

**Indian Fiction in English**  
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**Module - 11**  
**Lecture – 39**  
**New Writings in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English**

Good Morning, everyone. Welcome to today's session. Today we look at New Writings in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English. It is going to be slightly different from the kind of lectures that we had before. We are not looking at any particular text. We are not looking at any work of fiction. This is an, this is not really a survey either. It is more about how to approach the new writings in contemporary Indian Fiction in English which ranges from Pulp Fiction to Detective Writing, from Graphic Novel to Chick lit.

So, there are a range of things that we find emerging in the contemporary. It is also dubbed as Indian Writing in English. But as part of this course, as we had clarified right at the outset, there are only certain kinds of works which receive academic attention. So here we are looking at a set of other works in fact a number of other works which are outside the purview of academic attention.

Which are outside the purview of our course, but we cannot really ignore them. Instead we talk about those elements which make those works inaccessible within an academic fortale. In this course so far when we were referring to Indian English Fiction. We talk about our;

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**Indian English fiction**

o 'Canonical', 'literary' fiction ✓	o Salman Rushdie
o A larger-than-Indian presence ✓	o Amitav Ghosh
o Greater international visibility ✓	o Vikram Seth
o Coeval with 'Indian English literature' ✓	o Arundhati Roy
o Prizes, reviewing, literary festivals, promotional events ✓	o Amit Chaudhuri
o Circulated well in a wider Anglo-American market, enjoy wide critical attention and cultural currency ✓	o Rohinton Mistry
	o Anita Desai
	o Shashi Tharoor
	o Mukul Kesavan
	o Kiran Desai
	o Arvind Adiga

Canonical literary fiction which does have a lot of critical attention a lot of critical material to support its reading. It is a kind of writing which is a, larger than Indian presence. It cannot be limited to any Indian audience. On the other hand, it has a greater international visibility than any other kind of literature produced from the subcontinent. It is even considered equivalent to Indian English Literature.

Fiction being the most dominant kind of writing that Indian Writing in English has been producing. And this is also the kind of work. This body of work attracts a lot of attention in terms of prizes, reviews produce nationally and internationally. There are literary festivals where these works and their authors they have almost a celebrity status. There are promotional events for the new works which are coming out.

And this work, this body of writing which is considered as canonical and literary. It is circulated well in a wider Anglo-American market. They enjoy a wide critical attention and cultural currency. And this could be applied to any of the writers that we have been discussing; be it Rushdie, Ghosh, Seth, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor, Mukul Kesavan, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga.

So, these are the set of writers who fall within the purview of this canonical literary fiction, which is generally in an academic sense understood as Indian English Fiction. And regardless of the degree of attention, that these novelists and their works have received, they all have an international visibility. They all have received critical attention, though in variant degrees. So, what about the commercial;

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## What about commercial or popular fiction written in English in India?

Or popular fiction written in English in India. There is a growing market for commercial and popular fiction. There are writers such as Chetan Bhagat who have also taken advantage of this new-found market. There is a growing readership. And how do we engage with this type of writing. The commercial or popular fiction which is also written in English and produced in India. So, when we talk about commercial fiction;

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### Commercial fiction

- o Internal or domestic interest ✓
- o Rarely travels abroad
- o Not meant to be taken 'seriously' or regarded as 'literary'

Vis-a-vis literary or canonical writing. It is mostly of internal or domestic interest. Very rarely travels abroad. And very little attention is received in the international scenario. And conventionally it is also agreed upon that this literature need not be taken seriously and it is never regarded as literary. From the time Srinivasa Iyengar started writing about Indian Writing in English, this distinction was always very pronounced.

He also made a distinction between literary fiction and the pulp literature which was also prominent even then. So, trying to understand how we can approach commercial fiction and how one can situate commercial fiction within these many discussions about literary fiction produced in English.

