

The Ideological Everyday: Trope, Repetition, and the Naturalisation of Social Norms in Indian Popular Fiction, 1990–2019

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Abstract:

The present paper is an examination of the ideological work which is performed by Indian popular fiction published over the period from the year 1990 to the year 2019, with sustained attention being directed toward the precise mechanisms through which fiction naturalises social norms, constructs common sense, and reproduces structures of cultural and class power in ways that ordinarily escapes the notice of even attentive readers. The paper draws upon five major critical traditions — namely, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and concept of hegemonic articulation, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of cultural capital and distinction, Fredric Jameson's analysis of the political unconscious and the ideological function of genre, and Jean Baudrillard's theorisation of simulation and the hyperreal — in order to develop an integrated analytical framework for the study of ideology in popular narrative. The empirical ground for this analysis is furnished by Indian popular fiction across several recognisable sub-genres: specifically, the romance fiction of Durjoy Datta and Ravinder Singh, the mythological novels of Devdutt Pattanaik, the campus fiction of Chetan Bhagat, and the crime fiction of Vikram Chandra. The paper's central contention is that the repetition of narrative tropes across these otherwise diverse texts does not merely reflecting social reality in a passive manner but actively produces and legitimates particular configurations of gender, class, caste, and national belonging as natural, necessary, and altogether beyond the possibility of critical questioning.

Keywords: ideology; popular fiction; Indian literature; culture industry; hegemony; Bourdieu; Jameson; Baudrillard; trope; naturalisation; common sense; post-liberalisation India.

I. Introduction: The Politics of the Ordinary Story

It is a remarkable and often overlooked sociological fact that popular fiction — the fiction that people read on morning commutes, in railway waiting rooms, between university examinations, and in the abbreviated leisure of working lives squeezed between professional obligations — is, by virtue of that very ordinariness, the most culturally powerful form of literary production available in any contemporary society. The ordinariness of popular fiction is not incidental to its cultural significance; it is, rather, the very condition of its reach across social strata, and the reach is in turn the condition of its

considerable and frequently underestimated power to shape how social reality is understood, experienced, and reproduced by those who consumes it day after day without any particular critical awareness. To describe popular fiction as ordinary is not, therefore, to diminish it in any way; it is to locate it precisely within the social world it simultaneously inhabits, reflects, and — in the act of that very reflection — actively helps to reproduce.

The central claim of this paper requires some careful unpacking before the analysis can proceed, and it is the primary business of the sections that follows to undertake that unpacking in a systematic and theoretically grounded manner. Ideology, in the tradition of critical theory on which this paper draws, is not to be understood primarily as a matter of explicit political propaganda, the kind of thing one might find in government pamphlets or party manifestos. It is, rather, the altogether more subtle and consequently more powerful process through which historically contingent social arrangements — particular distributions of power across class, gender, caste, and regional affiliation, particular configurations of who may speak and who must listen — are rendered natural. It seems inevitable, and beyond the possibility of effective political question by the very people who lives within and is most severely constrained by those arrangements. The Sardinian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci gave this process the name by which it has been known in critical theory ever since: hegemony. Hegemony, as Gramsci theorised it across his Prison Notebooks, is the achievement of social consent through cultural means — the manufacture of a common sense that makes the existing order appear not as one possible arrangement among several equally conceivable alternatives but as the only arrangement consistent with human nature, social necessity, and the requirements of moral life. Popular fiction is, this paper argues, one of the primary sites at which this process of naturalisation operates in contemporary India, and the principal mechanism through which it operates is the repetition, across many texts and many genres and many reading encounters, of a relatively small repertoire of narrative tropes.

A trope, in the analytical sense in which this term is deployed throughout this paper, is not merely a rhetorical figure of the kind studied in classical and Renaissance rhetoric. It is a structural pattern of considerably greater depth and social consequence: a recurring configuration of character type, narrative situation, value system, and narrative resolution that appears with sufficient regularity across a body of texts and genres that readers comes to recognises it, anticipates it with something approaching pleasure, and experiences its repetition as confirmation rather than as monotony. The ideological power of such tropes resides precisely in that familiarity: the dutiful daughter who ultimately sacrifices romantic preference for family honour, the ambitious young man of modest social origin whose exceptional intelligence earns him entry to the institutions of the elite, the corrupt politician whose comprehensive villainy serves as the moral justification for the protagonist's extra-legal justice, the westernised young woman whose apparent modernity is ultimately and satisfyingly subordinated to the requirements of traditional social expectation — when these configurations recur, they does so not by accident or by the personal preference of any individual author but because the cultural and institutional conditions of literary production in post-liberalisation India consistently and systematically rewards precisely these kinds of story, these kinds of protagonist, and above all these kinds of resolution.

The five theoretical traditions on which this paper draws are those of Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry; Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and the associated concept of hegemonic articulation; Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of cultural capital and distinction; Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious and the ideological function of narrative genre; and Jean Baudrillard's analysis of simulation, the simulacrum, and the hyperreal as characteristic features of advanced consumer

capitalism. Each of these traditions contributes specific and irreducible analytical tools that the others do not supply; taken together, they constitute a comprehensive critical apparatus whose combined analytical power considerably exceeds what any one of them alone could achieve. Following an account of these theoretical resources in Section II, the paper applies them in sustained analysis of Indian popular fiction published across the three decades between 1990 and 2019.

