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Common Sense, Aspiration, and the Unmarked Nation:

Ideology, Hegemony, and the Construction of Class, Gender,
and National Identity in Chetan Bhagat's Popular Fiction

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Abstract

The present paper undertakes a sustained ideological critique of four novels written by Chetan Bhagat — *Five Point Someone* (2004), *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), and *One Indian Girl* (2016) — with the aim of examining that how their narrative architectures construct class mobility as meritocratic rather than systemic in nature, how they negotiates feminist aspiration within structurally patriarchal resolution frameworks, and how they produces what may be described as a brahminical, secular-Hindu, middle-class subjectivity serving as the unmarked norm of Indian national belonging. The analysis is grounded in three theoretical tiers: firstly, the foundational concepts of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony and Louis Althusser's ideological state apparatuses; secondly, the cultural studies frameworks of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and John Fiske's theory of popular culture; and thirdly, the India-specific scholarship of Leela Fernandes on the post-liberalisation middle class, Partha Chatterjee on political society, Angela McRobbie on post-feminist sensibility, and Homi Bhabha's theorisation of national narration. It is argued in this paper that Bhagat's fiction functions as a primary site of hegemonic articulation in post-liberalisation India, where dominant ideologies of neoliberal meritocracy, contained feminism, and Hindu-coded civic nationalism is rendered natural, consensual, and beyond political question altogether. The paper makes a contribution to the growing scholarship on popular fiction as an ideological apparatus and advances three research questions organised around the intersecting axes of class, gender, and national identity.

Keywords: Chetan Bhagat; hegemony; ideology; popular fiction; meritocracy; post-feminism; nationalism; India; Gramsci; Stuart Hall; neoliberalism; post-liberalisation

1. Introduction

When *Five Point Someone* was first published in the year 2004, it was received — both by its enthusiastic readership and its dismissive critics — as a phenomenon that is without any serious cultural consequence. The argument, as it was often put, was that this was nothing more than entertainment for the new Indian middle class: competently told, socially recognisable, and ideologically innocuous in its overall effect. Almost two decades and several dozen million readers later, however, this dismissal requires an urgent revision of considerable scope. Chetan Bhagat is not merely the most widely-read English-language author in the entire Indian publishing history; he is, in a precise analytical sense, one of

the most culturally powerful literary figures of his generation. His novels do not argue for anything in any direct or explicit manner. They do not advocate a political programme or defend a social philosophy in the conventional sense. Rather, they tell stories that feel like life itself — and it is precisely this quality of naturalness, of unargued self-evidence, that makes them into one of the most consequential sites of ideological production in contemporary India.

The concept of ideology which is deployed in this paper is not the crude Marxist sense of deliberate mystification, but the more sophisticated formulation developed by Antonio Gramsci in his analysis of hegemony: the process by which historically contingent social arrangements — particular distributions of power across class, gender, caste, and region — are rendered natural, consensual, and beyond question through cultural means. A hegemonic cultural form does not compel consent in any overt manner; it manufactures consent through subtler mechanisms. It does not argue that the world is arranged correctly; instead it tells stories in which the correct arrangement of the world is the taken-for-granted background against which events unfold. Popular fiction, and especially popular fiction with the reach and readership of Bhagat's works, is precisely such a form of cultural production.

The four novels examined in this paper — *Five Point Someone* (2004), *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), and *One Indian Girl* (2016) — constitute a corpus that spans Bhagat's most productive decade and addresses the three ideological formations which this paper identifies as central to the post-liberalisation Indian common sense: the formation of class and meritocracy, the formation of gender and aspiration, and the formation of national identity and caste-coded belonging. Each novel offers specific and detailed textual evidence for the ideological operations in question, and taken together they constitute a coherent cultural project whose significance exceeds the sum of its individual narrative parts considerably.

Three research questions organise the analysis that follows. The first asks how Bhagat's fiction constructs class mobility as meritocratic rather than systemic — how the narrative architecture of *Five Point Someone* and *Revolution 2020* naturalises the assumption that individual talent and effort alone determines life outcomes, thereby displacing the structural realities of caste capital, cultural capital, and systemic access. The second asks in what specific ways Bhagat's fiction simultaneously critiques and reproduces patriarchal gender norms, focusing especially on *One Indian Girl*'s deployment of what Angela McRobbie terms a post-feminist sensibility: that is, the production of an apparent feminism that covertly reinscribes the very structures it claims to have superseded. The third asks how the narrativisation of regional and communal difference in *2 States* and *Revolution 2020* constructs a brahminical, upper-caste, secular-Hindu subjectivity as the unmarked norm of Indian national identity — a norm which is rendered invisible precisely because it is presented as the universal ground of a pluralist nationalism.

