



BOOK FORUM

Bad Subjects of Good Freedoms

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Abstract

In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam’s book, *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, she identifies “Freedom Inc.” as a neoliberal celebration of individual empowerment that contrasts with the multiple ways people have imagined freedom in a longer history of Indian literature and philosophy, which are much more open to collective empowerment and political transformation. This critique is certainly valid, but where in it is there the space for “bad” subjects, erotic desires, or for men and women who disobey, who flaunt rules and whose visions of freedom exceed those framed by respectable behavior or collective uplift? This article gives a few examples of what those alternative freedoms would look like, suggesting that in addition to fundamental rights, Indians might need the freedom to be naughty as well.

In her book *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, Mukti Lakhi Mangharam describes the current landscape in India as inhabited by multiple ideas of freedom.¹ The most powerful of these, which she terms “Freedom Inc.,” is a neoliberal value propagated by right-wing leaders, the World Bank, international media like *The New York Times*, and some NGOs—“a discourse... which is defined by the idea that it is possible to achieve complete autonomy from one’s restrictive life circumstances... All you need to do is embrace free market capitalism” (Mangharam 1). However, there also exist alternative ideas of freedom that appear in Indian history and literature, such as the Buddhist idea of freedom for the community rather than only for the individual, Sufi notions of freedom found through self-transcendence and love, and feminist freedom founded in the

¹ Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023).

building of character. These alternative accounts contest the hyper-individualism of Freedom Inc., in which each citizen is the sole maker of their own destiny, the individual is fully autonomous, “autonomy is realized through rational decision-making, and what counts as ‘rational’ is itself defined through the metric of competitiveness and profitability” (Mangharam 21). By contrast, true freedom does not imagine an individual apart from the structures that contain and coerce; and true freedom does not just mean overcoming those structures through capitalist success, but is “the ability, born of opportunity, to decide between multiple modes of well-being, life paths, and possibilities for self-actualization” (22).

I am very much convinced by this argument, especially the impulse not to relinquish the idea of freedom to neoliberalism, which uses it in a very particular, top-down and, ironically, coercive way, but which does not represent the wide-ranging vernacular usages of the term, in India and elsewhere. The Foucauldian impulse, which Mangharam argues against, to replace the illusion of freedom with the reality of subjection not only downplays the emancipatory movements that have materially transformed the modern world but also denies a very real desire for individuals in many contexts and from many social locations to imagine freedom for themselves and their communities, and for that imagination to serve as a transformative force, whether systemically or in their individual lives.

At the same time, as I considered the various examples in the book, it did strike me how well-behaved all of Mangharam’s protagonists are in their quest for freedom, how virtuous their versions of freedom end up being. *The Space Between Us*’s Sera, for instance, having been forced to quit her job by her husband, “missed the simple routine of deciding what outfit to wear to work, the grand feeling of being swept in the tidal wave of office workers as they poured out of the morning trains, the camaraderie that came from participating in the jokes and gossip that circulated around the office like unofficial memos, the satisfaction of doing a job that earned her praise from Mr. Madan” (qtd on 55). In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, when the wife finally finds her freedom, she gets divorced and attains her dream of being a dance teacher, which allows “a rethinking of autonomy as the capacity for meaningful choice between multiple material opportunities and modes of self-realization” (66–7). Shilpa in *Daughters of Destiny* makes use of the educational opportunities offered by Shanti Bhavan which “‘create[s] a solid value system’ defined by a priority to uplift other Dalits so that they may raise yet more Dalits from their communities” (92).

These are all important freedoms—the freedom to work where one wants, the freedom to escape the confines of caste, and the freedom to leave a bad marriage—but it did make me wonder whether, in a study of Indian freedom, there might ever be space for bad subjects, erotic desires, or for men and women who disobey, who flaunt rules and whose visions of freedom exceed those framed by respectable behavior, self-betterment, or liberal uplift. Is there room for those who want more—who want to act angry, or flirt shamelessly, or do something frivolous? Basic freedoms are fundamental, but should those delimit what we want and desire; should those serve as the uppermost point in our imagination of freedom or, rather, its baseline? Should not freedom allow us to thrive rather than only survive?

The problem with bad subjects (and here I use “bad” not normatively, but to describe those who deliberately or inadvertently deviate from or refuse to

subscribe to dominant liberal norms) is that the freedom they want does not necessarily correspond with a larger interest; it can be idiosyncratic, ephemeral, spontaneous, and even discomfiting. Preetha, a Dalit student at Shanti Bhavan in *Daughters of Destiny* and discussed briefly in Mangharam's book, is potentially one such bad subject; she finds the school oppressive because it does not allow for her individual autonomy and she is not allowed to pursue her own personal interests, which are deemed "selfish" (96). Mangharam presents Preetha's desire to be a musician rather than a doctor or a lawyer and her claustrophobia in a school where, because she is on scholarship, she has to do what the principal says, as understandable, but ultimately, because Preetha values individual autonomy over the community, she is lumped together with "Freedom Inc" and thus implicitly criticized.