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Suman Gupta (2015)	
<i>Literary fiction</i> - the respectable public face of Indian literature in English abroad	Commercial fiction - the gossipy café of Indian writing in English at home
Salman Rushdie	Chetan Bhagat

We use Suman Gupta's 2015 work titled *Consumable Text in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology*. This is part of a series on new directions in book history. We find Suman Gupta beginning as an entry point to talk about literary fiction and commercial fiction. He goes on to define literary fiction as, the respectable public face of Indian literature in abroad vis-a-vis Commercial Fiction which is the gossipy cafe of Indian Writing in English at home.

If Salman Rushdie is one of the most representative and best-known writers of literary fiction, we can talk about Chetan Bhagat as perhaps the most prominent representative of commercial fiction in the contemporary. And this distinction that Suman Gupta gives is very useful because in the space of an academic discussion on Indian Writing in English, Indian Fiction in English, we so far have the room only to talk about literary fiction.

There is hardly any attention being paid commercial fiction to such an extent that one chooses to work under the superior's notion that Indian Fiction in English is all about the literary fiction, all about the international attention and all about the prizes that they had been winning internationally. When we begin to include commercial fiction into this body of discussion, may be our arguments will take a different line altogether.

Maybe the points presented would be from a different perspective. These are some of the things that we need to think about as and when we reach an, almost the end of this course. Through this lecture, though we do not have the time, not as the course address those wider scope, of addressing a commercial fiction as a genre which deserves a critical attention. Why we are not really doing that as part of this course.

I hope this lecture will provide an entry point for you to look at different other new writings which are also perhaps begging for academic attention in the contemporary. When we talk about the new writings and the new genres, these are the;

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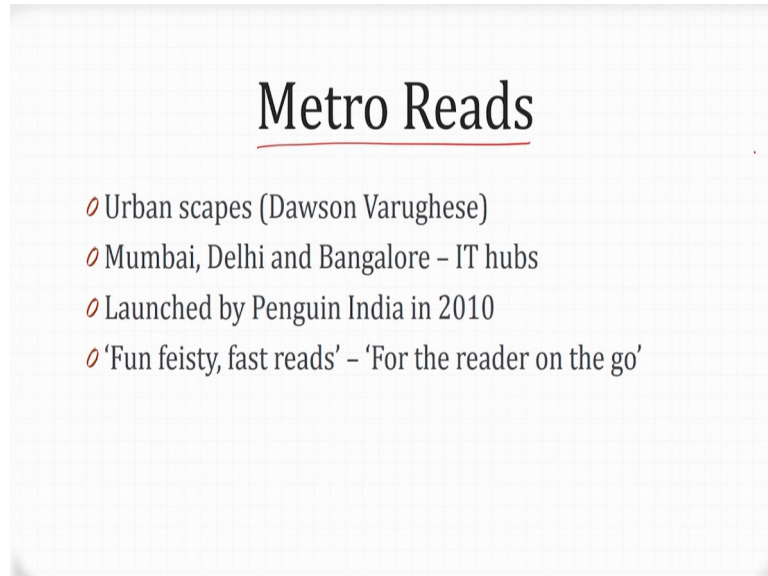


Some of the newer things that we can find around us today. Detective fiction, Science fiction and fantasies, Chick lit, Romances, Campus novels and of course the Graphic novels. If you recall the many discussions that we have been having, we have hardly focussed on these different distinctions. Because the writings about fiction entirely focuses on the kind of works produced by the likes of Rushdie or if we go to an earlier-times, by the likes of Rajaram Rao, Anand and Narayan.

And you must also notice this an almost invisible presence of women writers except for 1 or 2 writers such as Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. We find that this is predominantly a male forte. When we look at these new genres, we will find a lot of female presence and may be that is something that we can also talk about when we engage with commercial fiction in a more serious, in a more academic way.

What is interesting about commercial fiction or popular fiction is that, in the contemporary era, the publishers and the literary market, they have begun to take their readers more seriously. In 2010 Penguin India launched a series of works;

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Under the title Metro Reads. And Dawson Varughese in his work, he refers to these as the works which cover the urban scapes. The focus of a Metro Reads launched by Penguin was the IT hubs, Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. And this was targeted at the reader who loves fun, feisty and fast reads and it was meant for the reader on the go. And needless to say, this was very popular. This was unlike the kind of work produced by Rushdie, Ghosh or the generation that came after.

