

Cultural Capital, Readability, and Popular Fiction: Reassessing Chetan Bhagat's Contribution to Indian English Literature

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Abstract

The emergence of popular fiction has significantly transformed the landscape of Indian English literature during the twenty-first century. Among contemporary Indian writers, Chetan Bhagat occupies a unique position as an author whose works have reached millions of readers across diverse social and educational backgrounds. Despite his immense commercial success, Bhagat's literary contribution remains a subject of debate, with critics often questioning the artistic merit of his accessible language and market-oriented narratives. This article reassesses Bhagat's contribution to Indian English literature through the interconnected concepts of cultural capital, readability, and popular fiction. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the study examines how literary value is often shaped by institutional recognition and cultural hierarchies rather than readership alone. The article argues that Bhagat has played a significant role in expanding the readership of Indian English fiction by making literature accessible to first-generation English readers and emerging middle-class audiences. Through an analysis of selected novels, including *Five Point Someone*, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, *2 States*, and *Revolution 2020*, the study explores themes such as educational pressure, social mobility, middle-class aspirations, family expectations, and youth culture. The article further evaluates Bhagat's narrative techniques and readability as forms of literary democratization that challenge conventional distinctions between popular and canonical literature. By reassessing his position within contemporary Indian literary culture, the paper contends that Bhagat's significance extends beyond commercial success and lies in his ability to reshape reading practices, broaden literary participation, and reflect the social realities of post-liberalization India.

Keywords: Cultural Capital, Readability, Popular Fiction, Chetan Bhagat, Indian English Literature, Literary Consumption, Middle-Class Culture, Democratization of Reading.

1. Introduction

The history of Indian English literature has traditionally been associated with writers whose works explored questions of colonialism, nationalism, migration, identity, and cultural memory. Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Arundhati Roy contributed significantly to the international recognition of Indian English fiction through

the narratives characterized by stylistic innovation and thematic complexity. While these writers shaped the academic and critical understanding of Indian literature in English, their readership often remained concentrated within educated and culturally privileged communities (*Anjaria 112*). The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed significant social and economic transformations in India. Economic liberalization, rapid urbanization, expanding higher education, and the rise of a consumer-oriented middle class created new reading communities whose experiences differed from those represented in earlier literary traditions. These readers sought

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stories that reflected their educational struggles, career ambitions, family expectations, and changing social values. Within this context, Chetan Bhagat emerged as one of the most widely read authors in contemporary India. Since the publication of *Five Point Someone (2004)*, he has gained prominence for portraying themes such as academic competition, employment, entrepreneurship, romance, social mobility, and generational conflict. His direct and conversational style has attracted readers who may not previously have engaged with English-language fiction. Bhagat's popularity has generated diverse critical responses. Supporters view him as a writer who has democratized reading by making English-language fiction accessible to a broader segment of Indian society. Critics, however, often dismiss his novels as commercially oriented works lacking stylistic sophistication and literary complexity. This debate raises important questions about literary value, readership, and cultural legitimacy. Can a writer who influences millions of readers be excluded from serious academic discussion because of accessibility? Should literary significance be determined solely by critical acclaim and institutional recognition? These questions can be examined through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which suggests that literary prestige is shaped by institutions, cultural authority, and critical discourse rather than by textual qualities alone (*Bourdieu 56*). Consequently, works that appeal to mass audiences may occupy marginal positions within academic literary studies despite their considerable social influence.

Readability is equally important in understanding Bhagat's success. In a multilingual society where English functions as a language of education and social mobility, accessibility becomes a significant cultural factor. Bhagat's use of simple language, conversational dialogue, and relatable settings enables wider participation in English-language literary culture and challenges assumptions that literary merit must be associated with complexity. Recent scholarship has begun to reassess Bhagat's cultural significance. Ragini Tharoor