But in fact, Preetha is no exception. I can think of so many other bad subjects in Indian writing, Indian film, and Indian feminism—"wayward" subjects, to use Saidiya Hartman's term, who undertake "beautiful experiments—[who] make living an art," and in doing so court descriptors such as "promiscuous, reckless, wild, and wayward" (xiv).² As Hartman writes, "by attending to these lives, a very unexpected story... emerges, one that offers an intimate chronicle of black radicalism, an aesthetical and riotous history of colored girls and their experiments with freedom" (xv). True freedom can be glimpsed in the lives of these bad subjects, who transcend limitations of not only constraint, but of liberal ideas of good behavior as well. Their assertion of the right to pleasure pushes the limit on what counts as *good enough*—basic rights, which of course people should have—and reframes those basic rights as precisely that, basic, necessary, but not the very most we can hope for.

I think of Ashraf bhai in Aman Sethi's nonfiction book, *A Free Man*, who works as a freelance house painter in Delhi not because he cannot find a formal job but because he finds it freeing to work when he wants and to spend the rest of his time drinking, smoking hashish, and hanging out with his friends.³ He defines freedom as control over his own work schedule—"the freedom to tell the maalik [boss] to fuck off when you want to" (19)—but also as the right to tell his own story rather than reduce the complexity of his life to a prefabricated narrative about workers' conditions, about neoliberalism, or about precarity. That is why he refuses to answer so many of Sethi's questions or narrate his life story in a traditionally legible way, even though Sethi has only good intentions in wanting to hear Ashraf's story: "Arre, at least tell me the basic facts," Sethi beseeches, to which Ashraf responds, "You take the maza [fun] out of every story" (75). And later: "I can't build a proper timeline, if you don't tell me things," Sethi says. "Fuck your timeline," Ashraf responds (93).⁴

² Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2019).

³ Aman Sethi, *A Free Man* (Gurgaon: Random House, 2011).

⁴ Ulka Anjaria, *Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2019), 73–4; Jonathan Anjaria and Ulka Anjaria, "Maza: Rethinking Fun, Pleasure and Play in South Asia," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 232–42.

I think of Murad Ahmed in the film *Gully Boy*,⁵ who escapes his abusive father and his dreams of working-class respectability by writing lyrics and performing in hip-hop battles in the Dharavi neighborhood of Mumbai. The film speaks to the transformative potential of art and creativity, but it is not only that; Murad also finds freedom in all the masculinized paraphernalia of hip-hop: its swagger, its self-assertion, its unsparing, vulgar, and at times violent lyrics, its brutal honesty and its righteous but also self-righteous anger.⁶ This kind of aggressive expression is often dismissed for its lack of a collective conscious, but it offers a vision of freedom founded precisely on a sense of discontent from the idea of the commons and a refusal of the abject figure of the compliant Muslim minority.

Bad behavior abounds in R. Raj Rao's novels, such as *The Boyfriend*, which begins in a bathroom at Mumbai's Churchgate Station where men are cruising for sex, and where Yudi, the protagonist, picks out men based on the size of their "chillis" (7).⁷ Yudi's dispassionate account of bathroom-stall sex ("The gents' toilet at Churchgate provided a twenty-four-hour supply of men; the amount of semen that went down the urine bowls was enough to start a sperm bank" [2]) and his rewriting of Mumbai's urban geography as a space of queer desire offer a kind of freedom that refuses both sexual and esthetic propriety, asserting the publicness of queer intimacy as a rejoinder to the private-public divide that undergirds liberalism itself.⁸

Women in India are also constantly claiming the freedom to be their full wayward selves. Sociologists Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade, and Sameera Khan discuss loitering in public space as an emancipatory practice that also courts risk, as it centers women's bodies in public space not for productive purposes like going to work or buying groceries, but for doing nothing.⁹ Rather than avoiding the proverbial gaze of the lower-class loitering man by rushing home as fast as possible, women's claims for the right to occupy public space refuse the very logic that pits lower-class men against middle-class women in the elite male logic of the city. What might it look like, the authors write, to walk through a busy Indian city and see "varied street corners full of women sitting around talking, strolling, feeding children, exchanging recipes and books or planning the neighborhood festival. Imagine street corners full of young women watching the world go by as they sip tea and discuss politics, soap operas, and the latest financial budget... *If one can imagine all of this, one can imagine a radically altered city*" (193). The writers emphasize that women deserve not only equal political freedoms but also the right to be unproductive, to do nothing, and to enjoy the ephemeral pleasures of urban space for its own sake.

⁵ *Gully Boy*. Directed by Zoya Akhtar, Excel Entertainment, 2019.

⁶ Rashad Shabazz, "Masculinity and the Mic: Confronting the Uneven Geography of Hip-Hop," *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 3 (2014): 370–86.