This was for the ones who wanted to read in English but who wanted something light, something more palatable, one, anything that one can read on the go as they advertised. And some of the titles which came under this series Metro Reads it;

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*Dreams in Prussian Blue* (2010)  
*Love Over Coffee* (2010)  
*No Deadline for Love* (2011)  
*Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* (2011)  
*Where Girls Dare* (2010)  
*The Premier Murder League* (2010)  
*Jack Patel's Dubai Dreams* (2011)  
*What Did I Ever See in Him?* (2011)  
*Love on the Rocks* (2011)  
*With or Without You* (2010)  
*Close Call in Kashmir* (2010)

These are the set of titles. *Dreams in Russian Blue*, *Love Over Coffee*, *No Deadline for Love*, *Losing my Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas*, *Where Girls Dare*, *The Premium Murder League*, *Jack Patel's Dubai Dreams*, *What Did I Ever See in Him*, *Love on the Rocks*, *With or Without You*, *Close Call in Kashmir*. So, we, even as the title suggest, we do not find any profound theme being discussed over here.

This is certainly not about the nation as we had been noticing in the works, in the more literary kind of works. This is about simpler things in life. This is about relationships. This is about the mundane and the lighter things that one would see around in life. The nature of these titles would itself tell us that, there is hardly anything serious about these novels that require our serious academic attention. So how would we intervene in such a scenario.

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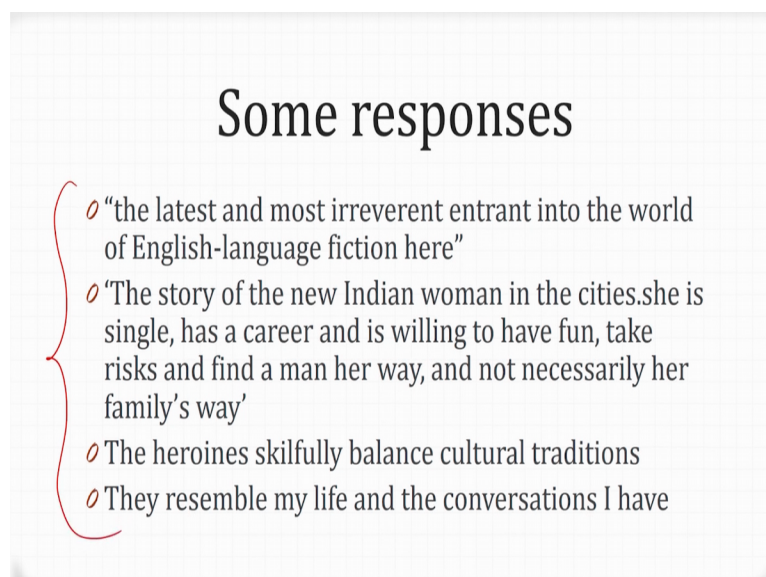
## Indian chick lit

- o *Trust Me* by Raja Shree
- o *The Zoya Factor* by Anuja Chauhan
- o "Ten years after the publication of Bridget Jones' Diary, the genre of fiction most recognisable for its pink cover art of stilettos, martini glasses and lipsticks, is now being colourfully infused with bindis, saris and bangles" – Sunaina Kumar in "The Rise of Ladki-Lit" (2006)

And there is also this uh emergent genres, Indian Chick lit, 2 of the important works which read a lot of success in the contemporary which were launched as Chick lit where, Trust Me, novel by Raja Shree and The Zoya Factor by Anuja Chauhan. Sunaina Kumar noted in her short essay, The Rise of Ladki-Lit in 2006. The 10 years after the publication of Bridget Jones' Diary, the genre of fiction most recognisable for its pink cover art of stilettos, martini glasses and lipsticks is now being colourfully infused with bindis, sarees and bangles.

