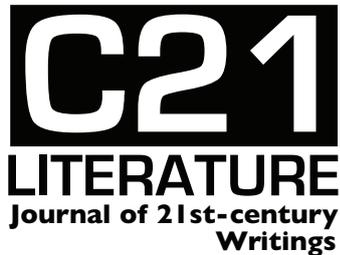




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## Review

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REVIEW

*Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture* by Ulka Anjaria, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2019

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Ulka Anjaria's study of contemporary novels and films, *Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture* stems from a personal experience of living in India at a time when 'routine' (ix) and 'everyday life' (x) seem to pervade the landscape of human interface. Anjaria begins her text by stating that the book is 'an effort to outline what criticism might look like when it becomes attuned to the everyday lives that people live in India outside the shadow of history' (xi). The author's premise is simple: it is by situating the ways in which novels, films and television foreground the ordinary that one might understand what Contemporary India truly is.

Indeed for Anjaria, since there is little time between the publication of books and their reception in the world, 'authors and practitioners are called on to engage with a range of issues of contemporary relevance more frequently than ever before' (2). However, Anjaria underlines the fact that the authors 'remain ambivalent with regard to the changes India has undergone in the last twenty-five years' (4). She begins by explicating her notion of the contemporary as 'both the time of the present and this new optic that recognizes and reads literature as of and for the world rather than as inhabiting a space apart from it' (4). It is also contrasted to the postcolonial which remains focused on the past, whereas the contemporary is by default the 'interest in

the banal and everyday' rather than 'idealist politics' (5). The contemporary 'appears in multiple forms' and explores 'new possible futures' (6).

The book is divided into three parts, which Anjaria sees as 'generic, formal and thematic constellations' (7). The first part consists of Chapters One and Two, which foreground contemporary novels, the second visual media with popular Hindi films and a television series presented by a popular film actor, while the third part provides an epistemological approach to what it means to read Indian novels nowadays. Anjaria is careful to note that the book is but 'an outline, an incitement to further study, rather than a full assessment of the Indian contemporary' (8). The critic highlights the fact that the contemporary itself is 'implicitly seen as the time inhabited by the West' (14) and recuperating the term for the Indian cultural space would involve 'regaining control of their [writers, artists and cultural producers] own representations, which in turn requires refusing the dominant idea of what is significant and important and what counts as a legitimate position for non-Western literature to take' (18). Anjaria places emphasis on the need to steer away from the political and focus on the quotidian life of ordinary people in India.

In her recent work, *Postcolonial Poetics*, Elleke Boehmer claims that:

21<sup>st</sup>-century postcolonial writings from [...] India in particular – has the capacity to keep reimagining and refreshing how we understand ourselves in relation to the world and to some of the most pressing questions of our time, including cultural reconciliation, survival after terror, and migration (Boehmer 2018: 1)

By contrast Anjaria firmly believes that contemporary Indian literature does not seek to do this. Nonetheless, what is significant here is that she is focusing on popular literature, rather than highbrow literature. Thus, Chetan Bhagat is a central part of her initial chapters as she charts the ways in which he firmly roots his novels in an Indian setting. For instance, *Half Girlfriend* (2014) is examined for the ways in which it reinforces the notion that 'coming home [to India] offers a new imaginary of India as a liveable place rather than one to be abandoned for better prospects else-

where' (28). Anjaria also highlights the ways in which different, less glamorous parts of India, such as Bihar, are foregrounded in order to ground the book in everyday reality. Bhagat's popularity with the masses has been the subject of controversy, as Anjaria highlights, and she critiques his tendency to invest in 'wounded masculinity' to the detriment of his 'undertheorized female characters' (31). ). Categorized under 'commercial fiction' Bhagat's works 'capture popular imagination on a scale unthinkable for literary fiction' (33). While Anjaria points out that Bhagat's plotlines 'inspire comparisons to Bollywood films rather than literature' (33), I was surprised that she did not underline the fact that indeed, most of Bhagat's popular novels have been scripted and now have a Bollywood film version. It would have been interesting to draw a comparison between the two forms and study the popularity of both media and the reach which Hindi cinema has in India to impact the masses, unlike literature, which might not include all the everyday categories which Anjaria insists upon in her book. The will to 'provincialise' literature is equally studied in other authors' works, for instance Anuja Chauhan, where it is gendered and sexual identity which is emphasised as protagonists like Jinni finds 'her true self, including her true sexual self' (55). Chauhan's and Bhagat's respective universal 'chick lit' and 'lad lit' labels, are dismissed and instead their 'openness' as an 'antidote to India's postcolonial predicament' is lauded (59). Like Eli P. Sorensen in *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary* (2010), Anjaria attempts to shift the focus on the literary, but while Sorensen underlined the importance of poetics and literary forms, Anjaria chooses to situate the everyday in the concerns and subject matter of the novels.