Srinivasan argues that his language reflects an emerging form of Indian English shaped by everyday speech patterns, while Kharat and Kachhwaha observe that his apparent simplicity often conceals deeper engagements with social realities and middle-class aspirations. These perspectives suggest that Bhagat's popularity should be viewed not merely as a commercial phenomenon but as an indicator of changing literary consumption patterns in contemporary India. Although current study has investigated Chetan Bhagat's popularity, accessibility, and commercial appeal, relatively little attention has been made to these aspects through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production. This study addresses that gap by examining how Bhagat's fiction unsettles established distinctions between literary and popular forms of writing within the field of Indian English literature. Drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, symbolic capital, literary field, and readership formation, the paper investigates the processes through which literary value is negotiated, legitimized, and disseminated. It argues that Bhagat's widespread readership signals a significant shift in the cultural dynamics of contemporary India, where market forces, changing reading practices, and expanding access to English-language fiction increasingly influence the production and circulation of literary value. Through this perspective, the study contributes to broader debates on canon formation, literary legitimacy, and the relationship between popular culture and literary institutions.

2. Literature Review

The growing popularity of Chetan Bhagat has generated significant scholarly debate within Indian English literary studies. While many critics acknowledge his contribution to expanding readership, opinions remain divided regarding his literary value and position within contemporary Indian English literature. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on three areas Bhagat's representation of middle-class India, the rise of popular fiction, and the relationship between readership and literary legitimacy. Critical discussions of Bhagat's fiction

have frequently focused on its representation of contemporary Indian society. Kharat and Kachhwaha argue that his fiction captures the aspirations, anxieties, and social realities of India's emerging middle class. Through themes such as education, employment, social mobility, and family relationships, Bhagat addresses concerns that resonate strongly with young readers. Similarly, Kumar contends that Bhagat's novels function as social narratives reflecting the transformations associated with economic liberalization and globalization. His characters often negotiate tensions between traditional values and modern aspirations, making his fiction relevant to contemporary readers. A related strand of scholarship has examined the accessibility of Bhagat's language and narrative style. Critics have observed that his use of simple vocabulary, conversational dialogue, and fast-paced storytelling distinguishes him from many canonical Indian English writers. Srinivasan argues that Bhagat's prose reflects everyday forms of Indian English and contributes to the expansion of English-language readership in India. His accessible style enables readers from diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds to engage with English fiction, thereby broadening literary participation. Such observations suggest that readability plays a significant role in his popularity and cultural influence.

Another important strand of scholarship examines the relationship between contemporary Indian literature and popular culture. Ulka Anjaria argues that contemporary Indian writing should be understood within the broader social and cultural transformations of post-liberalization India, where literature increasingly interacts with mass media, consumer culture, and changing reading practices (*Anjaria 15*). Her study highlights the importance of examining how literary texts reach diverse audiences and participate in the formation of new reading communities. This perspective is particularly relevant to Chetan Bhagat's fiction, whose popularity reflects the growing influence of market forces and expanding middle-class readerships in contemporary India. Scholars working on popular fiction have further emphasized the importance of

readership in determining literary significance. Ken Gelder argues that popular fiction should be understood not merely through aesthetic criteria but also through its cultural circulation and social impact (*Gelder 11*). Similarly, John Fiske contends that popular culture derives meaning from audience participation and everyday consumption practices. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Bhagat's fiction, which has attracted a large readership despite receiving mixed critical reception. The popularity of his novels demonstrates the importance of examining how readers engage with literary texts rather than relying solely on traditional measures of literary value.

The question of literary legitimacy has been explored through studies of canon formation and cultural authority. John Guillory argues that literary canons are shaped by institutional processes rather than purely aesthetic judgments (*Guillory 3*). Educational institutions, publishers, critics, and cultural organizations play a crucial role in determining which texts receive recognition and academic attention. This perspective helps explain why commercially successful writers such as Bhagat often occupy an uncertain position within literary studies despite their widespread popularity. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production provides an important framework for understanding these debates. Bourdieu argues that literary value emerges through struggles for recognition within a cultural field where different forms of capital operate simultaneously (*Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production 37*). Cultural capital, symbolic capital, and institutional authority influence how literary works are received and evaluated. Several scholars have applied Bourdieu's framework to examine questions of readership, literary prestige, and cultural hierarchy. His work remains particularly useful for analyzing the tension between commercial success and critical recognition that characterizes Bhagat's position within Indian English literature. Although existing scholarship has examined Bhagat's popularity, readability, and representation of middle-class life, limited attention has been paid to these issues through a comprehensive Bourdieusian

