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Problematic Pleasure: A Cultural Analysis of Taste and Power in Goodreads Reviews of Select "Controversial" Indian English Fiction

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the cultural phenomenon of the "problematic favourite" within the digital literary sphere. It analyses the vibrant and often fraught public discourse on Goodreads surrounding a select corpus of seminal but contentious Indian English novels: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* (2013), Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2018), and Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010). Central to this study is the question of how readers publicly negotiate their aesthetic pleasure against a spectrum of ethical, political, and social convictions. Employing a qualitative discourse analysis informed by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, and Michel Foucault, the paper maps the rhetorical strategies of these reviews. It demonstrates that the platform is far from a monolith of a singular "woke" consciousness; rather, it constitutes a dynamic battleground where competing ideological frameworks – from liberal secularism and social justice advocacy to religious traditionalism and cultural nationalism—collide and are performed. The ubiquitous "I loved it, but…" formulation is identified as the key linguistic site where Stuart Hall's model of negotiated reading is publicly enacted and where new, digital forms of Bourdieusian cultural capital – contingent on fluency in these critical discourses – are accrued and displayed.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the Goodreads community functions as a potent Foucauldian site of discursive power. Here, the traditional authority of literary gatekeepers is systematically challenged, and the very capacity to define literary value is redistributed through crowd-sourced, peer-led judgement. In this digital public sphere, the act of reading is fundamentally transformed: it emerges not as a private aesthetic encounter, but as a public performance of the self, where taste is inextricably entangled with the work of navigating India's complex and contested social landscape.

Keywords: Problematic Favourite, Cultural Capital, Digital Public Sphere, Negotiated Reading, Indian English Fiction, Goodreads, Discursive Power.

The digital literary sphere, particularly platforms like Goodreads, has fundamentally reconfigured how literature is consumed, judged, and integrated into public consciousness. In the context of contemporary India, this platform has become a crucial arena where the society's complex social, political, and aesthetic debates are also staged through the discourse of reading. A particularly revealing phenomenon within this space is the rise of the "problematic favourite", which means a text that readers find artistically compelling yet simultaneously recognise as socially, politically, and ethically troubling. This is not a mere private readerly conflict but a sophisticated public performance, where the act of reviewing becomes a critical domain for negotiating complex and often conflicting cultural values. By conducting a qualitative discourse analysis of the reviews surrounding five seminal but quite debated texts mainly Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* (2013), Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2018), and Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), this paper posits that the Indian Goodreads community constitutes a dynamic digital public sphere. In this Foucauldian sphere of discursive power, the traditional authority of literary critics seems to be systematically challenged, and

new hierarchies of Bourdieusian cultural capital are forged and wielded, all through the public, often agonistic, negotiation of readerly pleasure against an evolving socio-political consciousness. This analysis will first deconstruct the rhetorical language of this negotiation, then conduct a comparative analysis of the specific controversies, and finally theorise the platform's role in redistributing cultural authority and modelling a new, performative digital taste-making.

The Language of Negotiated Reading

The most immediate and pervasive evidence of this cultural negotiation is found in the specific rhetorical and linguistic patterns that constitute the "problematic favourite" review. These patterns are not merely stylistic choices; they are the practical, textual manifestations of Stuart Hall's theory of "negotiated reading." Hall's model of encoding/decoding moves beyond the simplistic binary of acceptance or rejection of a text's message. Instead, he identifies a negotiated position where audiences acknowledge the dominant ideological framework of the text but inflect it with their own rules, exceptions, and lived experiences, thereby resisting its complete hegemony (Hall 137). The quintessential formulation of this on Goodreads is the "I loved it, but…" structure, a syntactical performance that meticulously balances aesthetic appreciation against ethical or political critique, revealing a reader caught between the text's appeal and their own conscientised values.