The paper is structured as follows in terms of its organisation. Section two develops the theoretical framework, organised across three tiers. Section three reviews the existing scholarship on Bhagat and on ideology in Indian popular fiction more broadly. Section four outlines the methodology adopted. Section five presents the analytical core, organised across three sub-sections corresponding to the three research questions. Section six synthesises the analyses and draws out their collective implications. And section seven concludes with observations on the paper's theoretical contribution, its limitations, and the directions it opens for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Foundational Tier: Gramsci, Althusser, and the Ideology of the Ordinary

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which was elaborated across his Prison Notebooks (composed between 1929–1935, translated 1971), provides the primary conceptual architecture for this paper. For Gramsci, hegemony names the process by which a dominant social formation achieves and sustains its authority — not principally through coercion, but through the production of consent: the cultivation, across multiple cultural sites, of a common sense — a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about social

reality — that makes the existing order appear not as one arrangement among several possible alternatives but as the natural, morally obvious, and practically necessary arrangement of human life altogether. Common sense, for Gramsci, is not false consciousness imposed from without but a genuinely lived intellectual and moral framework, absorbed through education, religion, popular culture, and the texture of everyday social experience as it is encountered by ordinary people.

Louis Althusser's complementary concept of ideological state apparatuses, developed in his 1970 essay of that same title, offers a structural account of the institutions through which ideology is materially reproduced in society. Althusser's central contribution is the insistence that ideology is not primarily a matter of ideas floating in abstraction but of practices: of the ritualised, repeated behaviours through which subjects are interpellated — called into position — within ideological formations. The family, the school, the Church, and, crucially, the cultural apparatus of media and literature are all, for Althusser, ideological state apparatuses that reproduces the conditions under which dominant social relations can continue to appear as natural and inevitable. Popular fiction, on this account, is not merely a reflection of ideology but is itself an apparatus of its reproduction in society.

2.2 The Cultural Studies Tier: Hall, Fiske, and the Work of Popular Culture

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, introduced in his 1973 paper and elaborated across subsequent essays collected in Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies (1996), provides the analytical tools for reading the specific ideological encodings of Bhagat's texts and for understanding how those encodings are made available to different kinds of readers. Hall's key insight is that the dominant or hegemonic reading position — the set of meanings that a text is structured to produce — is not arbitrary in any sense but rather reflects the dominant ideological formations of the society in which the text is produced and consumed. A reader who occupies the appropriate cultural position will read these meanings as natural and self-evident: as common sense rather than as ideology in any politically loaded sense. A reader who brings different cultural competences or social positions to the text may negotiate or resist those meanings — but the encoding itself remains the structural condition of all reading.

Hall's analysis of hegemonic articulation — the continuous work of re-articulating dominant ideological formations in response to social change and cultural challenge — is particularly important for the analysis of Bhagat's novels, which consistently performs the ideological work of accommodating social change (women's education, inter-regional marriage, economic aspiration) within narrative structures that ultimately preserves the existing distribution of social power as it stands. John Fiske's theory of popular culture, as it is developed in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), adds a further dimension to the analysis: popular texts are, for Fiske, sites of struggle between dominant encodings and subordinate reading practices, and their popularity is always a negotiated achievement rather than a simple imposition of meanings from above. This nuance allows the analysis to acknowledge the genuine pleasures and partial identifications that Bhagat's fiction offers its readers without reducing those pleasures to mere ideological manipulation of a passive audience.

2.3 The India-Specific Tier: Fernandes, Chatterjee, McRobbie, and Bhabha

Leela Fernandes's *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (2006) provides the indispensable sociological ground for this analysis. Fernandes demonstrates that the new middle class which was produced by post-liberalisation economic growth is not a neutral social formation but a politically constructed one, whose cultural identity is organised around the values of individual merit, consumer aspiration, and a de-politicised nationalism that delegates social transformation to market mechanisms rather than to collective political action of any kind. This class is the primary audience for Bhagat's fiction and the primary social formation whose common sense that fiction reproduces and reinforces through its narrative operations.