framework. Most studies focus either on thematic concerns or on questions of literary merit without fully exploring the relationship between cultural capital, readership formation, and literary legitimacy. This study seeks to address that gap by examining Bhagat's fiction through Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, symbolic capital, habitus, and the field of cultural production. In doing so, it offers a more integrated understanding of Bhagat's contribution to contemporary Indian English literature and the broader transformation of literary culture in post-liberalization India.

3. Theoretical Framework: Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Production

This study is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, which examines how literary value is created, recognized, and circulated within society. Bourdieu argues that literature operates within a social field where writers, publishers, critics, institutions, and readers compete for different forms of recognition and influence (*Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production* 29). Literary value, therefore, is shaped not only by aesthetic qualities but also by cultural and institutional forces. Central to Bourdieu's framework is the concept of cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge, educational qualifications, and cultural competencies that influence an individual's participation in cultural life (*Bourdieu, Distinction* 66). In literary studies, cultural capital often determines which texts gain academic legitimacy and which remain outside the literary canon. Canonical writers generally possess higher cultural capital because their works are endorsed by universities, critics, and literary institutions. Related to cultural capital is the notion of symbolic capital, which refers to prestige, reputation, and cultural authority. Within Indian English literature, writers such as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have accumulated substantial symbolic capital through critical acclaim and academic recognition. In contrast, Chetan Bhagat enjoys enormous commercial success and mass readership but has received comparatively limited acceptance within traditional literary

institutions. This tension between popularity and legitimacy forms a central concern of the present study. Bourdieu's concept of the literary field further explains how literary value is negotiated. The literary field is a dynamic space in which different actors compete to define what counts as legitimate literature (*Bourdieu, The Rules of Art* 216). Bhagat's fiction challenges established literary hierarchies by attracting large numbers of readers who may not traditionally engage with Indian English literary texts. The study also draws upon Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which refers to socially shaped dispositions and preferences. The popularity of Bhagat's novels among middle-class readers may be understood as reflecting the social and cultural transformations associated with post-liberalization India. By applying Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, symbolic capital, literary field, and habitus, this study examines the position of Chetan Bhagat within contemporary Indian English literature. The framework enables an analysis of how literary value is constructed and contested through the interaction of readership, institutions, and market forces. It further illuminates the tensions between commercial success and critical legitimacy, thereby providing a useful lens through which to understand Bhagat's contribution to the evolving landscape of Indian English fiction.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production. The chosen novels, *Five Point Someone* (2004), *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), and *Half Girlfriend* (2014), were selected for their representation of distinct phases in Chetan Bhagat's literary career and their collective exploration of themes such as education, social mobility, entrepreneurship, cultural identity, and linguistic accessibility. The analysis examines how Bhagat's fiction negotiates questions of literary legitimacy, readership, and cultural value. Particular attention is given to Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, field, habitus, symbolic

capital, and cultural production. Through close reading of selected passages and narrative strategies, the study investigates how Bhagat's novels challenge established literary hierarchies and expand participation in Indian English literary culture.

5. Cultural Capital, Literary Legitimacy, and Popular Fiction

The debate surrounding Chetan Bhagat's place in Indian English literature highlights the relationship between cultural capital and literary legitimacy. Although he is one of the most widely read contemporary Indian authors, his work is often excluded from discussions of "serious" literature. This contrast raises questions about how literary value is defined and who has the authority to determine it. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a useful framework for understanding this issue. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that cultural preferences are shaped by social structures and power relations rather than individual taste alone (*Bourdieu 56*). Literary prestige is therefore influenced not only by the qualities of a text but also by institutions such as universities, critics, publishers, and literary awards. This distinction is evident in the divide between canonical literature and popular fiction. Canonical writers often receive academic recognition, while popular authors are judged largely by readership and market success. In Indian English literature, writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy have been celebrated for literary innovation, whereas popular writers have frequently been viewed with skepticism (*Anjaria 112*). Bhagat occupies a unique position within this hierarchy. His novels have sold millions of copies, been translated into several languages, and inspired successful film adaptations. Despite this influence, his work receives limited scholarly attention. This suggests that literary value is often shaped by institutional recognition rather than readership alone. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu explains that literature exists within a competitive field where authors, critics, publishers, and institutions compete for symbolic power

