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Review of *Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces*

Eds: Prem Kumari Srivastava & Mona Sinha

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Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces, along with *Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon* (Eds. Gitanjali Chawla and Sangeeta Mittal), both published by Aakar Books, is a step forward from the National Conference "Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon" that was organised in 2019. *Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces* is an anthology of twelve extremely engaging scholarly essays. If the term 'Popular Fiction' means that which is 'readable', 'identifiable' and 'accessible'; then Indian Popular Fiction specifically focuses on Indian writings. The editors of the anthology add the word 'Commercial' into the term to make the anthology a discussion on Indian Popular Commercial Fiction, thereby emphasizing on the role of the market in making literature popular.

The worth of the anthology is proven instantly owing to the fact that it carries a Foreword by internationally acclaimed author and critic Tabish Khair. In his foreword, titled "Popular, Pulp, Proustian", Khair explains the objective of the anthology by analysing its subtitle; "New Genres, Novel Spaces". He asserts that the subtitle "not only highlights this interplay of the new and the old across generic definitions, but also brings in other – newer – genres, including popular ones" (p.9). The anthology, therefore, negotiates between the dialectics of 'pulp' and 'popular'; 'high' and 'low'; 'literary' and 'vulgar' in the Indian Popular Commercial Fiction available in celluloid, social media and print media that emerged towards the end of the last millennium.

In a brilliantly written Introduction, Prem Kumari Srivastava and Mona Sinha, set the perspective of the anthology by underscoring the fact that it delves into literature that is "local and homegrown: from markets to consumers, to themes, to ideas, and people" (p. 25). The introduction posits that the focus of the book is the 'glocal' than the western. This is an

aspect that sets the anthology apart from several criticisms of Popular Culture like *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media and Everyday Life* by Arthur Asa Berger (Sage, 1997).

The twelve essays have been thoughtfully divided into four sections. The first section "Dismantling Hierarchies" attempts to provide a fresh perspective to the existing theorizations related to popular culture. It essentially de-centres all theorizations related to the binaries that Khair points out in his Foreword. The first chapter by Ruchi Nagpal, "'Popular' and 'Classic'" Deconstructing the Categories", looks into the conventional debate on English literature as 'intellectual discipline' vis-a-vis popular literature. Through the canonical texts, also called as 'popular classics' like *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, A Tale of Two Cities, Hamlet, Illiad,* Nagpal questions the concept of 'popular' and 'classical' as being binary opponents. Chapter 2 titled "Literary Fiction as Popular Fiction: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*" by Deblina Rout continues with the same question that Nagpal posits. Rout, too, questions the bifurcation of 'popular' and 'classic' through Lahiri's work. Being awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN Award, Lahiri's work is well within the category of a literary classic, however, it being a narrative of the flesh and blood experiences of the characters makes it popular as well. Ojasvi Kala's "Betwixt and Between: Giving the Middle Its Due" is the third chapter in this anthology. Fashioned in the style of the essay "Indian Pride and Indian Prejudice: Reflections on the Relationship between Regional Indian Literatures and Indian Writing in English" by M.K. Naik, Ojasvi makes a case for Indian Popular Commercial Fiction as the "middle child of the literary family" (p.75) existing in utter negligence, while Popular Fiction enjoys the privileges of the youngest child having got acceptance as a course in universities. Classic continues to be the all-important elder child.

The second section of the anthology "Romancing the Celluloid" brings into focus the literary adaptations of popular writings on celluloid. The first chapter in this section (Chapter 4) by Gautam Choubey entitled "Bhojpuri Leisure: Popularity, Profanity and Piracy" is significant because it studies the almost neglected Bhojpuri entertainment industry and compares it to the more popular Bollywood. Arunabha Bose's "Feluda's Serialised and Celluloid Selves: A Tale of Literariness and Patrilineal Legacies", brings the Bengali popular fiction in focus through a study of Satyajit Ray's Feluda series. Bose's essay posits the creator, Satyajit Ray as the doppelganger of his creation, Feluda. The essay traces the literary ancestry of Ray's creation in several Bengali detective fictions and to Sherlock Holmes as well. Neha Singh's "The Popular 'Dexter': Its Heirs and Impact on Indian Media" assesses the influence of the popular American series *Dexter* on Indian media. She proposes that

Anurag Kashyap's *Raman Raghav 2.0* (2016), Ken Ghosh's *Abhay* (2019), Mayank Sharma's *Breathe* (2018), Tathagata Mukherjee's *Water Bottle* (2019) are "possible heirs" (p.124) of the serial killer, Dexter.