II. Theoretical Framework: Five Critiques of the Ideological

Adorno and Horkheimer: The Culture Industry and Standardisation

The essay by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer that is titled 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' which first appeared as a chapter in their collaborative *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the year 1944, remains, more than seven decades after its initial composition, the most unrelenting and theoretically uncompromising account yet produced of the relationship between capitalist cultural production and the manufacture of social conformity. The central argumentative proposition of Adorno and Horkheimer is that the cultural products of the modern capitalist culture industry — films, popular music recordings, bestselling fiction — are not genuine cultural expressions in any meaningful sense of that phrase but standardised commercial commodities that have been engineered, through the rationalized logic of industrial production applied to cultural material, precisely in order to produce passive and politically quiescent consumers. The ideological effect of the culture industry, in their analysis, is achieved not through the explicit propagandistic assertion of particular political positions but through three related mechanisms: the systematic elimination of genuine aesthetic difference and surprise, the relentless recycling of formulaic narrative patterns that has already proven their commercial viability, and the careful calibration of the pleasures on offer to a readership so as to release accumulated social tension without in any way challenging the social structures and economic arrangements that is the ultimate source of that tension.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the repetition of narrative formula across many texts and many reading encounters is not merely an aesthetic failing of commercial literary production — a deficiency of imagination on the part of commercially minded authors — but an ideological strategy of considerable precision and effectiveness: it habituates consumers, through the sheer repetition of satisfying resolutions to familiar narrative situations, to the expectation that things will always resolve in the way they have always resolved, and that any individual aspiration — however frustrated it may be in the actual conditions of social existence — can in principle be satisfied within the framework of the existing social order without any structural transformation being required. The happy ending of the popular romantic novel, the eventual just resolution of the crime narrative, the meritocratic vindication of the hardworking campus fiction protagonist — these conventional closure functions, in the Adornian analytical framework, not as mere wish-fulfilment of a psychologically innocent kind but as ideological consolation of a socially consequential one: they collectively suggest that the social world is, beneath its manifest imperfections and temporary injustices, fundamentally fair, ultimately self-correcting, and sufficiently responsive to individual merit and effort that structural challenge is not merely unnecessary but positively ungrateful.

Before this analytical framework can be applied to Indian popular fiction of the post-liberalisation period, certain modifications and contextual adjustments are required. Adorno and Horkheimer were writing about an industry producing cultural commodities for a fully formed mass market in the conditions of advanced and mature industrial capitalism, and their analysis reflects with considerable

specificity the conditions of the American culture industry of the mid-1940s. The Indian publishing market of the 1990s and the 2000s was, by comparison, a considerably more heterogeneous, less rationalised, and in many respects less fully commodified system — one in which small publishers, regional language markets, and non-commercial literary traditions continued to coexist alongside the emerging mass-market English-language sector. These differences must be acknowledged and taken seriously. Nevertheless, the structural logic which Adorno and Horkheimer identified — the standardisation of narrative formula across commercially successful texts, the systematic management of reader expectation through generic convention, the ideological function of predictable and satisfying conventional resolution — is demonstrably operative in the bestselling popular fiction of the Indian post-liberalisation period, and the mechanisms through which it operates is substantially illuminated by their analytical framework despite the different historical and institutional conditions.

Stuart Hall: Encoding, Decoding, and Hegemonic Articulation

Stuart Hall's theoretical contributions to the study of ideology in popular culture is distinguished from those of Adorno and Horkheimer by a sustained and specifically theoretical attention to the active processes through which meaning is produced and consumed within specific social contexts of communication. His encoding/decoding model, which was first articulated in the stencilled paper of the year 1973 and was subsequently developed and refined across a series of important essays published in the late 1970s and the 1980s, represents a systematic challenge to the transmission model of communication — the deeply embedded assumption that meaning is produced by a sender and then received by an audience in a process that is essentially one of transparent conveyance — in favour of a considerably more complex account in which meaning is understood as the product of an active and socially situated process of reading that is shaped, at every stage, by the ideological formations, cultural competences, and social positions of both the producers who encodes messages and the audiences who decodes them.

The most analytically consequential of Hall's contributions for the study of popular fiction is his careful theorisation of the dominant or hegemonic reading position: the specific set of meanings which a given text is structurally encoded to produce, meanings that aligns with the dominant ideological frameworks of the society in which the text is produced, and which will be read as common sense — as the natural, obvious, and unquestionable meaning of the text — by any reader who approaches it equipped with the appropriate cultural competences that the dominant culture provides. A romance novel that encodes the presupposition that feminine fulfilment finds its proper and natural expression in the achievement of successful heterosexual partnership, or a campus novel that encodes the presupposition that meritocratic educational competition is both essentially fair in its procedures and socially beneficial in its outcomes, does not present these presuppositions as contestable ideological positions — as one set of claims among other competing and equally defensible sets of claims. Rather, they present these presuppositions as the entirely natural background conditions of the story, the un-argued assumptions against which the narrative events take their meaning. Hall's analytical framework equips the critic to read this naturalisation not as the transparent reflection of social reality but as an encoding choice — and therefore as a site of potential ideological contestation — even in, and perhaps especially in, those cases where its ideological character is entirely invisible to the ordinary reader consuming the text for pleasure.

Hall's analysis of hegemonic articulation, which draws upon and extends Gramsci's original theorisation, is of equal importance to the argument of this paper. Hall argued, against certain more structuralist readings of the Gramscian inheritance, that hegemony is not a condition that is achieved once and for all through a definitive cultural settlement but is a continuous and perpetually contested process of renegotiation, in which dominant social formations must constantly and actively re-articulate their cultural authority in response to the challenges posed by subordinate groups, the disruptions produced by social change, and the contradictions generated by the on-going dynamics of social and economic development. Popular fiction is, in this analytical perspective, one of the primary arenas in which this continuous process of hegemonic renegotiation takes place: the new tropes that emerges in bestselling fiction, the revised representations of gender and class and nation, the updated common senses about what constitutes aspiration and success and belonging — all these are traces of the cultural work that is required, in each successive historical conjuncture, to maintains hegemonic consent in conditions of substantial social transformation.

Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Capital, Distinction, and the Literary Field

Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of culture constitutes a third major theoretical resource for the analysis developed in this paper, one that is distinguished from both the Adornian tradition and the Hallian tradition by its specifically and rigorously sociological attention to the role which social class plays in the production, distribution, and reception of cultural meaning. In his landmark study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), and in the related analyses collected in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Bourdieu demonstrates through both empirical research and theoretical argument that cultural preferences — what individuals read, how they read it, what they find in it, and what they judge to be valuable about it — are not the expressions of individual sensibility or the exercise of natural faculties of taste with which some persons are more abundantly endowed than others. They are, rather, markers of social position: instruments through which class differences is reproduced from one generation to the next and through which the social origins of those differences are legitimated as natural differences of cultivation, refinement, and aesthetic sensitivity. Cultural capital — understood as the ensemble of knowledge, disposition, and competencies that enable confident and authoritative engagement with legitimate culture — is distributed along class lines in ways that is both systematic and powerfully self-reproducing, and the cultural field as a whole is structured by the perpetual competition between those agents and fractions who possesses cultural capital in abundance and those who does not. The relevance of Bourdieu's analytical framework to the emergence and social function of Indian popular fiction is both direct and somewhat more nuanced than a simple application of the categories. The development of a substantial English-language popular fiction market in India across the decade of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s reflects a specific and historically significant social transformation of the Indian class structure: the expansion of English-medium secondary and tertiary education, and the associated growth of a new aspirational urban middle class whose members possessed sufficient English-language reading competence to constitute a viable market for accessible, colloquial, English-language fiction, but whose cultural capital was not primarily oriented toward the more formally demanding and culturally exclusive productions of the established Indian English literary tradition. The popular fiction that addressed and helped to constitute this new readership — produced in an accessible English register, organised around social situations and aspirational anxieties that the readership could immediately recognised as familiar, and focused on the hopes and fears of the upwardly mobile urban

young — served simultaneously as entertainment and as a form of cultural mirror in which the new middle class could recognise itself, for perhaps the first time in the English-language literary field, as a coherent and culturally significant social formation with its own distinctive values, its own particular common sense, and its own legitimate claim to cultural recognition.

Bourdieu's concept of the habitus — understood as the system of durable, transposable dispositions through which individuals navigate the social world from moment to moment, perceiving and evaluating and responding to social situations through the embodied history of their social formation — is of particular analytical utility for the present study. It enables the analyst to understand how the ideological assumptions of popular fiction is embedded not only in the explicit content of its narratives — the values its characters explicitly affirms or rejects — but equally in the formal and stylistic choices that constitute the text's communicative register: the level of linguistic difficulty and cultural reference, the structure of the social relationships which is taken for granted between the characters who populates the narrative world, the kinds of moral reasoning that is presented as natural and self-evident by the narrative voice. These formal features inscribes the text within a specific social space and addresses its implicit invitation to a reader whose habitus matches its assumptions, with the consequence that the ideological content of those assumptions is rendered invisible: they appears simply as the natural way of telling a story about recognisable human experience rather than as the encoding of particular social interests.

Fredric Jameson: The Political Unconscious and the Ideological Work of Genre

Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, which was published in the year 1981, provides this paper with what is perhaps the most systematic and theoretically developed account of the ideological function of narrative genre that is available in the critical literature. Jameson's fundamental argumentative proposition is that all literary texts, including and especially those generic and formulaic texts that is most commonly dismissed as mere popular entertainment, are in their deepest structural logic attempts to manages and to contain the social contradictions of the specific historical moment in which they are produced. Genre conventions — the formulas that defines romance fiction, crime narrative, the campus novel, the adventure story — are not, on Jameson's analysis, merely the commercial templates through which publishers organises their marketing categories and through which authors structures their craft. They are, at a deeper structural level, ideological solutions: narrative mechanisms that provides readers with imaginary resolutions to real social contradictions that cannot be genuinely resolved within the framework of the existing social order, and that therefore requires management at the level of cultural fantasy if the social order is to maintained the consent of those it simultaneously depends upon and disadvantages.

The application of this framework to Indian popular fiction illuminates the ideological architecture of its most commercially successful genres with considerable analytical precision. The romance novel, on Jameson's analysis, does not simply tell stories about the experience of romantic love and the difficulties of its social negotiation; it provides an imaginary resolution to the real and lived contradiction between the increasingly dominant ideology of individual romantic choice — an ideology that post-liberalisation India has adopted with considerable cultural enthusiasm, particularly among the urban middle class — and the persistent social reality of arranged marriage, the regulation of intimate life along lines of caste and class endogamy, the effective authority of family and community over the intimate choices of its members. The campus novel does not simply tell stories about the pressures of examination culture and the pleasures and frustrations of student life; it provides an imaginary resolution to the deep

contradiction between the official ideology of meritocracy — the widely held and socially important belief that the educational system rewards demonstrable talent and sustained effort regardless of social origin — and the empirically well-documented social reality in which examination outcomes is heavily influenced by access to expensive private tuition, cultural capital accumulated through English-medium schooling, and the social networks that comes with middle- and upper-middle-class family membership. The ideological work of genre, in Jameson's account, is precisely to make these imaginary resolutions feel aesthetically satisfying and socially self-evident — to produce the pleasure of narrative closure as an experiential substitute for the genuine social transformation that would be required if the underlying contradictions were to be actually rather than merely imaginarily resolved.

Jameson's framework is of particular analytical value to this paper because it redirects the analyst's attention from the explicit content of popular fiction — what its characters say and does — to the structural logic that organises that content and determines its resolution: the specific social contradictions which a given generic text is organised to manage, and the specific forms of imaginary resolution to which its generic commitments structurally obliges it. A novel that consistently and across many iterations resolves its narrative tensions through the achievement of individual romantic partnership rather than through any form of collective social or political action is not simply making a series of individual aesthetic choices about the scale and kind of narrative resolution appropriate to its material; it is making, through that structural commitment, an ideological argument about the nature of the social world and the appropriate scale and kind of human response to the contradictions and injustices with which that social world confronts its inhabitants.