(*Bourdieu 87*). Within this system, commercial success is sometimes viewed as incompatible with artistic value. As a result, writers who appeal to mass audiences may struggle to gain literary legitimacy. The reception of Bhagat's fiction reflects this phenomenon. Critics often argue that his language is simple and his narratives prioritize entertainment over artistic experimentation. However, such criticism may overlook the cultural significance of accessibility. By reaching readers who might not engage with more academically celebrated works, Bhagat challenges traditional assumptions about literary value and readership.

John Guillory's theory of canon formation further supports this perspective. Guillory argues that literary canons are shaped by educational institutions and cultural transmission rather than objective standards of excellence alone (*Guillory 42*). The limited presence of popular fiction in academic curricula may therefore reflect institutional preferences rather than inherent weaknesses in the texts. Ken Gelder similarly argues that popular fiction should be understood through its relationship with readers and cultural communities (*Gelder 18*). Popular texts reveal the concerns and aspirations of particular social groups and contribute to cultural identity and public discourse. Viewed from this perspective, Bhagat's novels provide valuable insights into contemporary Indian society. His works address educational pressure, unemployment, entrepreneurship, social mobility, and middle-class aspirations. Their popularity suggests that they resonate with the lived experiences of many readers. Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan argues that his writing reflects evolving forms of Indian English shaped by everyday speech and communication practices. Likewise, Kharat and Kachhwaha contend that the simplicity of his language should not be mistaken for intellectual superficiality, as his novels engage with issues such as educational inequality and youth aspirations. The debate surrounding Bhagat ultimately raises broader questions about the purpose of literature. If literature serves as a medium for communication and social reflection, then popularity itself becomes an important indicator of

cultural influence. While critical evaluation remains necessary, it should not overshadow literature's role in everyday life. Rather than treating popular and literary fiction as opposing categories, it is more productive to view them as overlapping forms of cultural expression. Bhagat's significance lies not only in his commercial success but also in his ability to expand the reach of English-language literature. Through the lens of cultural capital, he emerges as an important cultural figure whose work reflects the changing relationship between literature, readership, and social change in contemporary India.

6. Readability and the Democratization of Indian English Literature

The accessibility of Chetan Bhagat's fiction occupies a significant place in contemporary debates on literary value and readership. While critics often associate literary prestige with stylistic complexity, Bhagat's popularity challenges the assumption that accessibility and literary significance are mutually exclusive. Through simple language, conversational dialogue, and contemporary settings, his novels expand participation in English-language literary culture and attract readers who have traditionally remained outside elite literary circles. This phenomenon can be examined through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, literary fields frequently privilege forms of expression that require specialized linguistic and cultural competencies, thereby reinforcing social distinctions (*Bourdieu 70*). Within Indian English literature, canonical texts are often associated with readers possessing higher levels of educational and cultural capital. Bhagat's fiction disrupts this pattern by reducing the barriers to literary participation and making English-language reading more accessible to first-generation and non-metropolitan readers. This accessibility is evident in Bhagat's representation of language and social mobility. In *Half Girlfriend*, Madhav observes that "English is not a language in India. It is a class" (*Bhagat, Half Girlfriend 88*).

The statement highlights how linguistic competence functions as cultural capital within Indian society. Rather than treating English merely as a medium of communication, Bhagat exposes its role in shaping educational and social opportunities. The passage illustrates how accessible language can simultaneously address broader questions of class and social inequality.

