



BOOK FORUM

Academia, Activism, and Popular Consciousness: A Response to *Freedom Inc.*

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Abstract

Mukti Mangharam's *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, conducts a thorough investigation into the culture and ideology of neoliberal capitalism being produced in India today. But Mangharam's approach is not to dismiss but to take seriously the appeal of individualism and entrepreneurship among its target audience: ordinary people looking for a way out of the material crises that neoliberalism has produced. In this response to *Freedom Inc.*, Pranav Jani recognizes the empathetic and democratic impulse in Mangharam's method and narrative style and finds a parallel in his own work as a scholar and organizer. How can scholars and activists concerned with the voice of the people recognize the fundamental heterogeneity of popular consciousness, neither romanticizing struggle nor foreclosing the possibility of reform, or even revolutionary change?

Keywords: freedom; neoliberalism; India; postcolonial; activism

Mukti Mangharam's *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, opens up fresh, new possibilities in the discussion of postcolonial Indian (and South Asian) criticism and theory. I was especially intrigued by three aspects of the book: (1) its method of historicizing the postcolonial and recognizing shifts in "postcoloniality," (2) its insights on the neoliberal vision of freedom ("Freedom Inc.") and how it claims to fashion new, liberated "selves" against gender, caste, and class oppression, and (3) its integration of personal stories and experiences from the author's own life into academic discussions of post-1990s literature and culture. *Freedom Inc.*, thus, asks us to challenge theories of postcoloniality that conflate and homogenize many decades of post-independence life into one mode of being, to explore socio-economic realities in relation to cultural narrative and literary form, and to consider a method of self-reflection in which the critic is

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themselves a product of manifold, historically and socially situated experiences, and not an expert standing above the world, dispensing knowledge.

With a clear focus on gender, caste, and class (and their intersections), Mangharam reveals the sheer complexity of the cult of individualism and entrepreneurship prevalent in Indian neoliberal frameworks. Rather than denying gender, caste, or class oppression, the discourses and narratives generated by Freedom Inc. show sympathy to suffering and alienation—and present a neoliberal version of bootstraps ideology as the way out. A case in point is Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Center*, analyzed in chapter 4, which licks the wounds of India's rural unemployed young men and invites them into a world in which they can become “real men”—successfully navigating English-dominant settings, becoming financially wealthy, and “getting the girl.” The problem of gender, caste, and class, for Freedom Inc., has nothing to do with historically rooted restrictions on individuals due to social hierarchies, patriarchy, or capitalist exploitation but, rather, with lack of opportunity and individual willpower. The opening up of the economy has, allegedly, laid open the path for individual freedom, if only people heard the good news, girded their loins, and forged ahead. Freedom Inc., one might say, puts the *liberalism* back in neoliberalism: free markets lead to free selves.

The actual immiseration of millions amidst today's accelerating inequalities, the real decline in the number of women working for a wage, the material hardening of caste inequalities despite the existence of a few Dalit entrepreneurs—none of these, as Mangharam shows, gets in the way of the triumphalist narrative of Freedom Inc. Like the “American Dream” but now from a non-Western standpoint, the mythologies produced by Freedom Inc. claim that India is now a land of opportunity, in which all one has to do to break free of social restraints is to work hard and become an entrepreneur. In stark contrast to the elite-cosmopolitan dreams of earlier ages, this success can be found right in India. A deeply populist patriotism is entrenched in this vision of neoliberal India; ironically, capitalist globalization has made the nation—once again—into a privileged space for dreaming of freedom.

Freedom Inc., remarkably, arrives at these important insights for scholars in postcolonial literary and cultural studies while presenting its arguments in a clear language accessible to undergraduates and readers from outside academia—without any judgment toward their/our own consumption of the enticing texts promoting neoliberal values. Repeatedly, Mangharam displays the unique ability to not only analyze mainstream texts like TV shows (*Indian Matchmaking*), low-brow nonfiction (self-help books), and popular novelists (Chetan Bhagat), but to treat with empathy those who use or enjoy these texts and even subscribe to their ideologies of freedom. Thus, Mangharam wants to keep a space for, learn to understand, and even learn from the users of Freedom Inc., including people like her mother-in-law who loved self-help books. What makes self-help books the most-read Anglophone texts in India—much more than the “elevated” fiction discussed in postcolonial studies classes and scholarship? What makes them work, and connect with people? There is an empathy and humility in the writing that is utterly moving, and

that challenges academics to pay attention to the real world and its complexities when theorizing about postcoloniality.

