



Book Review

***Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon.* Edited
by Dr. Gitanjali Chawla and Dr. Sangeeta Mittal,
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Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon immediately plunges one into the mesmerising mojo of Indian popular fiction. Beautifully curated and masterfully edited by Dr Gitanjali Chawla and Dr Sangeeta Mittal with a foreword by popular author, Advaita Kala, this anthology traverses across the realm of the 'popular' and offers thirteen remarkable scholarly articles. Popular fiction, as Kala notes in the foreword has become the most popular genre. Its rich diversity, easy relatability, lucid language and expert handling of contemporary issues in an identifiable world has appealed to the masses and has created a new generation of readers thereby revolutionizing readership and the publishing industry.

Reflecting the everyday reality, popular literature or commercial literature captures popular sentiments of the masses. But what is this 'popular' that defines and forms popular literature? The introduction of this anthology under review brilliantly takes us through the history and scholarly developments of this genre. John Storey in his ground-breaking book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* observes that popular culture stems from the people; the masses. However, in spite of having a popular appeal, there has been an incessant debate regarding the literary merit of popular fiction in academia. It has been treated as 'lowbrow literature' as opposed to serious fiction

and has been regularly sidelined as trash. But, the fact cannot be ignored that this genre has taken the world by storm. The genre has found an unprecedented popularity in India and since then it has set the cash registers rolling; towering in fact over the other genres. The anthology then not only introduces one to the cult of popular fiction and its sub-genres, but also examines the soaring popularity of Indian commercial fiction that has resuscitated the Indian publishing industry.

The book is divided into four sections; each section meandering and evaluating the varied themes and sub-themes and offering newer and fresher perspectives on the genre. The first section is titled 'Popular Habitats: Changing Ethos' and it opens with an eye-opening chapter by Giraj M. Sharma. Titled "The Reader has Moved on. Long Live the Consumer!", it looks at the flourishing genre of Indian popular fiction and the publishing market. It harps on the genre's rising readership and sales and examines the changing dynamics between readers of Indian commercial fiction and the publishing industry, whose market driven approach, publicity strategies and resistance to undertake risks has metamorphosed the readers into consumers. The next chapter "Reading *Mills and Boon* in India: From the Post-Colonial to the Millennial Experience" by Mona Sinha examines the role of romance novels such as *Mills and Boon* as part of India's liberalisation process and its impact on the urban upper class educated Indian women. Romance novels have been dismissed as unintellectual, anti-feminist and rape fantasy. But is it really so? Does it not subvert the patriarchal structure in its characterisation of women? Sinha explores this possibility in her thought provoking chapter and establishes women readers as 'active consumers'. Suchismita Ghosh in her chapter titled "Indian

Commercial Fiction: Chetan Bhagat and the Politics of Neoliberal Citizenry” harps on the impact of neo-liberal economy that led to the creation of a ‘new generation’ of readers. Crediting Bhagat for popularising Indian commercial fiction, she investigates the reasons for the success of the genre, that seeks to capture the ‘new’ Indian experience by negotiating social and economic pressures. The fourth chapter titled “The Use and Abuse of ‘Abuse’ in the ‘Popular’” by Abhinav Anand and Sangeeta Mittal probes the popular use of swear-taboo words and attempts to situate it in a particular historical, social and cultural milieu by examining popular fiction and cinema. Be it Honey Singh or Ganesh Gaitonde from *Sacred Games* who uses abusive language, the growing tolerance of cuss words and its further normalisation and popularity in India today has been brilliantly discussed by Anand and Mittal.

The second section of the book examines the most popular sub-genre of popular fiction. Titled ‘Popular Whodunnit: India’s Tryst with Sherlock’, this section includes three phenomenal chapters highlighting India’s foray into the world of detective fiction and its popularity among the masses. The first chapter titled “Papyrus to Celluloid: An Insight into the Oeuvre of Bengali Detectives” by Shatarupa Sinha, discusses Bengali detective fiction. Drawing a literary cartography, Sinha recounts the emergence of the genre in Bengali fiction and draws parallels to its English counterpart, Sherlock Holmes. Be it the crime solving duo of Panchkori Dey’s Debendrabijoy-Arindam or Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s Byomkesh Bakshi, the influence of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie can hardly be missed in Bengali detective fiction. Tracing the genre’s journey into the world of cinema, Sinha highlights the influence of the cinematic adaptations in shaping the ‘popular’ view while reading