Jean Baudrillard: Simulation, the Hyperreal, and the Disappearance of the Social

Jean Baudrillard's contribution to the analysis of ideology in popular culture is, among the five theoretical traditions assembled in this paper, the most theoretically radical and the most deeply unsettling in its implications for conventional critical analysis. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (published in French in the year 1981 and in English translation in 1994) and in the extended analyses of consumer society developed in his earlier and later works, Baudrillard argue that in the condition of advanced consumer capitalism the fundamental distinction between representation and the reality which representation is supposed to represent has effectively and irreversibly collapsed. The signs through which consumer culture represents the social world has, in this account, ceased to refer to any underlying social reality that pre-exists and grounds them; they have become self-referential — a system of simulacra that refers to and endlessly reproduce other simulacra rather than any external reality — and has in this process generated its own hyper-reality: a version of reality that is, paradoxically, more intense, more coherent, and more vivid than the actual reality it has in some sense replaced. In this condition, ideology in the classical Marxist sense — understood as the systematic distortion or mystification of an underlying social reality in the service of particular class interests — ceases to be analytically coherent, because there is no stable underlying social reality that could serve as the standard against which the distortion is measured. What replaces ideology, in Baudrillard's framework, is simulation: the production and continuous circulation of signs that performs the appearance of the social — the appearance of depth, meaning, community, and historical significance — without possessing its substance.

When this framework is applied to Indian popular fiction, it draws analytical attention to a dimension of the fiction's ideological operation that the other theoretical traditions cannot adequately capture. Popular

fiction does not primarily misrepresents Indian social reality in any straightforward or deliberate way; it produces, in its place, a hyper-real substitute for it — a version of urban Indian life that is more emotionally coherent, more morally legible, and more experientially vivid than the actual and variously contradictory experience of living in contemporary Indian cities. The IIT campus which is depicted in Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*, the call centre environment of *One Night @ the Call Centre*, the small-town North Indian world that Ravinder Singh's romantic narratives constructs — none of these is a realistic representation of an actual social environment in the documentary sense; they are all hyper-real simulations: condensed, emotionally heightened, ideologically organised versions of social experience that readers consume both in place of and as a supplement to their own actual lived experience of those or similar social environments.

Baudrillard's framework also illuminates the specific ideological function of the commodity culture that saturates the fictional world of Indian popular fiction in a way that other analytical traditions do not fully captures. The brand names, the multiplex cinemas, the fast food outlets, the mobile phone models, the brands of clothing and the styles of coffee that furnishes the narrative world of popular Indian fiction from the mid-2000s onward is not merely realistic social detail included to give the narrative an authentic contemporary texture. They are, in Baudrillard's account, signs within a hyper-real consumer system that produces an image of aspiration, modernity, and social belonging which is consumed by the reader as an end in itself — as the very substance of the desired social world — rather than as a representation of any actual social condition that the reader inhabits or has inhabited. The ideology of consumer capitalism is not argued for in this fiction through any explicit propositional claim; it is simulated — performed through the dense accumulation of consumer signs that constitute the very texture of the narrative's social world and that thereby make the consumer's relation to commodities appear as the natural and sufficient medium of social identity and social aspiration.

III. The Trope of Meritocracy: Campus Fiction and the Naturalisation of Class

Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*, which was first published in the year 2004, stands as the founding text of what has in the nearly two decades since its publication become a recognisable and commercially extremely productive sub-genre of Indian popular fiction: the campus novel, characteristically set within one of India's elite educational institutions, characteristically organised around the aspirations, failures, moral crises, and eventual vindication of young protagonists negotiating the intense pressures of the competitive examination culture that governs access to these institutions. The sub-genre which Bhagat inaugurated includes his own subsequent novels — *2 States* (2009) and *Revolution 2020* (2011) among them — as well as a large number of formally similar narratives by other authors who recognised and sought to capitalise on the commercial formula. The most persistent and ideologically consequential structural feature of the sub-genre as a whole is what might be called the trope of the deserving-but-disadvantaged protagonist: a young man or, occasionally, a young woman of modest social origins but exceptional intellectual ability who succeeds, after considerable difficulty and often after significant moral trial, in demonstrating and having recognised his or her genuine worth within the competitive meritocratic framework of the elite educational institution.

The ideological work performed by this trope, when it is analysed through the Jamesonian analytical framework, consists in the management of a real and structurally important social contradiction. On one side of this contradiction stands the official ideology of meritocracy — the widely subscribed and socially important belief that the Indian educational and economic system is organised so as to reward

demonstrable talent and sustained individual effort regardless of the social origin of the person who demonstrate these qualities. On the other side stands the empirically well-documented social reality of structural inequality, in which the actual outcomes of competitive entrance examinations are very heavily determined by factors that has nothing to do with innate talent or individual effort: access to expensive private coaching institutions that can provide years of targeted examination preparation, attendance at English-medium secondary schools that provides the cultural capital and the examination familiarity that the elite institutions presupposes, the possession of family social networks that makes available information about institutional cultures, and the broader set of cultural competences and social confidences that comes with middle- and upper-middle-class family membership. The campus novel resolves this contradiction not through any direct challenge to the meritocratic ideology — it does not present the reader with any sustained examination of the structural conditions that determines examination outcomes — but through the narrative mechanism of the individual exception: the story of the one deserving protagonist who, through the specific combination of their personal qualities and the particular narrative luck that the fiction confers upon protagonists it has chosen to vindicate, overcomes the disadvantages of social origin and demonstrates a worth that the meritocratic system is, eventually, adequate to recognises.