Mangharam certainly engages in ideology critique, but without any disdain for everyday people. The open-ended questions in the introductory sections of each chapter invite us to learn something new about Indian culture and literature today, and not only to rehash the problems of neoliberal narrative and discourse. Perhaps—like Karl Marx says about religion when we read beyond the famous “opium of the people” line—Indian neoliberalism’s narratives and promises fulfill a function as “the heart of a heartless world,” a way to find hope amidst the many crises and alienations of the neoliberal moment.¹

Those who are more critical of Freedom Inc., like the novelist Aravind Adiga, are clearly favored in Mangharam’s work as being able to see through and expose its contradictions and manipulations. But these more critical positions are not presented as simply telling the truth about Freedom Inc. Rather, they are read as engaging in debates about self-formation in neoliberal India. In chapter 3, for example, Mangharam argues that Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* does not eschew self-help discourse but rewrites it, recovering a notion of self-building based on a Sufi ontology. Acknowledging alternative, pre-modern, and non-Western modes of self-fashioning and self-recovery speaks to the fact that some of Freedom Inc.’s proscriptions actually do resonate with ordinary people trying to find space for themselves. Rather than creating a false binary opposition between the collective (which does not care about individual welfare) and the individual (who must separate themselves from the collective), Mangharam pays attention to the desire for individual success and explores the ways in which it gets articulated in today’s India. She pays attention to how subaltern groups too construct spaces for individual advancement, as represented in the work of Dalit school Shanti Bhavan. Following Ambedkarite and Buddhist thought, Mangharam demonstrates, Shanti Bhavan puts forward an ideal of individual growth that diametrically opposes the liberal-entrepreneurial idea that individualism means breaking from society and community.

Indeed, Mangharam suggests that the material conditions of economic crises and ongoing caste-patriarchal oppression in the new India are themselves motivating the widespread interest in neoliberal self-fashioning. Rural unemployed men are actually wrestling with the problem of learning English to advance in a world of Anglophone dominance. Women like Mangharam’s mother-in-law read self-help entrepreneurial books so they can bring in some income as family members lose their jobs. While we can criticize Freedom Inc. for asking individuals to monetize themselves, turning themselves into engines of profit, what about the fact that there is a real need for people to find new revenue streams to make ends meet?

Mangharam’s approach forces us to think about the class and social dimensions of scholarly critiques of mainstream ideas. Reading *Freedom Inc.* made me

¹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>).

think about the various ways in which my students have reacted to ideas that emphasize the material constraints on individual achievement. Over my thirty years of teaching as a graduate student and professor in both private and public colleges and universities in the US, I have always felt that elite and privileged students have been most open to arguments that individual merit and hard work might not be the key to success, given the logic of capital, the “glass ceiling,” the workings of white supremacy, and so forth. Working-class, immigrant, and otherwise marginalized students, in contrast, while acknowledging the truth of these constraints, have often bristled at the notion that they cannot succeed if they work hard. There are many explanations for this unscientific, anecdotal survey—but at least one of them is that there are those who can *afford* to emphasize the deep social constraints and obstacles on individual achievement and those who cannot. After all, if the college degree and all of the sacrifice that went into paying for it cannot lead to a better life than what is it all for? Perhaps it is hard for people to critique the idea of meritocracy when hard work, discipline, and getting that degree feels like all that they have, all they can control.

I. The use value of narratives

Rather than a more detailed review of *Freedom Inc.*, I would like to use this short space to reflect on Mangharam’s recognition and consideration of the “use value” of narratives and discourses. Besides offering more complexity to the study of *Freedom Inc.*, this approach allows for a more empathetic and *democratic* way of examining culture phenomena. Ideology critique, discourse analysis, and the like, for all the good that they do in unpacking and deconstructing the structures undergirding cultural texts, run the risk of either erasing the consumer/user or rendering them powerless. Undoubtedly, those oriented toward social justice often seek to recover the dynamism of cultural exchange by emphasizing agency and resistance. We might hold a space for agency—perhaps for “the subaltern voice”—and register its presence amidst overwhelming and ultimately unbeatable odds. Or we might highlight counter-discourses and counter-narratives that struggle against hegemony and power. But how many times, even when we reflect on the realities and possibilities of agency and resistance, do we imagine them as always already limited, constrained, and ineffective?