The emergence of Bhagat's fiction must be situated within the broader socio-economic transformations of post-liberalization India, particularly the expansion of higher education and the rise of a new middle-class readership. Rather than addressing an established literary elite, his novels engage readers whose educational experiences and social aspirations reflect contemporary urban and semi-urban India. In this sense, readability functions not merely as a stylistic choice but as a cultural strategy that broadens access to literary consumption. Scholars have similarly noted the social significance of Bhagat's language. Kharat and Kachhwaha argue that his accessible prose enables engagement with issues such as educational pressure, social mobility, and identity formation without alienating readers. Srinivasan further observes that Bhagat's use of everyday Indian English reflects linguistic practices familiar to a broad readership, thereby strengthening reader identification and participation. From a Bourdieusian perspective, Bhagat's popularity may be interpreted as evidence of changing patterns of cultural consumption. His novels have helped create new reading communities by legitimizing forms of literary engagement often overlooked by traditional literary institutions. The widespread reception of works such as *Five Point Someone*, *2 States*, and *Half Girlfriend* suggests that accessibility can function as a means of expanding readership rather than diminishing literary relevance. Consequently, readability should be understood as more than a stylistic characteristic. It represents a challenge to established literary hierarchies and highlights the evolving relationship between cultural capital, readership, and literary value in contemporary India.

7. Educational Pressure, Social Mobility, and Middle-Class Aspirations

A recurring concern in Bhagat's fiction is the relationship between education, social mobility, and middle-class aspirations in post-liberalization India. Rather than treating education as a purely academic pursuit, his novels portray it as a form of cultural capital that shapes access to economic opportunities and social recognition. Bourdieu argues that educational institutions play a crucial role in legitimizing and distributing cultural capital (*Bourdieu 66*). Bhagat's fiction reveals how this process influences the aspirations and anxieties of young Indians navigating increasingly competitive social environments. In *Five Point Someone*, the IIT functions as an institutional field in which academic performance becomes a primary measure of value and success. The experiences of Hari, Ryan, and Alok expose the pressures associated with acquiring institutionalized cultural capital and demonstrate how educational achievement is linked to future social mobility. Bhagat directly critiques the educational system through Ryan's observation that "The system wanted a grade, not knowledge" (*Bhagat, Five Point Someone 102*). The statement questions educational structures that privilege measurable achievement over intellectual development. Through a Bourdieusian lens, grades become institutionalized forms of cultural capital that determine access to future opportunities and social recognition. Rather than celebrating meritocratic ideals, the novel questions systems that prioritize measurable performance over creativity and individual development.

A similar concern emerges in *Revolution 2020*, where access to education is intertwined with economic and political power. The novel suggests that social advancement is not determined solely by talent or effort but is often shaped by unequal distributions of resources and opportunities. This critique is reinforced when the narrative suggests that success is often shaped by unequal access to resources and opportunities (*Bhagat, Revolution 2020 54*). The novel

therefore challenges meritocratic assumptions and reveals how economic and social capital influence educational outcomes. Through this perspective, Bhagat highlights the limitations of meritocratic narratives and exposes the structural inequalities that influence educational and professional success. Bhagat's representation of entrepreneurship further reflects changing aspirations within India's middle class. In *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, entrepreneurial ambition functions as an alternative pathway to economic and social mobility. However, the novel complicates simplistic narratives of success by demonstrating how individual aspirations remain dependent upon broader social, political, and economic conditions (*Bhagat, The 3 Mistakes of My Life 91*). Success therefore emerges not as an individual achievement alone but as a product of larger social structures.

Family expectations constitute another significant dimension of Bhagat's exploration of middle-class life. In *2 States*, conflicts surrounding marriage and cultural identity reveal the continuing influence of habitus in shaping personal choices (*Bhagat, 2 States 76*). Through Bourdieu's framework, such tensions may be understood as manifestations of deeply embedded cultural dispositions that regulate social behaviour even within modern and educated communities. The novel demonstrates that social mobility does not necessarily eliminate traditional forms of cultural authority. Collectively, these narratives reflect the aspirations, uncertainties, and contradictions of a generation shaped by globalization and economic transformation. Bhagat's fiction derives its cultural significance not merely from its popularity but from its ability to represent the experiences of readers negotiating educational pressure, professional ambition, and changing social identities. His novels therefore function as cultural texts that illuminate the relationship between aspiration and social structure in contemporary India.