Anjaria's next focus is on the city as expansive and unfeeling while the individual is mired in a 'personal sense of loss' (69) as with Suketu Mehta's fiction. The author examines Gyan Prakash's nonfiction *Mumbai Fables* (2010) as she discusses the slums of Mumbai, the Dharavi, Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2011) and a range of texts which allow her to analyse the multifarious ways in which the city itself becomes a character in contemporary novels. For Anjaria 'all these texts contest the narratives of decline and emergence that undergird so many city writings by disrupting narrative itself as a structuring principle. [...] They offer flashes of the *city now* as an experience,

shot through with desire, a time outside time itself' (86). Interestingly no other city is present in this analysis, nor is there an interrogation of why Mumbai (Bombay) would represent the city which must perforce be the space where such narratives take place.

Anjaria then shifts the focus to Bollywood, which has Mumbai as its headquarters and which houses all the popular stars. For her, Bollywood is 'precisely the opposite of the contemporary' due to its focus on escapism (89), yet the recent proliferation of films which have focused on the 'common man genre' (91) testifies to the shifts in perspective which have occurred in the industry. For Anjaria, it is the disappearance of the star and the emergence of the public which has contributed to these changes, and especially with films like *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006) or *Rang de Basanti* (2006), the 'anonymity and genericity' of protagonists in *Kahaani* (2012) or *Gabbar is back* (2015), and the play on the limits of genre in *No One Killed Jessica* (2011). While the author engages with the plots of these films, she does not highlight the fact that these films also featured actors who have a significant fan following in the film industry, which would also contribute to their success to a large extent.

It is indeed another such popular actor who heads the next project which Anjaria examines: Amir Khan's television *Satyamev Jayate* (2012–2014) which 'seeks to raise awareness of social problems that continue to plague the country' (117). Anjaria delves into Khan's career and the 'moral hybridity that characterizes his work' (122) before embarking upon an analysis of the ways in which the series mobilises the concept of identification (141) to transmit its social message. Khan's own body becomes a locus of potentiality as it allows him to discuss heteronormative practices, his tears are a means of eliciting emotional responses while becoming a source of entertainment. For the author, Khan's series permits an opening to the affective, to 'new vocabulary, new categories' (149).

The last part of the book delves into what political writing might mean, where politics is not a 'pre-existing belief but as something born in the act of reading' (154). For her Aravind Adiga's, Uday Prakash's and Manu Joseph's texts 'represent the contemporary not merely as the time of the present but as a disruption of the

conventions of the Indian English novel' (177). Equally, Paromita Vohra's works also allows Anjaria to explore the ways in which political art and politics are being redefined. It is also with Vohra that the author chooses to end her book, in particular, the role of the critic 'in the Indian contemporary' (211). For Anjaria, there are three directions: the 'political possibilities opened up by the Indian contemporary', as discussed in the different chapters across the book, the 'ability to tell alternative stories' (212), and finally the role of academic writing. For Anjaria, the medium of writing might influence the extent to which academic scholarship might reach different readerships, but also 'herald the rebirth of literary criticism in the twenty-first century' (213).

Anjaria's objective is to rethink how popular culture engages with the everyday lives of common people in India. While the films do reach the masses, they are not all dubbed into languages that are accessible everywhere in India, given that people in many states do not speak Hindi, for instance. Similarly, the novels Anjaria chooses to focus on in her book are written in English and therefore will necessarily appeal to a middle-class majority which is fluent or conversant in the language. The 'common' man she speaks of is not perforce the intellectual the books and films target. Yet Anjaria's book raises important questions about the importance accorded to the present and to the everyday in novels and films in India. It allows us to interrogate the place of politics in the daily lives of those who inhabit a heterogeneous country. The humdrum of daily life, the local settings, the preoccupations of the general population become the focus of what really living in India entails.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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