abatement. And no one really knows why the Partition that failed to resolve the Hindu-Muslim love and hate relationship, the major fault line in the subcontinent's history, took place and now how to negotiate this division for the mutual benefit of three constituents of the subcontinent, especially when many other fault lines have become visible during the last seventy years or so.

The book could have been more vigorously copy-edited. But it is very readable.

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Chawla, Gitanjali & Mittal, Sangeeta (Eds.). (2021). Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon. Aakar Books, Hardbound, Pages 278, ISBN 978-93-5002-690-8, Rs. 895

Reviewed by Indrani Das Gupta

Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon (2021) edited by Gitanjali Chawla and Sangeeta Mittal, along with the twin volume of *Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces* (2021) edited by Prem Kumari Srivastava and Mona Sinha, both published by Aakar Books and soon to be republished by Routledge, UK (forthcoming 2022), foregrounds the richness of Indian popular fiction represented in various literary and cultural undertakings.

The main argument of the edited volume *Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon* (2021) by Chawla and Mittal is underpinned by two frameworks: what denominates the 'popular' and the forms and trajectories of popular as defined in Indian contexts. The second framework subverts the valuation of 'popular fiction as marking a "travesty of taste" (Kala, p. 9). Popular fiction, relegated to the literary margins in academic circles, has often been understood as blurring the complexity of thematic

content and narrative style with marketing logic to constitute popular terrain as "formulaic, entertaining and escapist" (Chawla & Mittal, p. 19). The anthology confronts these pejorative denominations constituting 'popular culture' head-on—to showcase Indian popular fiction as worthy of critical and scholarly interest. Interestingly, this volume explores Indian popular fiction as a continuation of literary practices that emerged from Lord Macaulay's English Education Act of 1835. This continual, evolving tradition of Indian popular fiction allows a re-vision and re-centring of literary forms, practices, and trajectories in the Indian context. It establishes newer significations of Indian popular fiction by demonstrating its interstitial positions and cross-cultural ramifications. Chawla and Mittal's edited volume offers a nuanced reading of Indian popular fiction's history by linking the colonial to its postcolonial digital assemblages and versions, which dismantles the boundaries between elite and marginal popular voices. This fluidity of boundaries evoked in the terminology of popular culture and fiction maps Indian popular fictional terrain as not an "*other* to the dominant culture, folk culture, mass culture", etc. (Storey, 2009 p. 1; emphasis in the original). Instead, Indian popular fiction functions dialogically in this volume, cutting across regions, timelines, literary genres, and disciplines.

This anthology includes thirteen chapters spread over four sections. The first section, *Popular Habitats: Changing Ethos*, situates popular fiction amidst the changing scenario of readership patterns occasioned by liberalization policies and the emergent postmodern culture. Giraj Sharma in *The Reader Has Moved on: Long Live the Consumer* explores the ever-evolving transformative publishing industry guided by the impulses and needs of readers-cum-consumers, against the changing ethos of the society. This chapter facilitates understanding of the "all-inclusive, comprehensive landscape of leisure activities" (p. 46). Mona Sinha's *Reading Mills and Boons in India: From the Postcolonial and Millennial Experience* offers a fascinating insight into how the much-loved romance genre unpacked in Mills and Boons (M&B) series has grown in the Indian context. From exploring the sisterhood that emerged via reading M&B novels, Sinha's chapter offers an absorbing exploration of this series' continual popularity in a "post-feminist scenario in the new millennium" (p. 57) visible in digital formats like NovelCat, Wattpad, etc. to showcasing increasing autonomy and freedom from patriarchally constituted gender roles. Suchismita Ghosh's *Indian Commercial Fiction:*

Chetan Bhagat and the Politics of the Neoliberal Citizenry reads commercial fiction like Chetan Bhagat's fictions as closely bound to the Indian middle-classes anxieties and fears concerning the Indian liberal dream's possibilities and potentialities. *The Use and Abuse of the 'Abuse' in the 'Popular'* by Abhinav Anand and Sangeeta Mittal provides an interesting perspective to the idea of popular by reflecting on the normalization of cuss words in the popular domain. This chapter highlights via language usage the trends and reception frameworks widely used in contemporary society.