Section III is titled as "(Discoursing) Politics of the Popular". The three chapters in this section Sangeeta Mittal's "Graphic Novels and Delhi: Contested Spaces in the Popular"; Anupama Jaidev Karir's "Political Exceptions and Imperatives of Popular Dissent: A Reading of I.S. Jauhar's 1978 Emergency Spoof *Nasbandi*" and Indrani Das Gupta and Shashi Prava Tigga's "Woman and Statecraft: Reading Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's Novels in the Series 'Girls of the *Mahabharata*'" discuss the influence of politics in popular fiction. Sangeeta Mittal's essay discusses two graphic novels depicting Delhi – Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* – to bring out the politics that gets played during times of calm (as in *Corridor*) and in times of upheaval like the emergency as in *Delhi Calm*. Anupama Jaidev Karir in chapter 8 takes a similar stance as she analyses the emergency through Johar's film. She concludes that popular cinema is a medium via which public sentiments of resistance to political incidents like Emergency are resisted. The final chapter of this section by Indrani Das Gupta and Shashi Prava Tigga discusses the fluid interpretation that mythologies like *Ramayana* and, specifically, *Mahabharata* have gone through over the ages to highlight some of the political issues relevant to the times. The chapter discusses the role that women play in the affairs of the State - as rebels (Amba/Shikhandini/Shikhandi) or as those bound by it (Satyawati).

The final section of the anthology, "Moving Beyond: Social Media and New Spaces", is the highlight of the anthology as it studies the emergent literature in the new space created by the internet. In the chapter "Interrogating Social Media and New Spaces: The Case of Durjoy Dutta", Aisha Qadry studies the romance-fiction by Durjoy Dutta and the role played by the social media in publicising the work to make it a best-seller. Rachit Raj and Pranjali Gupta in "India's Tryst with Flash Fiction: A Terribly Tiny Tale" discuss the emerging genre of flash fiction through Anuj Gosalia and Chintan Ruparel's online site/ publication Terribly Tiny Tales. The final chapter of the anthology is another interesting study of online writing. Titled as "Online Writer and the New Age Popular", Prachi Sharma posits that "literature is social" (p.224) and a carrier of culture through the online writings emerging via Instagram, Facebook, Twitter etc. The cluster of these three essays makes the anthology stand out as it makes it interdisciplinary through the intermingling of print media with social media. It opens up new scope of research in the field of IPCF.

A comparison with recent publications on Indian Popular Literature also proves its uniqueness in terms of its scope in the area of Popular Culture studies. *Critical Insights into New Age Popular Fiction in Indian English* by Shalini R. Sinha (Lambert, 2019) is a critical discussion on specifically Indian English fiction. Another recent publication is *What makes it Pop?: An Introduction to Studies in Popular Fiction* edited by Srinjoyee Dutta and Ritwick Bhattacharjee (Worldview, 2020) is manly a collection of essays by known critics like Tzvetan Todorov, Ramaswamy et al. It is more syllabus-specific and largely caters to the undergraduate students of Popular Literature.

Hence, this anthology proves Prof Rajkumar, Head, Department of English, University of Delhi, right when he states that the anthology "is a big intervention in the way 'popular' genres in India are read, understood and analysed." Well-known Indian author, Devapriya Roy too echoes the fact that the anthology is a "valuable read for researchers, scholars and enthusiasts of contemporary Indian popular fiction". *Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces* is definitely going to be an asset for researchers and students of cultural studies in the near future.