



BOOK FORUM

Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture: A Response

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Abstract

This essay is a response to Mukti Mangharam's book *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*. The essay commends Mangharam's intervention in reading the gender, caste, and class implications of neoliberalism embraced by the Indian government and people. Drawing upon Mangharam's main arguments, this essay extends her analysis to examining the role of the Indian diaspora in promoting Freedom Inc's narrative, the increased marginalization and precarity faced by Muslims within this new India, and the insidious ways in which Freedom Inc coopts narratives that critique it.

Keywords: Freedom Inc; Muslim precarity; Indian diaspora; Dalit experiences

Mukti Mangharam's *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture* examines how the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s has narrowed ideas of freedom in Indian culture. She notes that governmental discourse, popular culture, and the impact of institutions like the World Bank present to the average Indian the idea that complete autonomy and freedom from social constraints is possible through the embrace of free market capitalism. She calls this discourse "Freedom Inc." and examines its gender and caste underpinnings. At the outset of this book, she notes that the ubiquity of Freedom Inc. has redefined individual freedom as merely the ability to pursue market freedoms and consumer choice. When individual freedom once meant "political sovereignty, individual agency, and social and economic liberty" (2), Indians now celebrate their ability to be consumers who can endlessly choose while competing in a global market and selling their labor for a wage that enables constant consumption. Mangharam goes on to argue that popular literature and culture (popular novels by Chetan Bhagat, television shows like *Indian Matchmaking*, self-help books, and literary novels like Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger*) register this shift in the understanding of freedom and critique Freedom Inc. through storytelling. She argues

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that “The writing that critiques Freedom Inc. decenters the myth of absolute autonomy that is central to the discourse” (4). She identifies the bildungsroman adapted and modified by literary realist texts as a major vehicle for this critique. The book then offers nuanced and provocative readings of a range of texts to demonstrate how writers examine gender and caste realities that undercut the myth of absolute freedom promoted by Freedom Inc. The chapters examine the place of waged labor by working women, Dalit women’s quest for autonomy through Ambedkarite writing, the role of self-help books in the lives of underemployed men, and the romance narrative in popular fiction.

I find Mangharam’s argument persuasive and an important intervention in Indian literary studies, and in the rest of this essay, I explore some elements that are related to Mangharam’s argument and with which one can extend her observations. These include interrogating (1) the role of the diaspora in propagating Freedom Inc. and the embrace of Freedom Inc. in the Indian-American diaspora, (2) the Hindu-centrism of Freedom Inc., and (3) the co-optation by Freedom Inc. of the narratives that challenge its assumptions.

In the Introduction, Mangharam charts the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s following pressures from the IMF and World Bank. While India touted the growth of the economy and the rise of the middle class and their concomitant prosperity, Mangharam demonstrates that there was widespread income inequality along with underemployment and the reduction of women participating in the workforce. While Mangharam focuses on issues within India, I note that beginning in the 1990s, India also saw a large emigration of educated people to the United States. Migration Policy Institute data show that in 1990, 450,400 India-born immigrants moved to the United States and in 2022, that number was 2,839,600. At the same time, remittances to India in 2021 were almost \$89.4 billion through formal channels, a 46-percent increase since 2011 and represent nearly 3 percent of India’s GDP, a chunk of these remittances come from the Indian-American diaspora (https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/indian-immigrants-united-states#age_education_employment). *BBC News* notes that the United States has seen a spike of undocumented migration from India at the US–Mexico border and most of these migrants are fleeing religious and gender persecution (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62893926>). The majority of Indian immigrants to the United States are educated and arrive here in search of economic advancement and among the push-pull factors for such migration are the issues with underemployment and income inequality combined with the US issuance of H1-B visas in increasing numbers. The Indian-American community has supported the vision of Freedom Inc. significantly. For example, The Indus Entrepreneurs (TiE) founded in 1992 by Silicon Valley Indian-American entrepreneurs has large programs that support global entrepreneurship. Its 2022 report identifies the profound impact it has had on governmental policy in India and how one of its founding members persuaded the Indian government to invest in the dot com boom in 1999. Indian-American fiction since the 1990s has focused significantly on the experiences of first-generation migrants. However, the emphasis in these narratives is often on the struggles of the immigrants in their adoptive home and the challenges of cultural alienation, racism, and belonging. Novels like Chitra Divakaruni’s *Mistress of Spices* or