Partha Chatterjee's work — particularly *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) and *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) — provides the analytical framework for reading the national ideology which is embedded in Bhagat's narratives. Chatterjee's insistence that Indian nationalism has always been organised around an inner/outer distinction — a spiritual, domestic, essentially upper-caste Hindu core

that appropriates the outer forms of Western modernity without surrendering cultural sovereignty — enables the analysis of how Bhagat's apparently secular, pluralist nationalism is in fact structured around a brahminical centre that presents itself as the unmarked universal. Angela McRobbie's theorisation of post-feminist sensibility, developed in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), provides the framework for analysing *One Indian Girl's* simultaneous acknowledgement and containment of feminist aspiration. Homi Bhabha's theorisation of national narration in *Nation and Narration* (1990) completes the theoretical apparatus, enabling the reading of *2 States* as a national allegory in which the resolution of regional difference enacts a specific and interested vision of the unified Indian subject.

3. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Chetan Bhagat is considerably smaller than his massive readership would suggest, and its engagement with the ideological dimensions of his fiction has been uneven at best. Early critical responses, largely from reviewers in literary publications and from scholars of Indian English literature, were primarily evaluative in their orientation: they assessed Bhagat's novels against the established standards of literary fiction and found them wanting in prose style, characterisation, and formal ambition. This evaluation, however justified on its own literary terms, systematically failed to ask the questions that a cultural studies approach makes central to any serious inquiry: not whether Bhagat's novels are good literature by conventional measures, but what cultural work they performs, whose interests that work ultimately serves, and what it reveals about the ideological landscape of the society that produces and consumes them on such a massive scale.

More productive for the purposes of this paper is the body of scholarship on Indian popular fiction and on the cultural politics of post-liberalisation India more broadly considered. Sudha Shastri's work on the new Indian novel in English situates the emergence of popular fiction within the transformation of the English-language reading public since the 1990s, thereby providing essential context for understanding the relationship between Bhagat's fiction and its audience. Priyamvada Gopal's *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (2009) offers a more theoretically sophisticated account of the political investments of Indian English fiction, though her focus remains primarily on literary fiction rather than on the popular variety. Her analysis of how Indian English fiction negotiates between nationalist and cosmopolitan cultural agendas is directly relevant to the questions this paper pursues in its own analytical sections.

On the ideology of the post-liberalisation middle class, Fernandes's *India's New Middle Class* (2006) remains the most rigorous sociological account available, and its documentation of the new middle class's investment in meritocratic and depoliticised cultural values provides essential context for the analysis of Bhagat's ideological operations. Ritty Lukose's *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India* (2009) extends this analysis to questions of gender and consumer identity, showing how the expansion of women's public roles has been accommodated within cultural frameworks that preserve the domestic sphere as the ultimate site of feminine fulfilment — a pattern which is directly relevant to the analysis of *One Indian Girl* undertaken in this paper.

The feminist cultural studies literature on popular fiction and post-feminist sensibility, anchored in McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) and in the broader tradition of scholarship on popular romance and gender ideology, provides the theoretical vocabulary for the analysis of Research Question 2. McRobbie's specific contribution — the theorisation of post-feminism not as a backlash against feminism but as a discourse that acknowledges feminist gains precisely in order to render further feminist claims unnecessary and redundant — is essential for understanding how *One Indian Girl* can present itself as a feminist novel while structurally reinscribing the very gender hierarchy its surface narrative appears to challenge at every turn.

The gap that this paper addresses is the absence, in existing scholarship, of a systematic ideological analysis of Bhagat's fiction that is simultaneously attentive to all three axes of class, gender, and national identity, and that grounds that analysis in a rigorous and consistently applied theoretical framework. Existing scholarship has tended to address these dimensions separately — either class or gender or

nationalism — without attending sufficiently to their intersection and mutual reinforcement as analytical categories. This paper argues that it is precisely the intersection of these three ideological formations, and their simultaneous naturalisation within a single narrative framework, that constitutes the distinctive ideological achievement of Bhagat's popular fiction as a cultural phenomenon.