We all know that Bridget Jones' Diary was the novel and the movie which inaugurated the emergence of this (()) (10:47) Chick lit. It has got white currency across the world today and Trust Me and The Zoya Factor, which are now dubbed as Indian Chick lit; they could be seen as a desi version of this Chick lit. And we do find that there is a growing leadership, there is a growing market for these kind of works. And some of the responses to these;

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New kinds of writings not necessarily form the critiques. These are form randomly reviews. These are from blogs. And these responses are very interesting and quite telling. One of them reads, the latest and most irreverent entrant into the world of English language fiction. It is the story of the new Indian women in the cities. She is single, has a carrier and is willing to have fun, take risks and find a man her way and not necessarily her family's way.

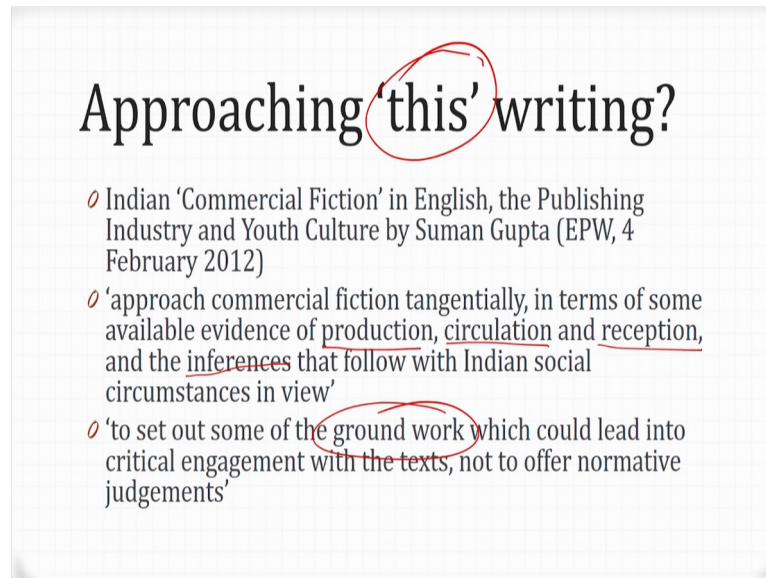
And it is about heroines who skilfully balance cultural traditions. And one blog writer notes that they resemble my life and the conversations I have. So how do we situate these responses within an academic framework. How do we situate these responses which are not necessarily informed by theories, which do not have the baggage of any critical tradition. These



responses cannot be dismissed. They cannot be wished away. This is also a reality that contemporary Indian writing is eliciting.

So, one needs to find a way to incorporate these into an academic language, into an academic framework, so that the critical tradition do not lose out or do not continue to be dismissal about the new writings which are also emerging in English.

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Approaching 'this' writing?

- o Indian 'Commercial Fiction' in English, the Publishing Industry and Youth Culture by Suman Gupta (EPW, 4 February 2012)
- o 'approach commercial fiction tangentially, in terms of some available evidence of production, circulation and reception, and the inferences that follow with Indian social circumstances in view'
- o 'to set out some of the ground work which could lead into critical engagement with the texts, not to offer normative judgements'

And the question about how to approach this writing is something that Suman Gupta's earlier work, 2012 essay which appeared in the EPW titled Indian commercial fiction in English, The Publishing Industry and Youth Culture. I find this essay extremely useful in talking about the difficulties and even at times inability in approaching this writing. It refers to this writing, because it is difficult to club them under a single term.

There is a difficulty of a nomenclature to begin with. There are no frameworks within which we can situate this writing. And more importantly there is no critical tradition which is paid attention to this. When we talk about a literary critical approach, towards this body of writing which is loosely dubbed as commercial or popular. We begin to realise that there are no scholarly works to support our argument, to support even the rational for beginning to talk about this body of writing.

So, this paper also is attentive to this limitation. It does not seek to provide a new approach altogether. On the contrary it tells us very directly that the intention is to approach commercial fiction, tangentially in terms of available evidence of production, circulation and

reception and the inferences that follow within Indian social circumstances in view. So, this is extremely important. And I find this approach very interesting because it takes the focus away from the theme, from the content or the storyline which is being seen as not so serious, frivolous or even dismissive to a very large extent.