Mangharam’s consideration of “use value” goes even further than this. Not only are the consumers and users of *Freedom Inc.*’s narratives shown to be important, but they need to be heard even when they are not resistant to neoliberal mythologies. We often imagine “the people” as being opposed to hegemonic narratives. But by highlighting personal storytelling and giving it value in the analysis, *Freedom* encourages a different approach. What if we create a space for the voice of the consumer or user of cultural texts without foreclosing, in advance, what that voice might say? What do we make of the person who finds peace or usefulness in the narratives of *Freedom Inc.*? Mangharam constantly positions herself as learning and growing from interactions with such

everyday figures. Indeed, the implied author named “Mukti Mangharam” constructed in *Freedom Inc.* is presented as a subject who is herself in formation—not only in the past, when she learned from people who think differently from her, but also in the “present” of the book, as she figures out which kinds of critical questions to ask about the new Indian literature and culture. How do we account the fact that, by definition, dominant ideologies and discourses are accepted by many people—and how do we, if we are interested in popular consciousness and not just critique from on high, acknowledge, explain, and grapple with these complexities?

I am attracted to this method because it resonates with both my academic and my organizing work in several ways. On the scholarship side, Mangharam’s approach of recognizing the heterogeneity of popular responses to Freedom Inc.’s narratives and mythologies is compatible with my critical approach in *Decentering Rushdie*, arguing against the conflation of a postcolonial author’s location, their politics, and their narrative strategies. Too often, the location of the Anglophone author (national location, social location) or the fact of their “postcoloniality” is used to predict their politics/ideological position (assumed to be critical of the nation) and their narrative strategies (assumed to be postmodernist). By refusing to conflate these categories, I argue, we can see how postcolonial and cosmopolitan authors may have quite different perspectives on the nation, and might be as attracted to realist forms as to postmodern ones. By leaving open the space that the consumers/users of Freedom Inc./products might not simply be victims of a duplicitous narrative but might also enjoy aspects of the current phase, Mangharam gives us a deeper understanding of why Freedom Inc.’s mythology has taken hold of the Indian imagination.

In my current book project on the afterlives of the 1857 Rebellion in the Indian imagination, I draw even closer to Mangharam’s interests in the complexities of consciousness when foregrounding the use value of nationalist symbols and mythologies in explaining how they work. In one chapter, I consider the diverse uses of the symbol of Queen Lakshmibai of Jhansi, who died in 1858 while fighting the British in combat. Following the scholarship of Harleen Singh, Sumathi Ramaswamy, and others, I emphasize how the militant and vibrant figure of the Queen has been tamed and co-opted—conflated with the figure of the Hindu goddess and/or “Mother India.” Lakshmibai is always militant—but her militancy is mainly directed toward defending tradition and culture, not patriarchal norms or other structures of social violence. And yet, I ask, what do we make of the fact that real-life militant women themselves, from the poet-activist Subhadra Kumari Chauhan to Captain Lakshmi Sahgal of the Indian National Army’s all-women Rani of Jhansi Regiment, used the symbol of the Rani (Queen) to create a space for themselves and a lineage of women’s militancy? What political traditions made it possible for militant Gujarati *anganwadis* (rural child care workers) to proclaim, in a rally I was privileged to witness in Delhi in 2011, that they were embodiments of the Rani of Jhansi, ready to fight the bosses? While popular symbols and narratives are embedded with relations of power, especially when authorized by national governments and organizations, ordinary people can use them in new and

creative ways—and have repeatedly done so, without waiting for permission from academics.

II. “Mixed consciousness”: Realities and problems

Beyond academic work, my decades of experience as an activist and organizer within social movements on and off campus have taught me to be attentive to and respectful of two facts pertaining to popular consciousness. First, that the people we aim to organize and mobilize hold diverse ideas about their situation and what ought to be done to better it, complicating easy ideas about what “the working class” or “the Black community” or “the immigrant community” thinks and wants to do. Second, that an organizer must listen to, learn from, and be shaped by these voices if they want to even come close to centering those who are at the front lines of oppression. An inability to understand the heterogeneity of popular thought, and/or a refusal to allow oneself to be moved or shaped by it, leads to a fundamental disconnect between the organizer and the people. It also reveals a basic misunderstanding about mass struggle, whose horizons can only stretch as far as the ideas and abilities of those who constitute it, and in whose name it is being waged.