4. Methodology

This paper employs a methodology of textual and discourse analysis that is grounded in the traditions of ideological criticism and cultural studies as they have developed over the past several decades. The primary analytical procedure is close reading: the careful, sustained attention to the specific formal and narrative choices of the texts — the management of point of view, the structure of narrative resolution, the organisation of character sympathy, the distribution of irony, the selection and repetition of tropes — as sites where ideological assumptions are embedded and naturalised within what appears to be ordinary storytelling. This close reading is conducted in explicit dialogue with the theoretical frameworks outlined in the preceding section, so that the analysis moves continuously between textual detail and theoretical abstraction in a productive manner.

The corpus consists of four novels: *Five Point Someone* (2004), *2 States* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), and *One Indian Girl* (2016). This selection is deliberate and defensible on several grounds. *Five Point Someone* inaugurates the ideological formation of meritocracy most clearly amongst the novels examined; *2 States* is the most sustained engagement with questions of regional identity and national belonging; *Revolution 2020* extends the meritocracy analysis to questions of corruption, civic nationalism, and capitalist development in the Indian context; and *One Indian Girl* is the text in which the tension between feminist aspiration and patriarchal resolution is most explicitly thematised and therefore most analytically productive for the purposes of this study. All four were published before the year 2020, and their combined readership across the period 2004–2019 makes them among the most culturally consequential literary texts that has been produced in India during that entire period.

The methodology is explicitly ideological rather than aesthetic in its orientation: it is not concerned with evaluating the literary merits of the texts under examination, but with identifying the ideological work that their specific narrative choices performs in the context of post-liberalisation India. It draws on Hall's encoding/decoding model to identify the dominant readings that the texts are structured to produce, and on Gramsci's concept of common sense to understand how those readings are made to feel natural and self-evident rather than interested and contestable. The analysis is also discourse-analytical in the sense that it attends not only to what the texts explicitly says but to what they assume, what they leaves unsaid, and what kinds of subject position they constructs for their implied readers.

5. Analysis

5.1 Class and Meritocracy: IIT Narratives and the Naturalisation of Neoliberal Success

The ideological architecture of *Five Point Someone* rests upon a foundational contradiction that the novel is structurally organised to manage and conceal from the attention of its readers. The three protagonists — Hari, Ryan, and Alok — are students at the Indian Institutes of Technology, the most socially selective educational institutions in the country, admission to which requires not only exceptional intellectual ability but also access to years of expensive coaching, English-medium schooling, and the cultural capital that comes with middle-class or upper-middle-class family formation. The novel's narrative premise is thus already ideologically loaded in a significant sense: the protagonists have achieved something that is, in structural terms, available only to a small fraction of the Indian population, and that fraction is overwhelmingly determined by social position rather than by individual merit alone.

Yet the novel does not present IIT admission as a socially determined achievement in any meaningful sense. It presents it as a matter of course — as the natural outcome of the protagonists' intelligence and effort, the taken-for-granted starting point of a narrative which is concerned with other things altogether. The structural advantages that enabled that admission — the coaching classes, the English-medium

education, the family stability and financial security — are not thematised or questioned anywhere in the narrative; they are simply absent from the novel's field of vision. This absence is not accidental but structural in nature: it is the very condition of possibility for the novel's central ideological claim, which is that the meritocratic system functions as it advertises itself to function, that the competition is open to talent wherever it may be found, and that failure within it is ultimately a matter of individual inadequacy rather than of systemic exclusion from the outset.

The figure of Alok is perhaps the most revealing in this particular respect. Alok's family is genuinely poor — his father is ill, and his sister's marriage depends on the dowry he can eventually provide — and the narrative presents his financial anxiety with real empathy and emotional sensitivity. Yet the ideological work of Alok's characterisation is to personalise economic hardship while simultaneously leaving its structural causes entirely unexamined. His poverty is presented as an individual family circumstance, not as evidence of the systematic relationship between caste, class, and educational opportunity that determines who enters IIT and who does not in the Indian social context. The novel invites readers to feel for Alok's situation without inviting them to think critically about the system that produced his situation — and this channelling of social sympathy away from structural analysis and toward individual narrative is precisely the ideological operation that Gramsci's concept of hegemony is designed to identify and analyse.