And on the contrary without focussing on those elements which are already been seen as inferior and of lesser importance. The focus is placed on the extra literary items, such as production, circulation, reception and the inferences that follow. And this approach would perhaps also help us to know a little bit more about Indian fiction in general which has both literary and commercial writing being a part of it.

And this paper also claims to set out some of the ground work which would lead into the critical engagement with the text and not to offer normative judgements. So, in this approach Suman Gupta clarifies that the objective of the paper, the intention of the paper is not to judge or evaluate a work, but to provide a ground work which could provide some kind of an entry into a proper critical engagement with the text.

He does not outline the kind of approach that one can possibly use. But he does talk about the various ways in which you can begin to approach this body of writing known as commercial or popular fiction. Suman Gupta's essay tells us that there is a body of writing which exists about the commercial or popular fiction. But it appears not in the academic journals; it appears in blogs, in reviews, in the blurbs or in the advertisements which are given by the publishing houses. So, there is a set of works which do approach this commercial fiction but not necessarily from an academic point of view.

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- o A non-academic register ✓
- o An alternative-to-academic authority
- o Literary vs. Commercial? ✓
- o Postcoloniality / literary history vs. globalisation and transcendence of the present
- o The quality of literary fiction vs. disclaimers about the literariness of commercial fiction

So, there is a non-academic register which is already available to talk about these works. And these, the places, the sights where these writings appear. The reviews or the blogs, or the reader responses. Yeah. They can be seen as an alternative to academic authorities, Suman Gupta argues. And here we also tend to look at, we also need to look at the differences in approach. How is a literary approach different from a commercial approach to towards a novel.

For instance, in a literary approach, one is not bothered too much about the saleability of a work or the readability of a work. But on the other hand, the commercial review, it looks more at the marketability of the work, its revenue generating capacity and how reader friendly it is. And when we talk about our reader, it is not a (( )) (17:15) theoretical term from the commercial perspective, it talks about the reader on the go as Penguin puts it.

So, we find that themes and the focus being very different in these 2 approaches. On the one hand we talk about literary fiction, we talk about postcoloniality, about literary history, about riot in the nation and when we talk about the commercial, we talk about globalisation and the transcendence of the present. In the same way when we talk about literary fiction, we talk about the quality of a literary fiction.

But the commercial fiction comes with disclaimers about literariness. That it is easy to read, that you do not have to be a critic. You do not have to be a student of literature to appreciate that. So that seems to be the USP; that seems to be the most important selling point as far as

commercial fiction is concerned. The absence of an academic register, the absence of literariness which is seen as an inferior thing from an academic point of view.

It emerges as perhaps its best advantage when we look at it from a commercial point of view, from a totally non-academic point of view. When we look at the emergence of commercial and popular fiction, the success that 2 of these works enjoyed in the post 80s, they cannot be ignored.

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One is Shobhaa De's, Socialite Nights and Anurag Mathur's The Incredible Americans. But in spite of the success that they had enjoyed, there was very little academic attention, either on the novels or on the nature of success that followed. And the same kind of inability to engage with this different kind of success, with this different kind of readership, can be seen extending itself to this Chetan Bhagat phenomenon as well.

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# The Chetan Bhagat phenomenon

- o "Why did we stop looking down on commercial writing? The answer, say publishers, can be found in two words: Chetan Bhagat" (The Hindustan Times 2007)
- o "It's not as if Indian writers never penned commercial fiction before. But this never developed into a body of work. That has changed ever since bestselling author Chetan Bhagat hit the scene (The Telegraph 2009)

When we talk about Indian Writing in English in the contemporary, much as we know about the kind of success that Chetan Bhagat and his novels enjoyed. His novels were even made into movies. So much as we are aware about the success that Bhagat's novels enjoyed; we refuse to talk about this as part of a literary canonical discussion. But when we approach this phenomenon, the emergence of Chetan Bhagat's novels from a commercial point of view, from the point of view of the literary market, we can rewrite the story of Indian Writing in English.

There is a different kind of a plot that emerges there. An article which appeared in the Hindustan Times in 2007. It points out, why did they stop looking down on commercial writing? The answer, say publishers can be found in 2 words: Chetan Bhagat. Which also indicates that pride to Chetan Bhagat. Before Chetan Bhagat's novels happened, there was this attitude of the publishers towards commercial writing.