8. Narrative Strategies and Reader Engagement

The widespread appeal of Bhagat's fiction can also be understood through its narrative strategies, which facilitate reader engagement and expand participation in literary culture. Rather than evaluating these techniques solely in aesthetic terms, they may be examined as mechanisms through which literature reaches and sustains diverse reading communities. One of the most significant features of Bhagat's fiction is its reliance on conversational language and dialogue-driven narration. The effectiveness of this technique is evident in *Five Point Someone*, where everyday conversations establish emotional connections between readers and characters. For instance, the statement "Friends are the family we choose for ourselves" (*Bhagat, Five Point Someone 67*) reflects the informal and relatable language that characterizes Bhagat's fiction. Such dialogue encourages reader identification and contributes to the accessibility of his narratives. This stylistic approach reduces the distance between text and reader, creating a sense of familiarity that encourages identification with characters and situations. As Srinivasan observes, Bhagat's language reflects contemporary patterns of Indian English usage, enabling readers to locate their own experiences within the narrative world. From a Bourdieusian perspective, such accessibility broadens participation in literary consumption by lowering the cultural barriers often associated with English-language fiction. Equally important is the pacing of Bhagat's narratives. Short chapters, rapid plot progression, and episodic structures reflect contemporary modes of reading shaped by digital media and popular culture. These features may be interpreted as adaptive responses to changing patterns of cultural consumption rather than simply commercial devices. Bhagat's fiction demonstrates how literary production increasingly interacts with media environments characterized by speed, accessibility, and continuous engagement.

The effectiveness of Bhagat's narrative strategies is further evident in the strong reader identification generated by his protagonists. Similarly, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* emphasizes aspiration and perseverance through observations such as "People laugh at dreamers until the dream comes true" (*Bhagat, The 3 Mistakes of My Life 91*). The simplicity of the language enhances its emotional impact and explains its resonance among young readers navigating educational and professional uncertainty. Students, young professionals, entrepreneurs, and middle-class families occupy central positions within his fiction, allowing readers to recognize familiar social realities. Reader engagement therefore emerges not merely from entertainment value but from the representation of experiences that resonate with contemporary social conditions.

The cinematic quality of Bhagat's storytelling also contributes to his cultural influence. The successful adaptation of several novels into popular films suggests that his narratives operate across multiple cultural platforms. This movement between literature and visual media illustrates the changing nature of cultural production in contemporary India, where literary texts increasingly circulate through interconnected forms of media consumption. From the perspective of Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, Bhagat's narrative techniques should be viewed as strategies that facilitate the formation and expansion of readership communities. Their significance lies not simply in readability or entertainment but in their capacity to connect literary texts with broader social groups. Consequently, Bhagat's fiction challenges conventional distinctions between literary value and popular appeal, demonstrating how reader engagement itself can function as an important form of cultural influence.

9. Popular Fiction and Literary Legitimacy

The critical reception of Chetan Bhagat's fiction reflects a broader debate concerning the relationship between popular literature and literary legitimacy. Although Bhagat remains

one of the most widely read authors in contemporary India, his works have often been marginalized within academic literary discourse. This tension highlights the processes through which literary value is constructed and contested within the field of cultural production. Bourdieu argues that literary fields are characterized by ongoing struggles over legitimacy, authority, and recognition (*Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production* 37). Within such fields, symbolic capital is often accumulated through critical acclaim, institutional endorsement, and scholarly attention rather than commercial success alone. Consequently, writers who achieve mass popularity may not necessarily receive recognition from literary institutions. Bhagat's position within Indian English literature illustrates this distinction. While his novels have sold millions of copies and attracted a diverse readership, they have frequently been excluded from discussions of canonical Indian literature. This disparity reveals the complex relationship between commercial and symbolic capital. Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy have accumulated substantial symbolic capital through literary awards, critical recognition, and academic study. Bhagat, by contrast, derives cultural influence primarily from readership and market success. His popularity therefore challenges conventional assumptions that literary value is determined exclusively by institutional validation.