Revolution 2020 extends and complicates this ideological formation considerably. Its protagonist, Gopal, fails the IIT entrance examination and is thereby excluded from the novel's version of legitimate aspiration. His trajectory — corruption, development capitalism, eventual moral redemption — is organised to demonstrate that the meritocratic system correctly identified the hierarchy of character between Gopal and his rival Raghav, who succeeds in the examination and becomes a journalist committed to principled civic nationalism. The novel presents this hierarchy not as the product of social advantage — Gopal and Raghav are presented as roughly similar in social origin, though the narrative is notably unspecific about the cultural capital differences that might actually account for their divergent outcomes — but as a moral fact: Gopal fails because his character is weaker, his commitment is less pure, and his ambition is more corrupt from the beginning.

In Jamesonian terms, both novels performs the same ideological function in their own respective ways: they provide imaginary resolutions to the contradiction between the meritocratic ideology that legitimates the post-liberalisation social order and the social reality of an educational and economic system whose outcomes is heavily determined by caste and class position. By narrating individual trajectories in which the system's sorting mechanisms are presented as morally coherent and socially just, the novels discharge the social tension generated by systemic inequality without requiring their readers to confront the systemic character of that inequality at all. Fernandes's analysis of the new middle class's investment in meritocratic ideology provides the sociological context for understanding why this ideological resolution is so effective in its cultural operations: it addresses readers who have themselves succeeded within the system and whose social identity depends upon the belief that their success reflects their personal merit rather than their inherited privilege.

5.2 Gender and Post-Feminist Sensibility: Aspiration Resolved in Domesticity

One Indian Girl is, on its surface, Bhagat's most progressive novel by a considerable margin. It is narrated in the first person by Radhika Mehta, a high-achieving investment banker who has worked in Mumbai, New York, and Hong Kong, who earns more than her male partners, and whose narrative explicitly acknowledges the double standards to which ambitious women are routinely subjected in Indian society. The novel's surface discourse is unambiguously feminist in its orientation: Radhika reflects on the social penalties she faces for being professionally successful, sexually active, and emotionally independent, and she articulates her grievances with an explicitness that marks a formal departure from Bhagat's earlier novels in important respects.

Yet the structural logic of the narrative contradicts its surface discourse at every significant narrative point. McRobbie's theorisation of post-feminist sensibility is precisely applicable in this context: post-feminism, in McRobbie's analysis, is not simply anti-feminism but a more complex cultural formation

that takes feminism into account — that acknowledges feminist gains, incorporates feminist vocabulary, and even stages feminist critique — precisely in order to render further feminist politics unnecessary and redundant. The post-feminist text offers women the position of the knowing, empowered subject who has already achieved what feminism sought, and who therefore needs no collective feminist project; she only needs to make better individual choices within the existing social order as it currently stands.

One Indian Girl enacts this post-feminist dynamic with considerable precision and narrative skill. Radhika's professional achievements are fully acknowledged throughout the novel; her intelligence and competence are never in question at any narrative point. But the organisation of desire, resolution, and moral value in the novel consistently subordinates these achievements to the demands of romantic relationship and familial approval as the ultimately meaningful categories. Each of Radhika's relationships is narrated as a failure for which she bears significant personal responsibility; each failure is associated with the excess of her professional ambition and the insufficiency of her emotional availability to others. The novel's resolution — Radhika's decision to pursue a relationship with a man who respects her professional achievements, validated by her family's eventual acceptance — presents this as a feminist triumph of sorts: she has found a man who loves her as she is. But what she is, in the narrative's terms, is defined precisely through the romantic resolution itself: her professional achievements form the background; the relationship is the foregrounded focus.

2 States reinforces this ideological formation through the character of Ananya, who is presented as equally talented to the male protagonist Krish but whose narrative function is primarily to embody her cultural community — Tamil Brahmin identity, family loyalty, domestic warmth — rather than to pursue an independent trajectory of her own. Her ambitions are noted and respected within the novel's surface discourse; but the narrative energy is invested almost entirely in the question of whether she and Krish can ultimately marry, and her identity is resolved through the logic of that marriage rather than through any narrative of her own development and growth. Hall's encoding/decoding framework reveals the hegemonic encoding at work: the dominant reading position which the text constructs is one in which feminine identity is most fully and authentically expressed in its successful accommodation of romantic and familial demands, and in which professional achievement is merely a secondary characteristic rather than a primary source of meaning and identity.