⁷ R. Raj Rao, *The Boyfriend* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003).

⁸ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

⁹ Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan, "Why Loiter? Radical Possibilities for Gendered Dissent," in *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities*, ed. Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 185–203.

True freedom includes the right for a sexual subjectivity, notwithstanding the risk it entails. Anjali Bhaati, the police protagonist in the 2023 television serial *Dahaad*,¹⁰ refuses her mother's insistence that she get married and pursues a commitment-free (by her choice, not his) affair with an old lover and friend, whom she meets from time to time at night in his home to have sex. Far from being presented as a problem, it is Anjali's sexual freedom that allows her to make a key discovery in the serial killer case she is working on; trying to figure out how the killer manages to murder his female victims without leaving any signs of struggle, Anjali realizes based on her own experience with birth control that he must be convincing them to willingly take a morning-after pill and then lacing it with cyanide. Later, when asked by her boss how she made that discovery, she responds, "Sir, that day I also had to take one [pill], and while I was taking it I figured it out." The feminist logic of this show not only presents sexual freedom as a right, but also cleverly turns that freedom into material knowledge that leads to the capture of a misogynistic murderer.

The need for this kind of freedom is so well articulated by Indian filmmaker and writer Paromita Vohra, my guru in all things fun and pleasurable. Vohra insists that as women—as *humans*—we need much more than fundamental rights and we must continue to demand access to all the beautiful and erotic delights the world has to offer, even while we continue to advocate for those rights. I am especially struck by her writings on Indian popular cinema, which to many commentators is a source of embarrassment for its celebration of excess and its sensory and erotic richness, which are seen to distract from (or even, at times, counteract) a more legible political agenda. For Vohra, this richness is what gives Bollywood its transformative potential; it advances new modes of freedom founded not in individual rights but in intimacy and desire, in the ability to represent women as sexual beings not found in most other media. Thus, she argues, a film like *Dum Laga Ke Haisha*, which tried very hard to make some important points about what counts as desirability in women (the female protagonist is overweight, and so at first her husband feels he cannot love her) and about love not being something you just fall into (as Bollywood usually suggests), ended up doing so in a preachy way that, ironically, reinforced the character's lack of desirability by replacing all of the sensuality and intimacy usually associated with Bollywood love with a sanitized version of love as sensible companionship.¹¹ By contrast, a film such as *Anarkali of Arrah* is able to both show the violent ways men treat women *and* offer a representation of a radical female sexuality by defining consent not solely in the negative (as something you withhold) but in the positive sense as well, as a desiring, seductive "yes" when she does want it. As Vohra writes:

Anarkali's raunchy songs, her blingy cold-shoulder kameezes, her full-lipped, curvy hipped presence, her friends with benefits relationship with

¹⁰ *Dahaad*. Created by Reema Kagti and Zoya Akhtar, Amazon Prime Video, 2023.

¹¹ Paromita Vohra, "Finding Indian Love: Dum Lagake Pyar Kar," *Bangalore Mirror*, March 5, 2015 (<https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/others/dum-lagake-haisha-love-stories/articleshw/46469836.cms>).

her manager, the fact that his wife runs off with the milkman—all of it is an evocation and affirmation of the naturalness of erotic life, seeing sex not as an exception, but as a part of life, and Indian culture, in myriad big and small ways.... I cried [when I watched it] because, as a woman, if I express dissatisfaction or critique of a so-called women's issue film, I am made to feel churlish and demanding... 'Arre, at least it did this' people will say. I think I cried because I realised somewhere I had begun to believe this was my lot—in movies, life and love—this kanjoos, male-appeasement version of consent, not a full-bodied, full-blooded celebration of pleasure and consent.¹²

The impulses described here are just some of the ways Indian authors, filmmakers, and feminists have pushed the limits of freedom beyond the language of rights to imagine new ways of being in the world, including those that refuse liberal respectability. They offer a glimpse of a world in which women, queer people, Muslims, Dalits, and others flourish at their full human capacity, achieving their own emancipatory aspirations well beyond their barest rights. That these freedoms are ephemeral and not necessarily linked to particular social movements makes them seem precarious and, at times, idiosyncratic. But that does not make them Freedom Inc. either, whose freedoms are sterile and ideological, serving a top-down and homogeneous vision of what India should be rather than being open to the multiple visions of self-making by regular people that constitute what India actually is. Detailing the various possibilities of what it means to be truly free is a radical act of the imagination, and indeed, at times, true freedom will seem impossible to attain. But even as we continue our investment in uplift and community, let us not let these bad subjects of freedom disappear from our view.

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¹² Paromita Vohra, "Yes Means Yes," *Mid-Day*, April 2, 2017 (<https://www.mid-day.com/news/india-news/article/paromita-vohra-yes-means-yes-18129185>); Ulka Anjaria, *Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 202–3.

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