Reading alongside the grain

Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture

By Ulka Anjaria

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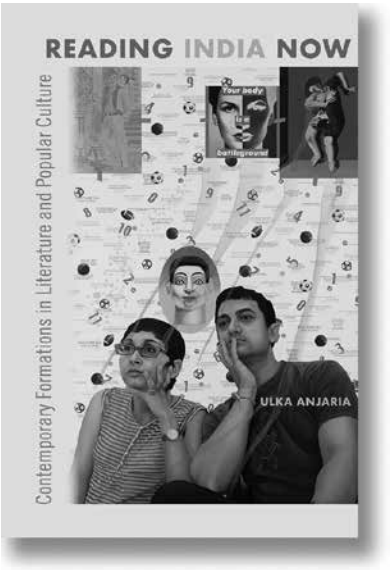
This book is a call for a new aesthetic in Literary Criticism — one that is particularly suitable for reading what Anjaria terms the "Indian contemporary", crossing divides between 'the high' and 'the low'. This approach would entail a deep engagement with texts usually dismissed as 'popular' and a suspension of the critical tools supplied by postcolonial theory that include a preoccupation with matters of larger historical importance, and which render invalid for analysis all that seems not to be tinged with nostalgia, rootlessness, and dissent against the state. It is also a manifesto for a radically different relationship between the text and the critic. In short, it draws attention to new forms, new sensibilities, and new relationships between the text and the world. (p 17)

The book is divided into three sections: 'Locations', 'Publics', and 'Representations'. Chapter 1 delves into popular fiction by Chetan Bhagat and Anuja Chauhan. Chapter 2 juxtaposes two books on experiencing the city through feminist and queer lenses (*Why Loiter?* by Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade[1]; *Gay Bombay* by Parmesh Shahani[2]), against "big fat city books" written by straight men — it explores their advocacy of loitering as a site of female pleasure and feminist resistance, and the recovery of the city through the pursuit of queer desires. Chapter 3 in the second section explores Bollywood's representation of 'the common man' through the genre of the new vigilante film. The next chapter on Aamir Khan's television show *Satyameva Jayate* explores how the show crossed conventional boundaries between forms, genres, and aesthetics. In the third section, Chapter 5 on the more 'literary' novels of Aravind Adiga, Manu Joseph and Uday Prakash analyses how they employ new narrative and formal techniques (like "journalistic time") and reject aesthetics of the postcolonial literary novel (like analogies), to speak of the current urban experience. The sixth and final chapter devotes itself to the multimedia oeuvre of filmmaker, cultural critic and curator Paromita Vohra, bringing together several of the book's concerns, especially that of critical intimacy substituting critical distance. It is Anjaria's attention to the popular that I would like to spend more time critiquing since it is in this realm that her intervention is most salient and timely, and for this I turn to the first and last chapters that demonstrate her alternative model of literary criticism.

Anjaria effectively draws attention to popular fiction's reflection of new aspirations of a new middle-class readership, and makes a compelling case for reading the popular on its own terms. But what are the implications of reading such texts "alongside, rather than only against, the grain"? (p 8) An instance of this is her characterisation of the "new provincialism" in Chetan Bhagat's books, which she compares to the rooted regional literature of erstwhile newly independent India. But she does not interrogate these representations more closely to discern their replication of urban attitudes, something that, for instance Namrata Joshi's recent book *Reel India: Cinema off the Beaten Track*[3] does well in its last chapter on contemporary Hindi cinema's similar proclivity for the small town. Moreover, contrary to her claim, I would contend that Bhagat's novels, far from refraining from asking big questions about the relationship of the individual with history, actually are anxiously invested in national history — that of Indian history in the making, emerging from the shadow of its colonial past. Similarly, instead of echoing Bhagat's claim that his books are too occupied with national realities to appeal to an international readership and stressing that they are redefining India for Indians today, it would have been more fruitful to enquire into the precise combination of factors that made an author like him such a phenomenal success, making possible a new model of domestic, self-sustaining publishing, enabling a new readership to emerge. Equally, if it is true that Bhagat's use of 'provincial' English helps dismantle earlier centre-periphery cultural structures, is it worth asking what new centres and peripheries it helps put in place?