5.3 Nation, Caste, and the Unmarked Centre: Brahminical Nationalism as Common Sense

2 States presents itself, on its narrative surface, as a comedy of regional difference: the clash between Krish's Punjabi family and Ananya's Tamil Brahmin family generates the novel's comic energy and much of its social observation about the diversity of Indian culture. The novel's surface ideology is explicitly pluralist and pan-Indian in its orientation: the message that the lovers and, eventually, the reader are invited to draw is that India's regional diversity is ultimately superficial, that underneath the cultural differences there exists a shared humanity and a shared national identity that transcends communal boundaries altogether. The narrative resolution — the two families united in celebration of the marriage — enacts this pluralist vision with the conventional satisfactions of the romantic comedy form.

But Chatterjee's analysis of the inner/outer distinction in Indian nationalism enables a more penetrating reading of *2 States*'s national ideology than its surface pluralism would suggest. What the novel presents as a neutral, universal Indian identity — the ground on which regional difference is overcome and transcended — is, on closer inspection, a specific and socially positioned subjectivity: English-educated, IIT-and-IIM-credentialled, economically aspirational, secular in civic presentation but Hindu in cultural assumption, and organised around a notion of merit and individual achievement that reflects the values of the upper-caste professional class from which both protagonists come. The Tamil and the Punjabi are caricatured for comic effect; the educated professional is the unquestioned norm. The regional identities are rendered as comic particularisms to be transcended; the IIT-educated meritocrat is rendered as the transparent universal, the Indian who is simply Indian without any further qualification needed.

Bhabha's theorisation of national narration as a pedagogical and performative doubleness — the nation narrates itself as both the pedagogical subject of history and the performative agent of its own present — illuminates the ideological work performed by *2 States*'s resolution. The marriage of Krish and Ananya

enacts, at the level of domestic comedy, the nation's self-narration: the overcoming of difference in the name of a unity that is presented as already given, as the natural destination of narrative energy rather than as the product of a specific social and political configuration of power. The caste and class homogeneity of the protagonists — both are from professional upper-caste families, their conflict is about region and temperament rather than about structural inequality — is the invisible condition of this resolution's apparent universality and its claim to speak for all Indians.

Revolution 2020 extends the nationalist ideological formation into the domain of civic politics more explicitly. Raghav's journalism — his campaign against corruption, his investment in a technocratic vision of Indian development, his identification of the nation's interests with those of an educated, civic-minded middle class — constructs a nationalist subject whose values are presented as simply good citizenship rather than as the expression of a specific class and caste formation. The corrupt temple trust and the venal local politician represent a traditional, communal India that is the obstacle to development and progress; the enlightened journalist and the aspirational student represents a modern, meritocratic India that is its rightful future. This binary, as Fernandes demonstrates in her sociological analysis, is the core ideological formation of the new middle class: it displaces questions of structural inequality, caste privilege, and redistributive justice with a narrative of corruption versus development, tradition versus modernity, in which the middle class is always already positioned on the right side of history.

6. Discussion

The three analyses developed in the preceding section are not independent of one another in any simple sense. They are, rather, three dimensions of a single ideological formation — the common sense of post-liberalisation India's aspirational middle class — and their intersection and mutual reinforcement is precisely what gives Bhagat's fiction its distinctive hegemonic force as a cultural phenomenon. The meritocratic ideology of class mobility, the post-feminist containment of gender aspiration, and the brahminical coding of national identity are not separate ideological messages delivered by different novels in isolation; they are interlocking components of a coherent social vision that the novels collectively produces and reproduces across a very large readership.

The interlocking quality of these ideological formations is most clearly visible in the figure of the protagonists themselves, taken as a group. Whether the protagonist is male (Hari, Gopal, Krish) or female (Radhika), the narrative consistently positions him or her as an individual whose achievements are the product of personal qualities — intelligence, effort, emotional sincerity — rather than of inherited social position. This individualisation is the common feature of all three ideological formations: it renders class mobility as meritocracy by attributing success to individual merit rather than to structural advantage; it renders gender aspiration as personal choice by attributing women's constraints to inadequate individual decisions rather than to systemic patriarchy; and it renders national identity as personal character by attributing civic virtue to the educated individual rather than to the specific social formation that produced his education and his cultural assumptions.