In Adornian terms, what the repetition of this narrative resolution across many campus fiction texts and many reading encounters achieves is the habituation of the readership to a specific set of expectations about the social world: the expectation that individual merit will, if sufficiently demonstrated and sufficiently pure, eventually prevails over social disadvantage, and that the competitive system, despite the visible failures it produces in particular cases, is ultimately adequate to the task of identifying and rewarding genuine worth. The social tensions generated by the reality of entrenched structural inequality are, through this habituation, managed and discharged at the level of aesthetic pleasure — the pleasure of the narrative resolution that confirms the protagonist's deserving nature — without requiring the reader to confronts the structural character of the inequality that the narrative acknowledges only to immediately transcend in the individual case.

Bourdieu's analytical framework adds a further and analytically essential dimension to this account. The campus novel is addressed to, and achieves its greatest resonance among, readers whose own social trajectory closely mirrors that of its typical protagonist: readers who are themselves navigating the pressures of competitive examination culture, who are aspiring toward professional-class status through the medium of technical or managerial education, and who are themselves first-generation or early-generation English-language readers for whom access to higher education represents a significant break with the social trajectory of the preceding generation. These readers brings to the campus novel a habitus shaped by exactly the meritocratic ideology which the novel reproduces and validates, and they finds in the novel a mirror of their own most deeply held self-understanding: a narrative confirmation that the position they occupies or aspires to in the social world is the product of their own qualities, their own efforts, and their own merit rather than the product of the social advantages which their class position may have provided and which Bourdieu's sociology would insists upon recognising as such.

IV. The Trope of Romantic Destiny: Gender, Consent, and Affective Ideology

The romance fiction that dominated the English-language Indian popular publishing market across the first two decades of the twenty-first century — a body of work associated above all with the names of Durjoy Datta and Ravinder Singh but extending to a large number of formally similar texts by

contemporaries who addressed the same readership with closely related narrative formulae — deploys, with remarkable consistency across the corpus, a set of gendered narrative tropes whose ideological content is, in Hall's analytical terms, hegemonic in its encoding. These tropes encode a set of deeply consequential assumptions about the nature of feminine desire, the social and moral entitlements of masculinity, and the appropriate form of resolution for heterosexual romantic narrative — assumptions that aligns, with a precision that is itself analytically significant, with the dominant gender ideology of a social formation in which women's intimate and professional choices remains, despite real formal advances in women's educational and occupational participation, significantly constrained by the authority of family, the pressure of community expectation, and the perpetual threat of social sanction for behaviour that deviates from gender-normative scripts.

The most persistent and structurally central of these gendered tropes is what this paper proposes to call the trope of romantic destiny: the structural assumption, reproduced across the overwhelming majority of texts in this corpus, that genuine love — love that is sufficiently intense, sufficiently pure, and sufficiently patient — will ultimately and necessarily overcome all social obstacles to its expression, and that the narrative resolution of the romantic story in the achievement of successful heterosexual partnership represents not merely a conventionally satisfying narrative outcome but a form of moral vindication — a proof that the love in question was legitimate in some deep social and metaphysical sense, that the relationship it sought was socially sanctioned by the very fact of its eventual success, and that the choices made by the lovers in its pursuit were correct. The ideological function of this trope in the specific context of Indian gender relations deserves careful explication: it naturalises heterosexual romantic partnership as the teleological endpoint of feminine desire, rendering other possibilities — professional achievement valued for its own sake, intimate friendship, political engagement, or the positive choice of solitude — as structurally secondary, as aspects of life that takes place in the narrative gaps between romantic encounters rather than as genuine alternatives to the romantic plot.

Ravinder Singh's debut novel *I Too Had a Love Story*, published in the year 2008, is particularly instructive as an illustration of this trope's operations. Drawing on autobiographical material to narrate a romance between two young urban professionals whose partnership is interrupted by the female protagonist's sudden accidental death, the novel achieves genuine emotional power through the authenticity with which it renders the narrator's experience of grief and irrevocable loss. The ideological structure of the narrative is, however, entirely conventional in ways that Hall's encoding/decoding framework makes analytically visible. The female protagonist exists, within the narrative logic that the novel constructs, primarily and in the most fundamental sense as the object of the male narrator's romantic desire and attachment; her death functions within that narrative logic as the occasion and the catalyst for the expression and elaboration of his emotional interiority rather than as a loss whose meaning might be explored in terms of her own subjectivity, her own aspirations for her life, her own social relationships and professional commitments, or her own experience of the developing relationship. The assumption that feminine subjectivity finds its most full and most meaningful expression precisely in its relationship to masculine desire is embedded so deeply in the structure of the narrative that it achieves complete invisibility for the ordinary reader approaching the text for its emotional content: it appears as the natural way of telling this kind of story, not as an ideological encoding that could be differently arranged.

Baudrillard's analytical framework illuminates a further ideological dimension of this romantic corpus, one that is specific to the contemporary digital-media context of its production and consumption. The

text messages, the Facebook messages, the missed phone calls, the Whatsapp conversations, and the profile photographs that structures the romantic plots of Datta's novels are not merely realistic social detail included to make the narrative feel contemporary and recognisable to its young readership. They are signs operating within a hyper-real system in which digital communication has become, for the urban aspirational middle class, the primary medium through which the ideology of romantic love is not merely expressed but performed, simulated, and consumed as a cultural form that is partially independent of any actual romantic relationship it may or may not accompany. The romance is simulated, through the accumulation and contemplation of these digital signs, as something more emotionally intense, more morally legible, and more ideologically coherent than the actual experience of romantic attachment in its embodied social complexity, and the readership consumes this simulation as something closer to a template than to a representation — as a script for their own romantic self-understanding and self-presentation rather than as a reflection of experiences already had.