In reviews of *The God of Small Things*, this negotiation frequently pivots on the tension between Roy's lush, poetic prose and her transgressive, often bleak, thematic choices. The aesthetic pleasure is consistently and eloquently acknowledged. Reviewer Rajat Ubhaykar describes the book as "both beautiful and crafty," a "rare combination," praising Roy for creating "a language of her own, a juvenile lucid language which complements the wistful mood of the book beautifully" (Ubhaykar). Similarly, Michael Finocchiaro was "viscerally grabbed" by the "beautifully written" and "supersaturated text," admiring the "capital letter

words and concepts that are sort of a kids filter on the omniscient narrator's text" (Finocchiaro, *The God of Small Things*). However, this praise is almost invariably followed by a critical pivot, a "but" that introduces the reader's ethical or emotional discomfort. Finocchiaro's admiration is tempered by his feeling that the characters "lack a soul" and that the climactic breaking of "Love's Law" was "unnecessary and a bit gratuitous," leaving him with a "less empty feeling at the end" and questioning, "what was the point?" (Finocchiaro, *The God of Small Things*). This sentiment is starkly articulated by Theresa, who categorizes the novel as "wallowing in the most base and offensive aspects of the human hondition without the slightest hint of hope." For her, the novel's failure is its lack of a "moral, an opinion, a solution, or at least an argument," resulting in an experience akin to "punching ourselves in the emotional face for days… for no reason" (Theresa). Here, the "but" functions as a corrective, a demand for a liberating or didactic resolution that the text's complex, amoral universe refuses to provide. The pleasure derived from Roy's "verbal tapestry" is acknowledged, however it is immediately counterbalanced by a critique of the text's perceived ethical or emotional deficit, performing a readerly negotiation between aesthetic seduction and moral expectation.

A similar, yet distinct, negotiation occurs within the discourse surrounding *Pyre*. Here, the "problematic" element is not a question of hope versus despair but of message versus medium. The reviews consistently validate the novel's powerful subject matter—the brutal reality of caste violence and rural intolerance—while critically assessing its literary execution. Adina affirms that the "subject is very disturbing" and that "the author did a good job" in portraying the "violent and narrow sighted" response of the villagers (Adina). However, she ultimately finds the narrative "too repetitive" and the prose "quite simple and matter a fact," which leads to a sense of "melodrama" and a reduction in her enthusiasm (Adina). David offers a more theoretical appreciation, noting the "powerful move" of never naming the specific castes, thus universalising the prejudice and focusing on the structure of bigotry itself.

Nevertheless, his final assessment is that the story offers "little new," simply reaffirming pre-existing notions about the "intolerance and violence that exists in rural India" (David). In these cases, the negotiation is not between beauty and offensiveness, but between the importance and accuracy of the social message and the perceived literary merits of the text itself. The reviewers position themselves as socially aware, validating the novel's thematic gravity and political necessity, while simultaneously displaying their literary discernment by critiquing its stylistic simplicity or narrative redundancy. This dual move allows them to accumulate cultural capital on two fronts: as ethically conscious individuals and as aesthetically sophisticated readers.

This performative aspect of the review is a key mechanism for accruing what Pierre Bourdieu terms "cultural capital." For Bourdieu, taste is not an innate or disinterested faculty but a potent social weapon, a means of classifying others and thereby securing one's own position within a social hierarchy (Bourdieu 56). On Goodreads, fluency in the language of social justice, literary theory, or political critique becomes a valuable form of capital. A reviewer who can deftly articulate why they are troubled by Roy's portrayal of the "Love Laws," or who can critique Murugan's depiction of systemic casteism while praising its intent, is not just evaluating a book; they are publicly displaying a valued competency also. This performance constructs a new, digital hierarchy where authority is derived not from institutional affiliation or a by-line in a national newspaper, but from a demonstrated, peer-validated fluency in contemporary critical discourses. The "like" button and the follower count become the tangible metrics of this newly accrued capital, creating an economy of attention where certain types of critical acumen are rewarded with social visibility and influence.

A Comparative Anatomy of Controversy: The Specifics of the "Problematic"

While the "I loved it, but…" formulation provides a standard grammatical-dialectal structure for readerly negotiation, the substance of the debate shifts dramatically depending on

the nature of the text's primary transgression. The Indian Goodreads sphere is not a monolith of a single, homogenous "woke" consciousness but a battleground for competing ideological bases, where the specific source of controversy dictates the language, intensity, and very conclusions of the readerly debate. A comparative analysis reveals four distinct genres of "problematic" engagement.

The controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* is the most globally recognised and hinges almost entirely on the axes of religious blasphemy and artistic freedom. Here, the discourse is profoundly polarised and high-stakes, often rendering purely literary analysis secondary to an ideological performance. Many reviewers feel compelled to preface their engagement with the text with a declaration of their political or philosophical stance. Michael Finocchiaro explicitly frames the act of reading as an act of political solidarity, urging others to read it "if for any other reason as to oppose censorship and support artistic freedom and artistic license," especially in an era of "religious fanaticism" (Finocchiaro, *The Satanic Verses*). This positions the reviewer as a courageous champion of liberal, Enlightenment values. On the opposing side, reviewers like Saadia B. dismiss the book as "outrageously stupid" and "written with an intention to hurt sentiments," arguing that true freedom of speech must inherently involve respect for other religions (Saadia B.). The platform thus becomes a digital public sphere, in a Habermasian sense, though a deeply fractured and antagonistic one, where the very limits of free expression are contested. The textual analysis itself is often secondary to this larger ideological battle; as Petra X admits, she could not finish the book because it "bored [her] rigid," but she still engages with its monumental cultural status, lamenting that "the fundamentalists have got even that much of a victory" (Petra X). In this case, the book's intrinsic literary meaning is almost entirely subsumed by its explosive extratextual life. The reviews are less about *The Satanic Verses* as a narrative and more about

"The Satanic Verses" as a symbol in a global culture war, with reviewers using the text as a canvas upon which to project their own convictions about faith, offence, and liberty.

In stark contrast, the "problematic" element of *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree is not its content but its form, as it reflects so through the Goodreads reviews. The controversy here is primarily aesthetic and structural, a debate about the very nature of storytelling and readerly patience. The reviews serve as a litmus test for tolerance towards narrative experimentation and definitions of pleasure that defy conventional plot-driven engagement. For every reader like Paul Fulcher, who finds the 700-page novel a "pure pleasure to read" and a "riotous and verbally dextrous exploration of borders," there is a reader like Sandeep, who abandoned it after 375 pages, calling it "rambling, ranting, small talk and nothing else" and citing the physical and mental effort as a "brunt" to be borne (Fulcher; Sandeep). Rosh captures the central conflict quite precisely. She acknowledges and appreciates "beautiful writing, poetic phrases, lyrical cadences," but also demands a "semblance of a plot," which she finds buried under a "tsunami of words" and a "highly stream-of-consciousness" approach that she admits "hardly ever clicks with me" (Rosh). This debate highlights a different kind of cultural capital at play; one based on familiarity with and appreciation for non-linear, meta-fictional, and linguistically playful narratives versus a capital derived from a preference for plot-driven realism and narrative clarity. The authority being challenged here is not that of religious leaders or political ideologues, but of literary prize committees (such as the International Booker) and their perceived taste for inaccessible, "highbrow" fiction that defies conventional enjoyment. The reviewer who champions the novel's complexity, like Vartika, performs a sophisticated readership by explaining how the novel "challenges the conventions of the Western novel" and is "rooted in a long-overlooked school of modern Indian writing," thus positioning their taste as both discerning and culturally informed (Vartika). The very length of the novel and its translation from around a 366-page Hindi original to a 735-page English tome becomes a point

of contention too, with reviewers like Rosh questioning publisher choices, thereby extending the critique from the author's aesthetic to the entire apparatus of literary consecration.