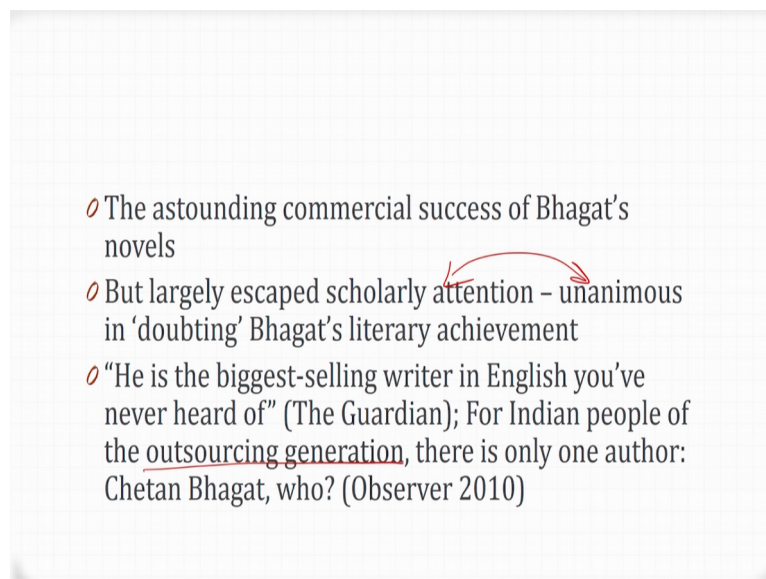
It was being looked down upon. But after Chetan Bhagat this article tells us that the entire scenario has changed, the trend has changed altogether. In 2009 The Telegraph ran another piece, another feature on the new writings produced from India. It remarked, it is not as if Indian writers never penned commercial fiction before but this never developed into a body of work. That has changed ever since best-selling author Chetan Bhagat hit the scene.

So, there were these occasional works which used to come out. Which used to reap commercial success. But this commercial fiction developing into a body of work by itself. So much so that the publishers find it important. The publishers find it financially buyable to

focus on them. That is what changed after Chetan Bhagat happened. So, it is some level when we look at this body of writing from commercial point of view from a larger literary historical point of view.

Even this can be seen as a watershed moment. Of course, it does not tell the story of the nation. It does not have the kind of international attention to compete with the other top-line writers of English Fiction. But nevertheless, this can be seen as a watershed moment. The astounding commercial success;

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Of Bhagat's novels was reported widely across the country and it was even said that a college going student could be found with a copy of Bhagat if your, she was literate enough to read in English. And after the novel was made into a successful movie this attention just got accentuated. But in spite of this astounding success, what captures Suman Gupta's attention is that this whole phenomenon escapes scholarly attention.

There was on the contrary a unanimous doubting of Bhagat's literary achievement. The surveys of literary histories which came out even after the emergence of Bhagat as a writer. We find those surveys not being (()) (22:27) to this moment which changed the dynamics of publishing, which changed the dynamics of marketability of fiction. The guardian mentioned this with the statement. He is the biggest-selling writer in English you would have never heard of.

And an article which came in the Observer in 2010. For Indian people of the outsourcing generation, there is only one author, Chetan Bhagat. Who? So, there is a way in which not just Bhagat's novels but even his audience are being framed. They seem as not accomplished readers. They are not seen as readers who are fit enough to give a judgement, give any value judgement on a work, on a literary work and this is extremely interesting.

The situation that he begins to identify. There is no scholarly attention and when it gets talked about, it is only to express some kind of a doubt about the nature of this achievement, to say that this is not really literary, that it is some publishing gimmick, some marketing gimmick which gave rise to this kind of an interest. Here Suman Gupta is not trying to tell us that we need to now switch our literary lenses our critical lenses towards uh Chetan Bhagat's novels.