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *Lowlands* focus more on immigrants from the pre-1990s era. Some recent Indian-American fiction has begun interrogating India post-liberalization. Indian-American writer Thirty Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* is a novel that Mangharam analyzes for its critique of women and waged work through the relationship of Bhima, a servant, and Sera, her employer, for whom waged work means different things because of their class differences. In the sequel to this novel, *The Secrets Between Us*, Umrigar explores the life of Bhima who wants to support her pregnant granddaughter but has lost her job with Sera because she is accused of stealing money from the family. Her dream for her granddaughter's education and success leads to Bhima taking a job with a lesbian couple and to starting her own fruit and vegetable stall with Parvati, another destitute woman. The narrative here subscribes to the fundamental myth of Freedom Inc. that one can overcome social constraints through entrepreneurship. Umrigar is an Indian-American writer and her sequel while continuing to explore the differential experiences of waged work for women in India does promote the vision of Freedom Inc. demonstrating the diaspora's investment in this idea. A more recent novel, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, on the other hand, employs dystopic fiction as a genre to critique Freedom Inc. from the perspective of Dalit experiences and to consider the devastating ecological and social implications of technological innovation and entrepreneurship. King Rao, a Dalit from India whose family strived to educate him, comes to the United States to study computer science and builds a tech empire. Rao develops technology that allows people to be injected with a drug that would help them download memories and become immortal. The experiments cause patient deaths and lead to widespread protests. In the novel, the world is in shambles, King Rao's daughter is in prison and tells us her father's story, and neoliberal globalization has a death grip on the world. Vara's narrative critiques not only Freedom Inc. but identifies its global implications. She demonstrates the devastating consequences of Dalit investment in this idea not just for the community itself but for the world.

An important aspect of Freedom Inc. and the liberalization of the Indian economy that must be considered is that it disproportionately benefits Hindus and is promulgated by the nation's Hindu majority. It is not coincidental that the liberalization begins in 1991 and is soon followed by one of the most violent moments in contemporary Indian history, the Babri Masjid destruction by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992. Hindus believed that a sixteenth-century mosque had been built over the remains of a Hindu temple commemorating the birth of Lord Rama. Hindu mobs tore down the mosque and widespread rioting across India led to violence against Muslims. The Council on Foreign Relations estimates that some 3,000 people, the majority of whom were Muslim, were killed in the clashes (<https://www.cfr.org/background/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>). Such violence has since occurred in 2002 in Gujarat and in 2013 in Muzzaffarnagar. The Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2002, Narendra Modi, was implicated in the violence but went on to become India's Prime Minister in 2014. Since then, the passage of a Citizenship Act and the decision to rescind Kashmir's autonomy by the Modi government have had a major impact on Muslim communities. Muslims face increasing precarity and question the