Finally, *The Immortals of Meluha* by Amish Tripathi presents a case study in mythological revisionism and populist appeal, igniting a controversy that is twofold. One is fidelity to religious tradition and the other being judgements of literary quality. The central "problematic" element is Tripathi's deliberate humanisation of Lord Shiva, re-imagining him not as a cosmic deity but as a fallible, hot-tempered Tibetan tribal chief who swears and smokes marijuana. While some, like the reviewer named M, find this "refreshing," noting with approval that "Shiva wasn't an all mighty, all-powerful god who knew everything, never made any mistakes," others are deeply offended by these liberties (M). Saburi Pandit calls the book a "nightmare for all those who are devout lovers of Shiva," criticising its "vague writing" and logical inconsistencies that, for her, "makes no sense at all" (Pandit). Simultaneously, a chorus of reviewers attacks the book's literary quality, dismissing its "pedestrian" writing (Indian) and "cliched" dialogues that seem "straight out of some TV soap opera" (Scarlet). The discourse reveals a fundamental tension between a populist, accessible approach to mythology aimed at a mass market and a desire for either devotional accuracy or literary sophistication. The massive commercial success of the book, noted by several reviewers, itself becomes a point of contention, sparking meta-debates about the "dumbing down" of Indian literary taste and what legitimately constitutes "Contemporary Indian literature" (Pandit). The reviewer named "Indian" explicitly demarcates the target audience as "Chetan Bhagat's audience," warning "serious Anglo-bibliophiles" away from the "10th standard writing style" (Indian). This not only critiques Tripathi but also classifies and judges his readers, reinforcing a cultural hierarchy within the literary field itself and performing a boundary-policing function that is central to the accumulation of cultural capital of Bourdieu.

Goodreads as a Foucauldian Space of Power

The collective, bottom-up, and often relentless critique observable on Goodreads represents a seismic shift in the ecology of literary judgement. Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse, power/knowledge, and surveillance provide an exceptionally powerful lens through which to view the operational dynamics of this platform. For Foucault, power is not merely a repressive, top-down force but a productive and circulating one; it moves through discourse, creating norms, establishing truths, and constituting subjects (Foucault 94). Goodreads is a quintessential site of this discursive power. It is a system of perpetual, horizontal surveillance where reading, traditionally a private and intimate act, becomes a public performance subject to the constant gaze, judgement, and categorisation of the community. This is not the Panopticon of a single state authority, but a distributed network of peers who collectively enforce standards of taste, ethics, and intelligibility.

This platform enables a robust form of crowd-sourced, peer-led cultural regulation that functions as a mechanism of what Foucault would call 'normalising judgement' (Foucault). The intense criticism of Amish Tripathi's prose, the heated debates over the narrative pacing of *Tomb of Sand*, or the collective scepticism towards Kumaresan's naivete in *Pyre* all constitute a decentralised, continuous, and public process of evaluation. This process directly impacts an author's reputation and a text's canonical status in a way that was previously dominated by a select few. This phenomenon directly challenges the traditional authority of "literary gatekeepers " which may include the academic critics, newspaper reviewers, and elite prize committees who have historically held a near-monopoly on defining and consecrating literary value. As reviewer Jo (The Book Geek) cynically advises, "Never trust a Booker prize winner," explicitly rejecting the judgement of a premier literary institution in favour of her own personal reading experience and standards of enjoyment (Jo). This represents a significant democratisation of criticism, a dispersal of interpretive authority. However, it is crucial to note

that this new system is also not democratic or an egalitarian utopia of any kind. Rather, new, digital hierarchies swiftly emerge, governed by the accumulation of likes, the number of followers, and the persuasive rhetorical power of a well-articulated review. Authority is redistributed not to everyone equally, but to those who can most effectively wield the community’s preferred forms of cultural capital – be it ethical insight, stylistic analysis, or humorous dismissal. The power is no longer centralised but has become capillary, moving through the myriad interactions of the community itself.

This regulatory function is starkly visible in the discourse around *Pyre*. The community does not just passively analyse the novel’s portrayal of caste violence; it actively and collectively polices the boundaries of its representation, engaging in a continuous process of defining what constitutes a "realistic" portrayal. Reviewers like Adina and Matthew Ted repeatedly question the protagonist Kumaresan’s “naïve” belief that his inter-caste marriage would be accepted, finding it “unrealistic” and “a bit ridiculous” (Adina; Ted). This critique extends beyond mere character analysis; it is a normative judgement about how one should behave or think within the brutal logic of systemic oppression. The community, through its accumulated discourse, establishes a "regime of truth" about the unyielding realities of caste and vigilantly patrols artistic representations for their fidelity to that accepted truth. Similarly, the global debates around *The Satanic Verses* are a textbook example of what Foucault termed the “incitement to discourse”; the fatwa and the surrounding controversy did not silence talk about the book but, paradoxically, produced an endless, self-perpetuating stream of discourse about blasphemy, freedom, and the responsibilities of the author, thereby ensuring the text’s enduring and contentious legacy (Foucault 34). On Goodreads, this incitement is perpetual, fueled by the platform’s very architecture, which encourages continuous commentary and rating, ensuring that the power dynamics surrounding a text like *The Satanic Verses* are constantly re-enacted and negotiated.