V. Mythological Fiction and the Common Sense of Tradition

The substantial resurgence of mythological narrative as a commercially successful and socially influential form of Indian popular fiction — a resurgence that is associated in the specifically non-fiction register with Devdutt Pattanaik's prolific and widely read output across the 1990s and 2000s, and in the domain of popular fiction proper with the extraordinary commercial success of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013) and the considerable wave of mythological retellings that was subsequently produced in its commercial wake — represents a distinct ideological formation that requires its own sustained analytical treatment, separate from and in addition to the treatment of romance fiction and campus fiction undertaken in the preceding sections. The common sense which this body of mythological popular fiction constructs and circulates differs significantly in character and social function from the common senses of meritocratic aspiration and romantic destiny analysed above, but it is no less ideological in its operations and those operations is equally illuminated by the five theoretical frameworks assembled in this paper.

Devidutt Pattanaik's myth commentary — produced across a substantial body of illustrated books and popular essays that spans the period from the late 1990s to the 2010s and that includes texts such as *Myth = Mithya* (2006) and *Jaya* (2010) — performs a specific and consequential ideological work in the cultural landscape of post-liberalisation India. It presents the myths, symbols, ritual practices, and narrative traditions of the Hindu religious tradition as constituting a coherent, internally consistent, and philosophically sophisticated system of thought and value — a system that provides, moreover, a distinctively and authentically Indian answer to the fundamental questions of ethical life, social organisation, governance, and personal conduct that the Western analytical traditions derived from Enlightenment philosophy cannot, in this account, adequately address. This presentation is not merely interpretive or educational in any neutral sense of those terms: it is hegemonic in precisely the analytical sense that Hall's framework specifies. It articulates the Hindu tradition as the natural and self-evident cultural foundation of Indian civilised life as such, and it constructs a common sense in which the consultation of mythological tradition — the turning toward the inherited narrative repertoire of the Hindu majority — is presented as the natural, culturally authentic, and practically wise response to the ethical and social questions generated by contemporary Indian experience.

Jameson's analytical framework reveals the political unconscious that is at work in this mythological common sense with a clarity that other analytical approaches might miss. The ideological function of the

return to myth in post-liberalisation India is the management of a profound cultural contradiction that is generated by the specific social dynamics of the period: the contradiction between the rapid and disorienting pace of social and cultural change produced by economic liberalisation — the disruption of established family structures, the challenge to traditional caste and gender hierarchies, the progressive displacement of regional language cultures by a globalised consumer culture conducted in English and in Americanised visual idioms — and the widespread and politically powerful desire for cultural continuity, for a form of Indian modernity that is not experienced as merely derivative or imitative of Western models but as rooted in and continuous with an indigenous tradition of considerable antiquity and philosophical richness. The mythological novel provides an imaginary resolution to this contradiction at the level of narrative: it makes the traditional material available in a contemporary, accessible, and pleasurable form, demonstrating through the very fact of its narrative attractiveness that the tradition is capable of accommodating and illuminating contemporary experience, and thereby producing the experience of cultural continuity — the experience of belonging to and drawing on a living tradition — as a commercially available consumer pleasure.

The ideological consequences of this particular form of imaginary resolution are, however, far from politically neutral, as a careful examination of the corpus reveals. The version of the Hindu tradition that mythological popular fiction makes available to its large and growing readership is not a neutral or comprehensive presentation of that tradition in all its internal diversity, contradiction, and historical complexity. It is a specifically selected and specifically inflected version: one that is philosophically ecumenical and humanistically appealing in its explicit values and its narrative surface, but that is structurally organised around the presuppositions of Hindu cultural centrality — presuppositions that aligns the corpus, with a consistency that is itself analytically significant, with the broader cultural project of Hindu nationalism that has become an increasingly dominant political force in India across the period under examination. Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry's relationship to its market provides the most direct analytical framework for understanding this alignment: the market for mythological popular fiction is constituted by the same aspirational urban Hindu middle class whose cultural investments and political sympathies makes Hindu cultural nationalism a culturally resonant and politically potent formation in contemporary India, and the publishing industry, following the commercial logic that Adorno and Horkheimer analyses, produces the version of the tradition that this particular market will find most immediately legible, most culturally affirming, and most personally satisfying in its implications.

VI. Crime Fiction and the Ideology of Order: Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, published in the year 2006, occupies a position within the landscape of Indian popular fiction that is in many respects structurally anomalous relative to the other texts considered in this paper. It is a crime novel of very substantial formal and literary ambition — of considerable length, of a structural complexity that draws upon multiple narrative registers, of a stylistic hybridity that moves fluidly among English, Hindi, Marathi, and Punjabi — that was nevertheless published and commercially positioned as popular fiction and achieved significant sales success both in the Indian domestic market and internationally. This combination of formal literary ambition and commercial popular form means that its ideological operations are considerably more complex and internally contested than those of the bestselling romance or campus novel, and its sustained analysis

both demonstrates the analytical power of the theoretical frameworks assembled in this paper and reveals some of their limits and constraints.

The novel's structural architecture is organised around the investigation conducted by a Mumbai police officer of Sikh origin, Sartaj Singh, into the circumstances surrounding the suicide of the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde at the narrative's opening. The investigation proceeds through an alternation between Sartaj's inquiries in the narrative present and extended retrospective accounts of Gaitonde's life, social origins, criminal career, and eventual political and religious entanglements, together constructing a panoramic social portrait of Mumbai that encompasses the criminal underworld, the police institutional culture, the Bollywood film industry, the political establishment of post-Independence Maharashtra, the intelligence and security apparatus of the Indian state, and the ordinary lives of the city's heterogeneous and frequently desperate populations across several decades. The novel's most distinctive ideological characteristic — the feature that most clearly differentiates it from the genre fiction with which it shares its commercial positioning — is its refusal to provide the reader with the simple and satisfying resolutions that the crime genre conventionally promises: the criminal punished and order restored, the individual heroism of the detective vindicated, the moral clarity of a social world in which the good ultimately prevails.