My organizing influences are varied, but the basic methods of my practice were established while I was a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) from 1995 to 2019, in various cities. While the ISO made many mistakes, large and small – I was part of the national leadership team that dissolved the organization after the revelation of sexual assault/rape cover-ups – I remain grateful for much that I learned and experienced, and the genuine people I met. In this light, I want to highlight a concept that we used, “mixed consciousness,” that helped me grapple with the complexity of ideas among people we met, whether on campuses or in union halls, whether in struggles against police brutality or US militarism or abortion restrictions. While I am unsure of its exact origins, we used “mixed consciousness” rather than “false consciousness”—a term appearing in the work of Friedrich Engels and later Marxists to describe workers who believed in the ideas projected by capitalist society about the fairness and freedom of the market. This move from “false” to “mixed” represented, in my view, an acknowledgment of complexity, unevenness, and grayness that could make the organizer a little more humble.

Whether we call popular consciousness “mixed” or “false,” both terms represent an attempt to grapple with the problem of ideology in capitalist society, the fact that the exploited and oppressed understand their exploitation and oppression in diverse ways. Marx famously, and succinctly, described it this way in *The German Ideology*: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, that is, the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”² In other words, the fact that most people believe in hegemonic ideas, rather than revolutionary and critical ones, is not

² Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>).

simply a paradox but a standing feature of class (and capitalist) society: the ruling classes control the dissemination of knowledge (the media, the schools, the governments) and what even counts as knowledge.

The task of the organizer, then, is to try to create spaces where people can act together and work through this contradiction—to try to knit together people whose knowledge and experiences of life, despite these “ruling ideas,” push them to ask critical questions and, sometimes, even rebel and mobilize. But in that process, the term “false consciousness” can lead to dead-ends: the (Marxist) organizer might think of themselves as wielding true knowledge while most people are far from it and might not give enough space to the dynamics and insights of popular consciousness. The term “mixed consciousness” has always reminded me, in contrast, to anticipate heterogeneity, to listen to and grapple with it, and to be shaped by it *because my own consciousness is also quite mixed*. Experience has taught me that people can be radical on some issues and not on others, that they can act heroically against power even while holding onto conventional ideas, and, at the same time, that those with radical ideas may not know how to operate in the face of a crisis.

The sheer unevenness of the revolutionary process is powerfully conveyed by the Russian revolutionary V. I. Lenin in an article arguing vehemently against those who criticized the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland for its shortcomings. Lenin argued, in a document that was a key forerunner of the Comintern defense of anticolonial nationalism in the 1920s:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.-to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, “We are for socialism”, and another, somewhere else and says, “We are for imperialism”, and that will be a social revolution! (...) Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will never live to see it.³

While Lenin is certainly not relinquishing the idea that the organized socialists are the ones with the knowledge of the system as a whole, the entire passage is a critique of imagining revolution as linear or “pure” process and missing the actual, historical struggle of a colonized people. There is a refreshing critique here of a formulaic, linear idea of revolution. Those who are not political and/or not proletarianized, might leap into action, Lenin tells his left-wing audience; those who experience national oppression and feudalism may take the lead. Lenin asks his audience to embrace the messiness, unevenness, unpredictability of struggle, and to *learn* from this process.

³ V. I. Lenin (<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/irishmr/vol04/no14/lenin.html>).

Lenin here displays a more flexible understanding of struggles and consciousness than he gets credit for. And yet scholars and activists have also cautioned against anti-leadership rhetoric that, in the name of being anti-hierarchical, dismisses the fact that organization is central for moving from a diffuse and heterogeneous set of ideas to a struggle that can win concrete victories. Barbara Ransby, in her study of the grassroots U.S. Black leader Ella Baker, has shown us that Baker actually had a theory of leadership and did not just champion spontaneity, as often thought. Angela Davis cites Ransby thus in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*:

Those who romanticize the concept of leaderless movements often misleadingly deploy Ella Baker's words, 'Strong people don't need [a] strong leader.' Baker delivered this message in various iterations over her fifty-year career working in the trenches of racial justice struggles, but what she meant was specific and contextual. She was calling for people to disinvest from the notion of the messianic, charismatic leader who promises political salvation in exchange for deference. Baker also did not mean that movements would naturally emerge without collective analysis, serious strategizing, organizing, mobilizing and consensus building.⁴