Freedom Inc. vision. It is not surprising that Mangharam chooses a Pakistani writer, Mohammad Hanif, and his work *How to Become Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* as the novel that challenges the myth of Freedom Inc. Her rationale for this is that Hanif is popular in India. I would argue that it has become increasingly difficult for writers to speak up against the current political regime in India. Writers such as Arundhati Roy whose *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* condemns Indian military violence in Kashmir and Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Nights* are among those that speak to the violence experienced by Muslims. Both Roy and Peer have faced censorship for their outspokenness. At the time of this writing, Roy has had sedition charges leveled against her for a speech she made some years ago. Peer's memoir, a bildungsroman if you will, demonstrates how violence and precarity shut Kashmiri Muslims out of any possibility of participating in Freedom Inc. As India touts its success with space exploration and landing a space craft on the moon, a Gallup article from 2022 notes that India's economic dream is faltering. Gallup writes that 71 percent of Indian Muslims and 64 percent of Hindu Indians expressed that they had difficulty getting by. The pandemic had had a disproportionate economic impact on Muslims and Gallup underscored that failing to address the economic woes of Muslim Indians would negatively impact the country as a whole as it tried to recover from the pandemic. While Mangharam's analysis of Hanif's novel is significant, it is worth interrogating the links between economic liberalization, anti-Muslim violence, and scarcity of narratives by Muslim Indian authors critiquing Freedom Inc.

Finally, I want to explore the manner in which Freedom Inc. coopts narratives that critique it. Mangharam discusses Yashica Dutt, Indo-American Dalit writer, and her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit*. In August 2023, Amazon Prime released its second season of *Made in Heaven*, a socially conscious series. In this show, the focus is on two friends, a gay man and a divorcee, who establish a wedding planning business. Season 1 was immensely popular for challenging heteronormativity and the struggles of a gay wedding planner whose best friend and partner was struggling with the end of her marriage to a rich man. As this team plans lavish weddings, the show explores the complexities of love, marriage, and prejudice in India. The weddings glorify the unlimited ability of the nouveau riche in India to define themselves through unbridled consumption and spectacles. Season 2 takes on social problems like colorism, divorce, and caste and didactically checks off social problems to be explored, critiqued, and resolved with a lavish wedding in each episode. Episode 5 features a Dalit woman who has been educated in the United States and is engaged to an upper caste man. As many viewers were quick to point out, the episode modeled its Dalit protagonist on Yashica Dutt and Dutt revealed that the show did not credit her work although the production team had been in touch with her. The controversy flared further as the Director of the episode (a prominent Dalit himself) and the rest of the creative team attempted to justify their work as not indebted to Dutt but drawing in general from Dalit experiences. While the nuances of this controversy are well documented on several social media platforms and in petitions that were circulated to support Yashica Dutt, what interests me here is how Dutt's work was appropriated by a media behemoth like Amazon Prime. (Full disclosure, I do

see the shows creators as having borrowed Dutt's narrative without acknowledging her work.) I concur with Mangharam's analysis of Dutt's memoir as challenging the founding myths of Freedom Inc. and propose that *Made in Heaven* as a show superficially critiques Freedom Inc. by questioning social constraints that limit individuals from fulfilling their individual quest. However, the show focuses on how individuals can rise above gender, class, and caste constraints by embracing the values of Freedom Inc. The entrepreneurs and their employees are all marginalized in some way (gender, sexuality, and class) and the narrative arc of the show celebrates their ability to overcome these constraints through entrepreneurship that facilitates lavish consumption. In appropriating Dutt's life narrative and then doubling down on their appropriation by denying her claims, the show demonstrates how the machinery of Freedom Inc. is capable of consuming and burying narratives that are critical of its agenda.

Mangharam's work raises important and provocative questions for literary scholars to consider. Her redefinition of the bildungsroman and her argument that Anglophone Indian writing needs to be read in the context of India's neoliberal economy and the growth of Freedom Inc. philosophy are important interventions in postcolonial literary studies. At the same time, the study offers opportunities to expand upon Mangharam's ideas as I have done in this response.

Author biography. Nalini Iyer is Professor of English at Seattle University. She teaches courses in postcolonial South Asian and African writing, diaspora studies, and transnational feminisms. Her books include the following: *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* (2009); *Roots and Reflections: South Asians in the Pacific Northwest* (2013); *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays in Memory, Culture, and Politics* (2016); and *Teaching Anglophone South Asian Diasporic Literature* (2024). She has also published articles in *ARIEL*, *South Asian Review*, and *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. She is the Chief Editor of *South Asian Review*.

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