Yet the ideological work performed by *Sacred Games*, when it is analysed through Jameson's framework with the attention it requires, is not simply subversive of the genre's ideological conventions in any straightforward way. The novel's ambition of panoramic social mapping — its meticulous and sustained documentation of the structural relationships that obtains between criminal organisation, financial capital, political power, and the ordinary circumstances of everyday social life in the city of Mumbai — produces what Jameson, drawing on the geographer Kevin Lynch, calls cognitive mapping: an imaginative representation of the social totality that makes the overwhelming complexity of social processes and their structural interconnections legible and navigable for a readership that lacks direct access to the social worlds the novel depicts. This cognitive map is not ideologically innocent in its construction or its effects: the specific organisation of social space and social agency within it, the specific allocation of narrative sympathy and moral judgement across its range of characters and situations, and the specific form of its ultimate resolution — which confirms the reality of a large-scale violent conspiracy threatening the security of the Indian nation-state, and which in confirming this vindicates the claim of the state to the monopoly on legitimate violence — all reproduce specific assumptions about the relationship between order, law, security, and social value that aligns closely with the dominant ideological formations of the contemporary Indian post-liberalisation state.

Baudrillard's framework illuminates a final and important dimension of the novel's ideological texture: the specific cultural function of Mumbai as a hyper-real urban space in the novel's imaginative geography. The Mumbai that *Sacred Games* constructs through its dense accumulation of vernacular language, cultural reference, social observation, and historical detail is not a realistic representation of an actual urban environment that could be verified against the experience of living in that city. It is a hyper-real construction: a Mumbai that is more morally legible, more socially comprehensive, more cinematically intense, and more emotionally compelling than the actual city of experience, produced through precisely the kind of dense sign accumulation that Baudrillard's analysis of the simulacrum describes. Readers engages with this Mumbai as a form of cultural tourism — acquiring through the act of reading the appearance and the pleasures of social knowledge, of intimate familiarity with social

worlds that is otherwise inaccessible — without the discomfort, the ambiguity, and the ethical complexity that actual social proximity to those worlds would inevitably involves.

VII. Common Sense, Repetition, and the Social Function of Narrative

The analyses that has been developed across the preceding four sections — of campus fiction and the trope of meritocracy, of romance fiction and the trope of romantic destiny, of mythological popular fiction and the common sense of Hindu cultural tradition, and of crime fiction and the ideology of social order — converges on a set of structural observations about the ideological work performed by Indian popular fiction in the period under examination that is worth bringing into explicit analytical relationship with one another. Across the full range of the corpus, across genres and sub-genres that is formally and thematically diverse in many respects, a consistent and interconnected set of ideological operations can be identified with analytical confidence: the naturalisation of specific and historically contingent social hierarchies through the repetition of narrative tropes that renders those hierarchies as the unquestioned background condition of the social world rather than as the contested and potentially transformable content of political life; the construction and continuous reinforcement of a common sense that aligns closely with the aspirations, self-understandings, and cultural investments of the aspirational urban Hindu middle class that constitutes the primary market for English-language popular fiction in the period; the management of real and structurally generated social contradictions through narrative resolutions that provides the aesthetic pleasures of imaginary resolution without requiring or even suggesting the possibility of actual social transformation; and the production of a hyper-real social world whose density of consumer signs performs the ideology of consumer capitalism as a natural and sufficient medium of social identity and social aspiration rather than arguing for it through any form of explicit propositional claim.

The concept of common sense — drawn from Gramsci's political theory and developed for the analysis of popular culture by Stuart Hall — emerges from this analysis as perhaps the single most useful analytical category for integrating its various threads into a coherent account of the ideological function of the corpus as a whole. Common sense, as Gramsci theorised it, refers to the ensemble of taken-for-granted assumptions about social reality that circulates in a given society at a given historical moment — the things that everyone knows without requiring instruction, that does not need to be argued for because they appear as the self-evident and unquestionable background conditions of social life. The ideological power of popular fiction resides precisely in its capacity to contribute — through the repetition of narrative tropes, the construction of fictional social worlds, and the provision of reading pleasures that are simultaneously aesthetic and social — to the continuous production and reproduction of this common sense. Popular fiction achieves its ideological work not by arguing for particular social positions in any explicit or propositional manner but by incorporating the assumptions of those positions so deeply and so pervasively into the structures of its narratives that they appear simply as the natural way of telling a story about love, or professional aspiration, or justice, or what it means to be Indian.

The specific common senses produced and reproduced by Indian popular fiction across the period from 1990 to 2019 reflects, with a consistency that is itself analytically significant, the specific social formations and historical dynamics of post-liberalisation India. The common sense of meritocracy — the collective assumption that individual talent and individual effort are the primary and ultimately decisive determinants of social outcomes, regardless of the social position from which the individual begins — reflects and serves the interests of a middle class that has materially benefited from the expansion of

professional and technical opportunities produced by economic liberalisation while remaining substantially insulated from the recognition that its own social position is itself a form of advantage that contributes independently to the achievement of those outcomes. The common sense of romantic destiny — the assumption that heterosexual partnership is the natural and proper telos of feminine desire, the endpoint toward which feminine aspiration properly tends — reflects and serves the interests of a gender order that has adapted its outward forms to the real and significant expansion of women's educational and professional participation while preserving in its deeper structures the substantive authority of family and community over the intimate choices of its female members. The common sense of Hindu cultural centrality — the assumption that the myths, rituals, and narrative traditions of the Hindu majority constitutes the natural, authentic, and self-evidently appropriate cultural foundation of Indian civilised life — reflects and serves the interests of a cultural nationalism whose political dominance has increased markedly across the period under examination and whose cultural work is substantially assisted by the mythological popular fiction analysed in Section V.

