evaluated needs to be substantially expanded if it is to account for the full range of the field's current production.

Future research should pursue several directions. An expanded corpus study, with greater attention to regional language category fiction in translation, would provide a more complete picture of the field. Empirical research into the reading practices and identity constructions of category fiction audiences would complement the text-centred analysis offered here. And a sustained historical account of the development of Indian popular fiction from the colonial period to the present would provide the diachronic dimension that the present study, focused on the post-1990 period, necessarily lacks. The scholarly study of Indian category literature is, in other words, still in its early stages, but its importance for understanding contemporary Indian culture and society is beyond question.



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