The last chapter shows how Paromita Vohra's documentary films resist the conventional authoritative narrative voice, and how all her projects, especially her website *Agents of Ishq*, step aside from mainstream feminism and its consuming concerns against sexual violence, instead opting for a constantly evolving politics derived from self-critique, empathy, ambiguity and playfulness. Anjaria traces the way in which Vohra creates affective communities through the viewership of her films, helping build a new vernacular vocabulary with which to speak of matters of love, sex, intimacy and desire. Notably, Anjaria's presentation of Vohra's work replicates in some sense Vohra's own blurring of lines between the fan and critic in her reading of Bollywood. Although Vohra's rich oeuvre and radical politics have not attracted the critical engagement they rightfully deserve, one wonders if reading her texts solely in line with her own declarations is not a limited critical exercise. For instance, the chapter would have been enriched by placing her works in the context of others who have researched the history of desire in India or, given their common themes of female desire, pleasure, autonomy and sexual agency, they could have been placed in conversation with those of Anuja Chauhan or Phadke *et al*, that appear in the preceding chapters.



It is unclear how "Taking contemporary writing seriously on its own terms, even when it seems apolitical or populist, is not a concession to the current right-wing shift but potentially its antidote." Is the critic's attitude to be one of indulgence of the self-avowedly apolitical? How far can one respond to the plea of rendering criticism less 'negative' in an age politically determined to reward glorification and punish the critical? In the interests of a democratic impulse, is this a case for dissolving altogether the distinction between the critic and the reader?

Anjaria rightly chastises Literary Studies for overlooking or dismissing the study of the popular and for lamenting the loss of an earlier literary sensibility for a more 'authentic', less 'commercial' literary production. However, she neglects to mention that the study of the Indian popular has its own history — especially in Sociology, Anthropology, Film and Visual Studies. And if the usual methodological tools of literary analysis are inadequate for its study, the popular has the advantage of lending itself more readily to an enriching, interdisciplinary approach, one which Anjaria herself does not adopt. Purnima Mankekar's *Unsettling India*[4] makes for a good case in comparison and contrast; it echoes some of the concerns of *Reading India*, but uses multiple academic lenses to study transnational networks of 'India' and 'Indianness' circulating across genres and readers, while balancing itself between empathetic engagement and critical distance. Anjaria similarly makes little attempt to use existent theoretical frameworks that have flourished in Culture Studies for decades now. To assert that language should not be seen as the site of consolidation of discourse, but as a terrain of striving for multiple political positions (p 22) is little more than a reformulation of the conceptualisations of 'hegemony' and 'consent' by Antonio Gramsci[5] or that of 'traditional', 'emergent' and 'residual' cultural forces by Raymond Williams[6]. While on one hand Anjaria evokes Roland Barthes's theorisation of the pleasures of the text, she ignores his distinction between the text of pleasure that invites a comfortable practice of reading and the text of bliss that unsettles the reader's assumptions, a distinction especially pertinent to the popular.[7] Overall, in its attempt to inaugurate a new methodology, the book does little by way of engaging in depth with existing theory, if only to demonstrate reasons to depart from it.

Moreover, it is unclear how "Taking contemporary writing seriously on its own terms, even when it seems apolitical or populist, is not a concession to the current right-wing shift but potentially its antidote." (p 14) Is the critic's attitude to be one of indulgence of the self-avowedly apolitical? Is it the 'critic' alone who merits vigorous undoing and reconstruction, or the 'author' and the 'text' as well, given the careful self-fashioning of popular authors as public intellectuals, and the excess of their texts across form and medium, helping in the creation of literary-cultural 'brands'? What does it mean to make criticism less 'frigid', and more desiring? Would not desire cloud the critical lens? How far can one respond to the plea of rendering criticism less 'negative' in an age politically determined to reward glorification and punish the critical? In the interests of a democratic impulse, is this a case for dissolving altogether the distinction between the critic and the reader? Should engagement necessitate adulation? Or, as Nandini Chandra has claimed, is it possible to recognise the workings of hegemony while not being immune to the seductions of the text?[8] Ultimately, it is in the centring of the 'popular' in literary-critical enquiry, and in the raising of the important questions mentioned above, rather than the demonstration of alternative models, that the book's intervention in the field of Literary Criticism lies. ■

REFERENCES:

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