None of these common senses is, of course, produced by popular fiction alone or in any simple causal relation to any single cultural form. They are produced and reproduced across the full range of cultural institutions and social practices through which a society reproduces itself and its members — schools and families, religious institutions and workplaces, political parties and social media platforms — and popular fiction is one node within this much broader and more complex cultural network. It is, however, a node of particular analytical importance and practical cultural consequence because of the intimacy, the immediacy, and the pleasure with which its ideological content is consumed by its very large readership. The reader who finds herself identifying with the romantic heroine, sharing in the meritocratic hero's vindication, or recognising her own social world in the hyper-real consumer landscape of the popular novel, is not simply receiving ideological instruction from without: she is actively and pleasurably participating in the production of her own common sense, finding in the narrative pleasures of the text a confirmation and elaboration of the social world as she already understands it and as she is therefore motivated to continue to understand it. This is what makes popular fiction ideologically powerful, and this is what makes its sustained critical analysis both intellectually necessary and politically significant for any serious understanding of the cultural dynamics of contemporary India.

VIII. Conclusion: Reading Against the Grain

The argument that has been developed across the preceding sections of this paper has been simultaneously descriptive and analytical in its overall intellectual orientation: descriptive in the sense of providing a detailed and texturally grounded account of the specific ideological operations performed by Indian popular fiction across the period from the year 1990 to the year 2019, and analytical in the more demanding sense of identifying and applying the theoretical frameworks that makes those operations visible to critical scrutiny — that allows the analyst to see what the ordinary reader, consuming these texts for the pleasures they offers, is structurally positioned not to see. The paper's central argument is that the five theoretical traditions on which it has drawn — Adorno and Horkheimer's structural critique of the culture industry, Hall's dynamic account of encoding, decoding, and hegemonic articulation, Bourdieu's sociological analysis of cultural capital and the social construction of taste, Jameson's theorisation of the political unconscious and the ideological function of narrative genre, and Baudrillard's radical account of simulation, the simulacrum, and the hyper-real — are not competing

alternatives from among which the analyst must choose but complementary analytical resources whose combined application yields an understanding of the ideological work of popular fiction that no one of them, applied in isolation, could adequately achieve.

Adorno and Horkheimer provides the structural account of the market conditions that produces narrative standardisation in the cultural field and the mechanism through which the habituating repetition of conventional resolutions serves ideological ends that extends well beyond the intentions or awareness of any individual author. Hall provides the specific analytical tools required for reading the ideological encodings of particular texts and for understanding, at the level of both production and reception, the processes through which hegemonic consent is produced, negotiated, and contested across specific historical conjunctures of cultural production. Bourdieu provides the sociological analysis that situates cultural forms within the structures of class and the dynamics of the cultural field, showing how the habitus of specific social groups shapes both the production and the reception of popular fiction in ways that makes the reproduction of class inequality through cultural means appear as the natural expression of individual taste and sensibility. Jameson provides the analytical framework for understanding the conventions of popular narrative genre as ideological solutions to structurally generated social contradictions, enabling the analyst to reads the political unconscious of popular narrative form beneath the surface of its manifest and explicit content. And Baudrillard provides the most radical of the five analyses: the account of how, under conditions of advanced consumer capitalism, ideology ceases to operate through the distortion of a stable underlying reality and begins to operate instead through the simulation of a hyper-reality that is consumed, by its audiences, as more real than the real itself.

What all five of these theoretical traditions share, and what distinguishes the kind of critical reading they together makes possible from a purely aesthetic or a purely historicist approach to popular fiction, is their collective insistence on a fundamental and analytically productive principle: that the ordinary story is never, in any socially or politically significant sense, merely ordinary. What appears natural in popular narrative — the self-evident rightness of its resolutions, the taken-for-granted quality of its social assumptions, and the unquestioned familiarity of its tropes— is always historically specific, always reflective of particular and interested social configurations, and always, in consequence, open to critique and to the possibility of being differently arranged. The practice of reading popular fiction against the grain — attending with critical precision to what the narrative naturalises rather than to what it explicitly asserts, to what its recurring tropes assumes rather than to what its individual plots argues, to the social world its common sense takes for granted rather than to the fictional world it explicitly depicts — is not an exercise in unwarranted intellectual suspicion toward cultural forms that are enjoyed and valued by many readers. It is an exercise in the kind of cultural intelligence and critical self-awareness that the five traditions assembled here collectively makes possible and that the extraordinary scale and social reach of Indian popular fiction makes not merely intellectually desirable but politically urgent.

The popular fiction of post-liberalisation India is not, ultimately, merely entertainment to be consumed and set aside without analytical consequence. It is — as the analyses conducted in this paper has attempted to demonstrates — a major site of the cultural production of social reality in the most comprehensive and consequential sense: a socially distributed machine for the manufacture of common sense, the naturalisation of hierarchy, the management of social contradiction, and the simulation of a hyper-real social world in which the existing configurations of power and privilege appears as the natural, inevitable, and morally appropriate conditions of human social life. To reads it critically, in the tradition of the thinkers this paper has engaged throughout, is to begins to understands how the social

world is not merely reflected in the fiction that circulates through it but is actively and continuously produced through that fiction: how the stories we tell ourselves, in the ordinary and unreflective pleasures of everyday reading, are also — and this is what makes their critical analysis so important — the stories that tell us who we are, where we belong, what we should want, and what kind of world it is possible, within the horizon of the common sense they construct, for us to imagine.

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