Bengali detective fiction. The next chapter titled “Feluda’s Rendezvous with Heirlooms and Traditions” by Debalina Pal takes us to yet another intriguing journey into the world of detectives. Dwelling on the socio-ethical responsibilities of a detective, Pal goes on to examine the fulgurant corpus of Satyajit Ray’s Feluda series. Ray has often been branded an escapist for failing to address the political and economic crises of his times. Pal however, presents Ray in a new light and seeks to destabilise such notions around Ray who according to Pal diluted the façade of ‘Bengali Bhadrals’. The next chapter by Zainab Abrar makes an honest attempt to discuss Surender Mohan Pathak’s Vimal series. Titled “From Detective to Vigilante: An Examination of the *Vimal* Series by Surender Mohan Pathak”, Abrar associates Vimal’s popularity to his unconventional and non-conformist nature. In this context, she does an incredible job in tracing Pathak’s ingenious ways and struggles in constructing a character like Vimal, who does not fit into the category of a detective per se and is yet a popular detective figure.

Indian mythological fantasy has become hugely popular in India and this anthology brilliantly encapsulates this genre by giving us three power-packed chapters in the section titled ‘Popular Mythology: Revisitations and Retelling’. It opens with Souvik Kar’s critical examination of the genre and its obsession with nuclear/mythical weapons of mass destruction. Examining the works of Amish Tripathi and Krishna Udayashankar, Kar successfully situates the obsession of weapons in these texts to the current scenario of international relations, whereby every nation is in an arms race. The myths have always fascinated people and its revisitation to explore mythical characters offers engaging and critical space raising important questions on issues of morality, eternity

and temporality. Archa Bhatnagar's powerful articulation of Sita in her chapter titled "Reconfiguring Sita as the Warrior of Mithila", looks into the construction of Amish Tripathi's Sita as a warrior goddess built around the hybridisation of Sati, Shakti and Virangana. Dwelling on the aesthetics and stylistics of mythological fiction, Bhatnagar investigates its complexity vis a vis its epic rendition, audience's taste and its impact on the publishing industry, while also discovering a Bollywood connection in Sita's treatment. Offering a dynamic take on Draupadi, Mridula Sharma in her chapter titled "*The Palace of Illusions*: Redefining the Mahabharata in Popular Fiction", discusses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and analyses Draupadi as a multi-dimensional female character. In her analysis, Sharma hints at the author's feminist failure for perpetuating patriarchy and appeasing the popular cultural memory that blames Draupadi for the cataclysmic Mahayudh.

From the world of Indian mythology, we are propelled into the world of Indian vernaculars in its fourth and final section titled 'Popular Vernacular: Identities and Intersections'. It opens with GuntashaTulsi's "Sikh Periodicals and Popular Literature: Framing Community Consciousness", where she examines the politics that went into constituting the ideas of 'popular' vis a vis class consciousness and social status. Tulsi beautifully lays bare the changing contours of the term 'popular'. In doing this, she focuses on the Sikh periodicals of early twentieth century that went on to define the 'popular' Sikh consciousness. If Tulsi harps on the popular imagery of Sikh community, then the next chapter titled "*Thakurmar Jhuli*: A Study of the Changing Bengali Society" by Debosmita Paul Lahiri is a reflection of a changing Bengali society. Lahiri traces these changes by examining the varied versions of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, that served as the

perfect Swadeshi alternative to the West-produced children's story books flooding the Indian market. But, what makes the chapter important is its brilliant navigation and manoeuvring in highlighting the nationalistic purposes that *Thakurmar Jhuli* served in the nation-building process and in glorifying an 'ideal' Bengali past. From an 'ideal' Bengali past, we are confronted with the archaic system of caste that is still plaguing the Indian nation in the final chapter by Aditya Premdeep. Titled "Indian English Commercial Fiction and the Question of Caste", this chapter examines the way caste and its associated politics have been treated by commercial writers and publishers. Analysing the works of popular writers like Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi and Anuja Chauhan, Premdeep reflects upon the presence of caste chauvinism and the arrant absence of marginalised communities in their fiction. While exposing the Savarna men's ideology, Premdeep also hints at possible ways to demolish Savarna bastions.

This anthology thereby is beyond just a mere exposition of the genre of Indian popular fiction. True to its subtitle, the anthology brilliantly redefines the canon of popular fiction by indulging in varied and diverse themes of the 'popular'. Literary criticism at its best and replete with pregnant thoughts, Dr Gitanjali Chawla and Dr Sangeeta Mittal's jaw-dropping book is a wonderful testimony to the varied scholarly developments of this genre and brilliantly exposes why popular literature is popular in the first place. The book with its rich critical insights not only offers a stimulating experience and an opportunity to delve into the world of 'popular' but also makes you ponder and raise new debates and discussions surrounding the genre. If you want to know and research more on this genre, then this anthology is a must read.