Here we see a role for organizers and leaders that is essential to bring movements together and be effective even as the idea of the "messianic" leader is critiqued. Taking together these thoughts—Marx on ideology and the notion of "mixed consciousness," Lenin's concept of revolution, and (via Davis and Ransby) Baker's insistence on organic leadership—we can conceptualize a more complicated map of the relationship between organizers and the people. It is a constant, dynamic, and dialectical relationship. The people and their ideas are diverse (even contradictory); their struggles train the organizers and force them to shift and learn; the people *become* the organizers; and yet this does not erase the fact that organizers matter, that systemic thought, reflection, and strategy matters.

I have been privileged to glimpse the dynamics of struggle as an organizer in so many campaigns—but perhaps none more than one in which I was part of every step of the process: the one-thousand-strong occupation of the John Glenn International Airport (CMH) in Columbus Ohio that I helped to lead in January 2017. It was just after Donald's Trump's election, and he had just enacted the first Muslim ban. The action was a "festival of the oppressed": hundred came out, across generational divides, across religious, race, gender, national, and class divisions. On our feet and in wheelchairs, with our baby carriages and our walking sticks, and with diverse Muslim populations at the front and center, we defied right-wing threats (images of roadkill were posted to our Facebook page) and the possibility of police violence to rally against Islamophobia and

⁴ Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. Ebook. 74.

anti-immigrant violence at one of the prime sites of Islamophobia since 9/11, the airport.

As I discussed in an article, “Bringing Together the Militants and the Masses,” the CMH action happened because of the mix of spontaneous anger and trained organizers, as Columbus joined cities that had shut down airports around the country.⁵ I did *not* agree with all that was said that day; people expressed their antagonisms to the Muslim ban from their own experience, knowledge, and viewpoint, and while some of these stood parallel to my own, some were antagonistic. And yet we, collectively, made this symbolic yet powerful event happen—and many who met that day have continued to organize together, seven years later.

Every struggle I have been part of has brought me face to face with the realities of mixed consciousness—and challenged me with viewpoints and perspectives that I had never considered before. I learned how to stand in solidarity on a picket line, as a Brown man, with White, rural workers who strongly believed in anti-immigration policies—and to argue with them even as we marched against their poverty wages. I learned how to listen, not just speak, when others’ direct experiences and identities needed to be at the center; and yet how to step in when they did not need to bear all the burden and hypervisibility of advocacy. I have learned, over time, that true solidarity is not an act of will but an act of love and trust. As we stand together with students, at the time of this writing, against the administrators and police who attack efforts to speak out against the atrocity of 40,000 dead in Gaza. As we direct ourselves, together yet unevenly, towards freedom.

III. Conclusion

Earlier in this piece I claimed that Mangharam’s approach to the consumers and users of Freedom Inc.’s narratives and discourse was both empathetic and democratic. Empathetic because rather than seeing people as just the dupes of neoliberal thought they become active humans, round characters who think, feel, make mistakes, progress, and so forth. Democratic because without giving the space to people’s own, diverse responses to such narratives, the critic, and/or the organizer, leaves out of the equation the voice of the people—the very force that can illuminate a cultural phenomenon, win a needed reform, transform a society.

While many different strands of political and academic theory have described the overwhelming impact of hegemony, the overdetermination of ideology, and socio-economic forces, I have seen organizers and activists, of various backgrounds, take a much different approach because of how they understand consciousness. While recognizing the realities of the constraints all around us, they also put forth the assertion that it is we, warts and all, who can and will shape history. As Marx famously put it: “Human beings make history, but not in

⁵ Pranav Jani, “Bringing Together the Militants and the Masses” (<https://pranavjani.medium.com/cmh-airport-protest-bringing-together-militants-and-the-masses-4ffa6e937f3a>).

conditions of their own choosing,”⁶ a proposition that refuses to let the fact of historical limits deny the possibility of change through human and individual action. A proposition that is only conceivable if we assert that what individuals do and think *does* matter—but also, against the logic of neoliberalism, that individual progress can be thought of in conjunction with the good of the collective, and indeed, means little without it.

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⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm#:~:text=Men%20make%20their%20own%20history,the%20brains%20of%20the%20living>).

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