The widespread circulation of memorable and relatable observations contributes significantly to this popularity. In *2 States*, Bhagat writes, "Sometimes life is about risking everything for a dream no one can see but you" (*Bhagat, 2 States* 176). Such passages resonate with readers because they address personal ambition and social aspiration through accessible language. Their popularity demonstrates how literary influence can emerge through reader engagement as well as critical recognition. The debate surrounding Bhagat's work also raises important questions regarding canon formation. Literary canons are not neutral collections of texts but are shaped by cultural institutions, educational systems, and critical practices. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the

exclusion of popular fiction from canonical discussions reflects broader power relations within the literary field. Bhagat's widespread readership suggests that literary significance cannot be measured solely through academic recognition but must also consider cultural reach and social impact. Furthermore, Bhagat's fiction has contributed to the expansion of English-language reading communities in India. Many readers encounter contemporary Indian English fiction through his novels before engaging with other literary works. This role as a gateway author complicates simplistic distinctions between popular and literary fiction. His contribution lies not merely in commercial success but in the creation of new readerships and the democratization of literary participation.

The continuing debate over Bhagat's literary status ultimately reveals changing patterns of cultural consumption in contemporary India. As market forces, digital media, and expanding educational opportunities reshape reading practices, traditional criteria of literary legitimacy are increasingly subject to negotiation. Bhagat's career therefore provides a valuable case study for examining how cultural authority, readership, and literary value are produced within a rapidly transforming literary landscape. Rather than viewing popularity and literary merit as mutually exclusive categories, Bhagat's fiction invites a reconsideration of how literary value is defined. Through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, his work demonstrates that literary legitimacy remains a dynamic and contested process shaped by the interaction of institutions, markets, and readers.

10. Conclusion

This study has examined Chetan Bhagat's position within contemporary Indian English literature through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, symbolic capital, habitus, and the field of cultural production. The analysis demonstrates that Bhagat's significance extends beyond his commercial success and popular appeal. His fiction provides

a valuable lens through which to understand the changing relationship between literature, readership, and cultural authority in post-liberalization India. The study has shown that the accessibility of Bhagat's language and narrative style has contributed to the expansion of English-language reading communities. By reducing linguistic and cultural barriers, his novels have enabled wider participation in literary culture, particularly among first-generation readers, students, and emerging middle-class audiences. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this expansion of readership represents an important shift in the distribution of cultural capital and challenges traditional assumptions regarding literary value and legitimacy. The analysis further revealed that Bhagat's fiction engages with issues central to contemporary Indian society, including educational pressure, social mobility, entrepreneurship, cultural identity, and family expectations. Rather than functioning merely as popular entertainment, these narratives reflect the aspirations, anxieties, and social realities of a generation shaped by globalization, economic liberalization, and rapid social transformation. His representation of middle-class experiences has enabled readers to recognize their own social conditions within literary texts, thereby strengthening the relationship between literature and everyday life. At the same time, Bhagat's position within Indian English literature highlights the continuing tension between commercial popularity and symbolic recognition. While his novels have attracted millions of readers, their reception within academic and critical circles remains contested. This tension illustrates Bourdieu's argument that literary value is produced through complex interactions among institutions, critics, publishers, and readers rather than through textual qualities alone. Bhagat's career therefore provides an important example of how literary legitimacy is negotiated within contemporary cultural fields. The study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that Bhagat's work should be understood not only through debates concerning literary merit but also through questions of readership formation, cultural

participation, and social representation. His fiction occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of popular culture and literary production, revealing how changing patterns of reading are reshaping the landscape of Indian English literature. Future research may further investigate the relationship between popular fiction, digital reading cultures, and emerging forms of literary consumption in India. Such studies would provide deeper insights into the evolving nature of readership and the continuing transformation of literary value in the twenty-first century.

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