The second section of the edited volume, *Popular Whodunit: India's Tryst with Sherlock*, foregrounds postcolonial subjectivities via detailed exploration of vernacular detectives. *Papyrus to Celluloid: An Insight into Oeuvre of Bengali Detectives* by Shatarupa Sinha maps the history of Bengali detective fiction from children's literature to its rendition in Bengali cinematic universes as a meshing of styles, genres and stories that disrupts Anglo-centric detective narratives. *Feluda's Rendevous with Heirlooms and Traditions* by Debalina Pal reads Satyajit Ray's famous detective Pradosh Chandra Mitra also known as Feluda vis-à-vis three frameworks: as an illustration of preserving the literary tradition begun by Ray's famous grandfather, Upendrakishore Roy Chowdhury, in the pages of the literary periodical *Sandesh*; as a familiar space etched in the relationship between readers and Feluda's nickname; and in the training of the child to espouse multiple subjectivities from local to national to universal. Pal's reading of the Bengali detective genre "strike[s] a critical balance between idealised fantasy and relatability" (p. 140). Zainab Abrar's, *From Detective to Vigilante: An Examination of the Vimal Series by Surender Mohan Pathak* examines Hindi detective narratives written by Pathak against the backdrop of pulp tradition and the American hard-boiled detective genre. Her chapter challenges the sexual aspersions cast onto Hindi detective narratives by outlining Pathak's detectives as straddling several domains, identities, textures, and styles, which refuse to "conform or settle in the fixity of one" (p. 147).

The third section deals with the widest readership in the Indian popular literary context—mythological genres. Mythological popular fiction retells stories drawn from myth and governed by a "historicising, revisionist-objectivist impulse" (Kar, p. 166). The three chapters of this section foreground alternative histories to resurrect the mythological genre for contemporary readers; and link the past with the future. Souvik

Kar's brilliant essay *Mytho-Nukes: The Indian Popular and the Nuclear Debate* juxtaposes the rise of popular mythological fiction against the backdrop of India's nuclear policies to construct and deconstruct the "fables of power" (p. 172) associated with mass weapons of war. Archa Bhatnagar's *Reconfiguring Sita as the Warrior of Mithila* analyses Amish Tripathi's popular figuration of the idealistic, feminine figure of Sita translated as a warrior goddess akin to a Bollywood heroine enacting a feminist reading of history. Mridula Sharma's chapter *The Palace of Illusions: Redefining Mahabharata* in Popular Fiction recasts Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakurni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2009) as the focal perspective in this retelling of the *Mahabharata* to render "an alternative mythopoeia" via a "multi-dimensional female character" (p. 195). Sharma gives voice to feminine energies outside the scope of patriarchal control while simultaneously portraying her vulnerabilities.

The fourth section, *Popular Vernacular: Identities and Intersections*, encapsulates the idea of popular fiction in vernacular languages and works of literature of colonial and postcolonial times. The three chapters of this section open up the possibilities of popular narratives as being more than a mass-market phenomenon to registering these stories as vitally connected to folkloric practices, nation-building strategies, and drawing up of community imaginaries. Guntasha Tulsi's *Sikh Periodicals and Popular Literature: Framing Community Consciousness* examines the Sikh periodicals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century as enacting community consciousness, which ultimately rejects the ossifying practices of colonial politics. Debosmita Paul Lahiri's *Thakurmar Jhuli: A Study of Changing Bengali Society* examines the changing trajectory of *Jhuli*'s *Grandmother's Bag of Tales of 1907* through its narrative content and style. Lahiri's essay grapples with heterogeneous political contexts: from Swadeshi nationalism to identifying with upper-class representations to functioning as a conduct manual for women. The intermedial practices of *Thakurmar Jhuli* draw our attention to the close ties between mass media and popular culture enunciated in the animated version of these tales. The final chapter in this edited volume is by Aditya Premdeep, whose *Indian English Commercial Fiction and the Question of Caste* examines the rise of commercial English fiction against the obfuscations and marginalization of caste dynamics in popular fictions' thematic, stylistic, and mass-market mechanisms. Even as the publishing scenario is undergoing a revolution, Premdeep foregrounds

how caste operates as a non-factor in the emerging commercial English fiction of contemporary times.

Chawla and Mittal's edited volume offers a fascinating insight into how technology, storytelling practices, political forms and mechanisms, and market forces influence the Indian popular fictional imaginary as an illustration of a "significant sociotextual process" (Bullock, 2018, p. 9). As manifested in this anthology, popular fiction's history and politics are vitalised for a variety of critical dialogues to be enunciated between segregated spaces and identities, mainstream and marginal literature, the centre and margins of academic institutions, and patriarchal and patriarchal heteronormative logic, and feminine and caste agency. This edited volume is a must-buy for scholars and even non-academic professionals who shall find in this anthology a linking up of varied practices, forms, styles, and registers that refuses closure and situates Indian popular fiction as a shifting, pluralistic term of immense importance.

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