Articulating Digital Taste-Making

The evidence from these five case studies allows for the synthesis of a coherent model for understanding how "taste" operates in the contemporary Indian digital literary field. It is no longer, if it ever was, a matter of pure, disinterested aesthetic discernment. Instead, taste is revealed as a tripartite public performance of navigating the complex and often contradictory interplay between three powerful forces that are aesthetic pleasure, ethical alignment, and social accountability.

Aesthetic pleasure remains a powerful and legitimate driver, as seen in the rapturous responses to Roy's prose, the compelling, fast-paced plot of *The Immortals of Meluha*, or the linguistic virtuosity of *Tomb of Sand*. However, in the digital public sphere, this pleasure is no longer a private endpoint. It is now the starting point for a public reckoning. The reader who enjoys *The Immortals of Meluha* must account for its literary flaws or its theological liberties in their review. The reader moved by *The God of Small Things* must grapple publicly with its bleakness and moral ambiguities. This is where ethical alignment comes into play, informed by the reader's distinct ideological framework—be it liberal secularism, social justice advocacy, religious devotion, or cultural nationalism. The reviewer's identity is constructed through the articulation of this alignment, whether they are defending artistic freedom against religious dogma, advocating for feminist or anti-caste readings, or insisting on the sanctity of religious figures.

Finally, and most critically, this entire process is conducted under the condition of social accountability. The review is written for an audience of peers, and the performance is meticulously standardised for that audience's potential judgement. The choice to highlight one's discomfort with a text's politics, to showcase one's ability to appreciate difficult prose, or to dismiss a work as commercially crass – all are strategic moves in a social game where the stakes are one's standing within the community. This synthesis represents the culmination of

Bourdieu's theory within a digital framework. The performative taste-making on Goodreads explicitly actualises Bourdieu's core propositions that taste is a practice situated "at the heart of these symbolic struggles" for distinction (Bourdieu 310); it is "almost always a product of economic conditions identical to those in which it functions" (375), and here shaped by the platform's attention economy; and it manifests as "an acquired disposition" to culturally "'differentiate' and 'appreciate'" (Bourdieu 466). Thus, it is perhaps clear that taste is performance, and the performance is a bid for a specific kind of capital and a specific position within the social hierarchy of readers.

In conclusion, the Goodreads community, including the Indian one, as evidenced by the robust, nuanced, and often fraught discourse around these five "problematic favourites," is far more than a passive repository of book ratings. It is a dynamic, contentious, and highly productive digital public sphere where the very definition of literary value is being continuously contested and redefined. The familiar "I loved it, but…" formulation is the linguistic signature of Stuart Hall's negotiated reading, performed in public for a community of peers. Through this performance, new forms of cultural capital, rooted in fluency with social justice terminology, tolerance for narrative experimentation, or a discerning literary palate – are displayed, recognised, and wielded as social currency. The platform vividly enacts Foucault's discursive power, functioning as a regulatory space where crowd-sourced norms are enforced, and the authority of traditional literary "authorities" is simultaneously challenged and supplanted by a new, peer-based hierarchy. The act of reading, therefore, is fundamentally transformed in the digital age. It is no longer a solitary engagement with a text but a public practice of the self, where aesthetic judgement is deeply entangled with the work of navigating India's complex, vibrant, and often fraught socio-cultural and political landscape. The "problematic favourite" is thus not just a category of book but a catalyst for a deep social process where individual taste becomes a public statement of identity, belief, and belonging.

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