On the contrary, he is trying to tell us that this is a phenomenon which cannot be entirely ignored. It needs to be looked at from a larger perspective, from a larger point of view of literary history of publishing which perhaps tell us newer stories. Which would perhaps give us a different way to understand this body of writing. Another article which came in the New York times in 2008;

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It had a similar opinion. Mr. Bhagat might not be another Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy. But he has authentic claims to be one of the voices of a generation of a middle-class Indian youth. Facing the choices and frustrations that come with the prospect of growing wealth. This is important. It may not be about the author himself or the writings that he had been producing.

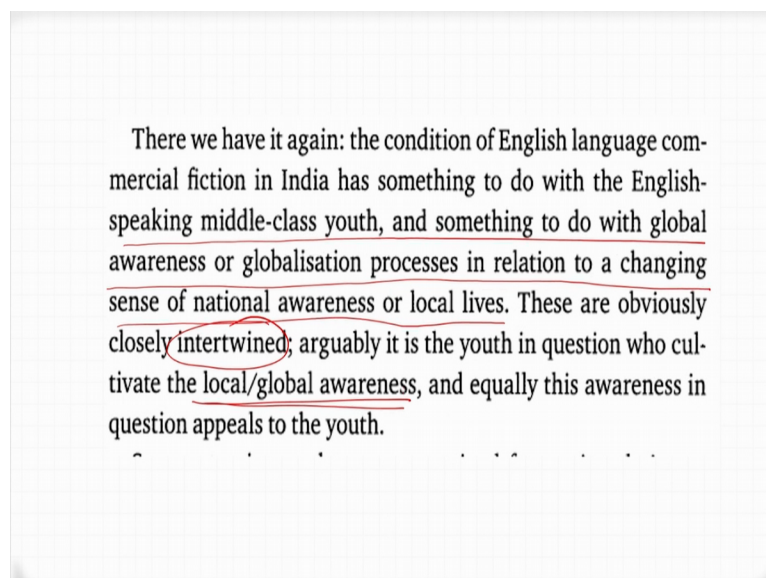
But he cannot be ignored because he is someone who has perhaps articulated in a more or less authentic way, the voice of a generation of a middle-class Indian youth.

This growing readership itself can be a form of study Suman Gupta also argues. And this is perhaps one of the approaches that Suman Gupta is trying to highlight. Something for future researchers to hop on to; that there is a new way in which we can look at this combination of the middle-class youth and India's growing affluence and their presence in this globalised world. And how this also goes on. And how this also goes on to strengthen a sense of national and local identity.

And this will have 2 advantages. 1. It will bring in a new perspective which is not really jaded, which is not overshadowed, which is not dominated by the postcolonial frameworks that they have been using, the framework of the nation that we had been using. And secondly, it will also help us to look inwards, look locally to get an idea of the kind of fiction which is being consumed by the middle-class Indian youth, by the reader on the go, by the one who does not have a training in reading and approach literature.

And this itself can be a new kind of study which would widen the horizons of our understanding and our knowledge of this body of writing that we refer to as Indian Fiction in English. As we wind up this lecture, I leave you with this excerpt from Suman Gupta's work.

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There we have it again, the condition of English language commercial fiction in India has something to do with English-speaking middle-class youth and something to do with global



awareness or globalisation processes in relation to a changing sense of national awareness or local lives. These are obviously closely intertwined. Arguably it is the youth in question who cultivate the local or global awareness and equally this awareness in question appeals to the youth.

By the way like the idea of engaging with commercial Indian popular fiction or not. Suman Gupta's essay and the many non-academic writings about this fiction, it tells us that they are here to stay. And it also encourages to look at new relationships which are being forged. The intertwinings which we miss out or we overlook when we look at canonical and literary fiction, they become clearer, they emerge stronger in these works which have a local grounding.

But they also have a global awareness because the interest in them, in the first place it has to do with global awareness or globalisation as Suman Gupta points it out. I hope this lecture was useful in giving you a sense of how different forms of writings which are outside the purview of the works that we look at can be approached. And this has also been useful in showcasing the newer approaches which do not really look at the text but look at the audience, the different forms of reception, different modes of publication to seek what we can infer about the new writings that are now emerging and are here to stay. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.