What Bhagat's fiction reveals, when it is taken as a cultural formation rather than merely as a collection of individual texts, is the remarkable coherence and self-reinforcing quality of the post-liberalisation ideological consensus as a whole. Each of its component formations supports and legitimates the others in mutually reinforcing ways: the meritocratic ideology legitimates the class position of its middle-class readers by attributing that position to their personal merit; the post-feminist ideology legitimates the persistence of patriarchal family structures by attributing women's continued subordination to their own individual choices; the brahminical nationalism legitimates the cultural authority of the upper-caste professional class by presenting that class's particular values as the universal values of the Indian nation itself. Together, they constitute a remarkably comprehensive ideological system in which every structural inequality appears as the natural outcome of individual quality, and in which the very possibility of systemic change is not refuted but rendered virtually unimaginable to those who inhabit the system.

This analysis does not imply that Bhagat's fiction is without value or that its readers are simply the passive recipients of ideological manipulation from above. Hall's encoding/decoding framework insists

that dominant encodings does not determine reception in any mechanistic fashion, and Fiske's analysis of popular culture demonstrates clearly that readers bring their own competences, desires, and resistant readings to popular texts in every act of reading. The millions of readers who have found in Bhagat novels a recognisable image of their own experience, a vocabulary for their aspirations, and a mirror of their social world are not simply being deceived. But the pleasures of recognition are not politically innocent in their effects, and the social self-understanding that Bhagat's fiction validates and reinforces is one that consistently serves the interests of social reproduction over social transformation.

The particular historical moment of Bhagat's popularity — the period between the consolidation of economic liberalisation in the late 1990s and the emergence of an aggressively Hindu nationalist politics in the mid-2010s — is not incidental to the ideological work his fiction performs but is central to understanding it. His novels were produced in and addressed to a social formation in the process of constituting itself as a class, developing its cultural identity, and asserting its claim to represent the national norm. In that specific context, the production of a fiction that validates meritocratic class identity, contains feminist challenge within romantic resolution, and codes upper-caste professional identity as the unmarked centre of Indian national belonging was not merely commercially successful; it was, in Althusser's terms, an ideological state apparatus performing the work of social reproduction with unusual reach and unusual effectiveness across an entire generation of Indian readers.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Chetan Bhagat's popular fiction functions as a primary site of hegemonic articulation in post-liberalisation India, and that the ideological formations it naturalises — meritocratic class mobility, post-feminist gender containment, and brahminical nationalist normativity — are not incidental features of popular entertainment but constitutive elements of a coherent and consequential cultural project. The analysis has been organised around three research questions that addresses the novels' engagement with class, gender, and national identity, and has grounded the close reading of the texts in a three-tiered theoretical framework drawn from Gramscian political theory, British cultural studies, and India-specific political sociology.

The theoretical contribution of the paper is twofold in nature. First, it demonstrates the productivity of applying the Gramscian concept of hegemony, in its Hall-mediated cultural studies formulation, to the specific conditions of post-liberalisation Indian popular fiction — a context in which the concept has been less systematically applied than its analytical power would fully justify. Second, it advances a methodological argument for the integration of class analysis, feminist cultural critique, and postcolonial nationalism studies within a single analytical framework, showing that the ideological operations of Bhagat's fiction are fully intelligible only when these three dimensions are analysed in their intersection rather than in isolation from one another.

The paper's limitations are significant and should be acknowledged forthrightly. It focuses exclusively on the textual encodings of Bhagat's fiction without addressing the important question of reader reception: how actual readers engage with, negotiate, or resist the dominant readings that the texts are structured to produce. A full account of the ideological work of popular fiction would require ethnographic research into actual reading practices — the kind of reader-response and reception study that has been productively applied to popular romance in other cultural contexts but has not yet been systematically pursued in relation to Indian popular fiction as a genre. This is the most important direction for future research to pursue. A comparative study that set Bhagat's fiction in dialogue with popular fiction in other Indian languages — particularly Hindi and Tamil — would further test and refine the analysis, determining whether the ideological formations identified here are specific to English-language popular fiction or are characteristic of post-liberalisation popular fiction more broadly across linguistic communities.

The ordinary story is never merely ordinary in its cultural effects. What Bhagat's novels tell their millions of readers — about how the world works, about what kind of person succeeds and why, about what women want and what the nation ultimately is — is not a neutral reflection of social reality but an active

production of the common sense that makes social reality appear natural, necessary, and beyond transformation. Reading that production critically, in the tradition of the theorists assembled in this paper, is not an act of hostility toward popular culture or its readers but an act of intellectual and political responsibility: the recognition that the stories we tell about ourselves are always, also, the stories that tells us who we are allowed to be.

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