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A literary trickery

There was a time when if you didn't care for literature — you know, writings that are consciously an 'art form' — you didn't care to talk about your choice. You may have had an apologetic air at a dinner party if you preferred one of Khushwant Singh's countless joke books to his Train to Pakistan. But you certainly wouldn't boast about not reading books that tried to move you, make you think or do anything more than tell you a time-pass story with the sole allure of having characters 'you can relate to'.

Somewhere down the line, more and more people with a highly developed sense of reverse snobbery started exclaiming how they can't bear to read anything 'serious' and oh-so-much prefer 'low-brow frivolous' reading. Which is a bit like people boasting about how they prefer Maggi noodles to 'pretentious' restaurant khana.

Now, I can't imagine a reading life without my regular fix of straight-up forget-after-you've-shut-the-book racy reads. Right now, I'm thoroughly enjoying the rollicking 2,300 years-back-and-forth-per-chapter historical thriller Chanakya's Chant by Ashwin Sanghi. But to deny myself of the more lasting pleasures of reading a finely written novel with carefully written sentences and finely crafted passages that make me stop and read them again in a tiny explosion of awe and envy is a different ball game altogether. (Fiction's great advantage over non-fiction: it possesses the magical ability of accounting for things that never happened or will ever happen.)

Much like the precious division made in the 80s between 'mainstream' and 'parallel' cinema, the difference between 'popular' and 'literary' fiction has led to the strange glorification of the textual equivalent of Jeetendra movies with the corollary of contemporary 'literature' being slagged as posh utter tosh. Which is a pity. The old dogma of valuing 'literary' books even if they are bone-crushingly boring and scandalously pretentious has been replaced by the new dogma of celebrating fluffy brain-dimmers that give genuinely entertaining non-literary fiction a bad name.

Thankfully, there is still enough literary action abroad. The latest Jonathan Franzen may be unreadable and the last Salman Rushdie may have been twee. But the critical machine at the disposal of the publishers-writers-readers tag team 'over there' ensures that 'literary' fiction is popular and alive. This, in turn, ensures that 'literary' books read by western readers are the only 'literature' that most desi English-reading 'literary' fiction readers are aware of and don't feel embarrassed to read.

So while Siddharth Chowdhury's Day Scholar beats Brett Easton Ellis' latest, Imperial Bedrooms, hollow in the same game of brutal hilarity, the former will be considered 'boring literary fiction' while the latter will be the work of "a real American genius" (from the GQ blurb on the book's back cover).

So with a large bulk of English readers in India far too sophisticated to read literature, how does one convince the reader who doesn't mind 'literary' fiction and enjoys his Orhan Pamuks, Philip Roths, Ian

McEwans and Amitav Ghosh to give desi ‘literary’ fiction that hasn’t been approved by the New York Times or the Independent a shot? I can think of only using the ‘Lolita strategy’. The 1960s-1970s mass market editions of Vladimir Nabokov’s masterpiece, *Lolita*, bore covers that made it look like a Harold Robbins novel. A modern classic of literature the book became a runaway paperback hit when readers who wouldn’t be caught dead with a ‘literary’ book took to it thinking it was a potboiler. (Well, the story of an erotic relationship between a man in his late-30s and a 12-year-old girl did help in garnering popular interest.)

So if the next Kalpana Swaminathan or Chandras Choudhury novel is published with a ‘Chetan Bhagat’ paperback look and price, the anti-literature snob (which includes most of the media) should fall for it and take to the occasional ‘high-brow’ book without a squeal. Which is a far easier thing to organise than getting the Indian reader of ‘literary’ fiction allergic-to-desi-literature to deign to read contemporary literature from these philistine shores.

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