



BOOK FORUM

Nested Frameworks of Unfreedom in *Freedom Inc.*

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Mukti Mangharam made a case for rescuing the concept of universalism from obsolescence in her first book and expanded the conversation to include the question of freedom in her second book. Professedly, she undertakes the task of rethinking Lisa Lowe and Pheng Cheah’s dismissal of universalisms, one of them being the idea of freedom, as contributing toward exploitative structures of colonialism and different forms of capitalism. Pointing to the flaws in their perspective, which overlook the contextualized nature of freedom, she presents to us a set of South Asian texts which look at the idea of being (un) free in gendered, patriarchal, caste-based, and otherwise disenfranchising contexts. While admitting, nevertheless, that autonomy is a problematic formulation, the author, is not least in favor of jettisoning the ideas of freedom and choice altogether. Not to throw out the baby with the bathwater—she assures her readers—“*Freedom Inc.*’s consumer model of choice”¹ is the only kind she is opposed to. The kind she advocates for instead, has been amply demonstrated in post-1990s texts that configure the idea of autonomy to reflect a plurality of choices presented to the characters. These choices may involve the ability to decide between several life paths and various models of wellbeing.

What is this phrase “*Freedom Inc.*” gesturing toward in the title and the chapters? The reader might ask. Is it ironical, the name of a film or a novel, or is it perhaps an intertextual reference to an academic work that looms large in the foreground, informing the author’s contentions in the text? The answer is neither. “*Freedom Inc.*,” is, in fact, the author’s autonomous coinage. However, it does carry a hint of irony—a phrase used to describe the various ways in which dominant cultural discourses in present-day India have assimilated the universal concept of freedom to fuel the predatory agendas of a

¹ See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 22.

neoliberalized economic marketplace. In measured terms, she defines “*Freedom Inc.*” as an alternate discourse that perpetuates the perspective that it is possible for a human individual to attain complete autonomy from dire circumstances, if such is their lot in life, by investing enough time and labor in the project of neoliberalization itself. This autonomy may be economic, might involve romantic agency, or gendered choices, or might even have to do with freedom of physical mobility of marginalized demographics and minoritized castes.

The book presents a conversation at the intersection of caste, class, and gender in contemporary India and deftly demonstrates how the neoliberalization of workplaces has brought about little economic stability or financial freedom for citizens in the country. As a matter of fact, such a system remains exactly as exploitative, if not more, than colonial forms of domination in the subcontinent. Particularly harmed are individuals belonging to certain marginalized castes, the rural poor, and gendered subjects like the women characters she analyses from novels and films produced in post-liberalization India. *Freedom Inc.* touts the idea that the solution to all forms of oppression is to surrender, body and soul, to a corporate free-market logic in order to efface the socio-cultural and religious problems plaguing the victims of the same. However, in an ironic twist, this same line of reasoning also obliterates any discourses on the marginalizing effects of such discriminatory systems, in the first place. “*Freedom Inc.* thus subsumes the salience of all other forms of freedom—individual, political, social, and economic—within itself”² and in the process, does the predatory work of exploiting and silencing discriminated others, in its own turn.

To demonstrate her arguments against the project of *Freedom Inc.*, Mangharam reads a set of primary works comprising English-language novels, Dalit life writing, Indian films, and a Netflix TV show. In addition to this array of literary texts, in both the “Introduction” and the “Coda,” she mentions two novels in passing: *In Times of Siege* (2003) by Githa Hariharan and *The Fate of Butterflies* (2019) by Nayantara Sahgal. The purpose of bringing them up is to contend that they shed light on the links connecting the Hindutva ideology and the proliferation of the neoliberal economic structure as the dominant rubric of income. Alongside this, the two novels attest to the gendered discourse that supports the analytical claims presented by the author in *Freedom Inc.* Although the author does not venture into a deep-tissue critique of the Hindutva ideology in her book, the nascent potential of doing so remains, and perhaps she will think to take this up in a future scholarly work of hers.

While scholarly in scope, the methodology of the book makes it a non-traditional academic monograph. This unconventional approach enriches the arguments Mangharam presents us in her text as well as helping the reader grasp the interpersonal relationships the author herself shares with those in social positions like the characters presented within the literary, cultural, and

² See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 17.

filmic texts she reads. Borrowing the Foucauldian idea of the “technology of the self,” she undertakes the task of autotheory—while dissecting the primary texts—and begins each chapter with a brief, engaging anecdote about how the theme of the chapter has been informed by her own experiences. Funny, frustrating, humbling, and refreshing, alternately, these anecdotes dot the surface of an otherwise serious academic work and provide moments of levity and affective closure for the reader. She also explains why she feels the need to recount stories from her own life as part of her scholarly praxis in this monograph. They lift up the literary-critical arguments she makes in this book and place them in a league of their own, setting them apart from dryly argued impersonal works of academic scholarship which might frequently lack any significant affective pull for the reader.

In each chapter, the author chooses a genre of literary expression—the bildungsroman in the first chapter; Ambedkarite life-writing in the second; the self-help novel in the next; and popular and literary fiction in the final chapter. Mangharam discusses how nested forms of oppression like caste and gender affect the composition of the plots of such literary artifacts as well as inform the characterization of individuals who populate these cultural texts. The anecdote headlining the first chapter is culled from her own mother’s social and economic existence as a homemaker. This anecdote about her mother’s lack of financial independence as a “housewife” (a term the author willingly adopts) caused her an academic epiphany. She explains how she understood that waged work can be both liberating and exploitative for women in India. While the paternal side of her family had enough privilege to afford her mother being a housewife—notwithstanding the financial constraints she may have been autonomously facing inside the domestic space—there are numerous women in rural parts of the subcontinent who are compelled to resort to cheaply remunerated work because they must find means of basic subsistence, even when they are badly paid. Waged work is nuanced, women’s freedom is classed, Mangharam concludes. At this point, I wondered whether the author is willing to engage with—perhaps in a later piece—scholarship on the “wages for housework” movement? To my mind, an engagement with interlocutors like Silvia Federici coupled with a scholar of caste and gender, like Uma Chakravarty, would make Mangharam’s contributions even more firmly situated in a South Asian literary and cultural context at the same time as lending her insights a more rooted grounding in social movements around causes of gender that have taken place in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The cultural texts Mangharam analyses in the first chapter are “Young Rural Women in India Chase Big City Dreams” (2016), an *NYT* story by Ellen Barry; the novel, *The Space Between Us* (2017) by Thrity Umrigar; and finally, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), a Malayalam-language film directed by Jeo Baby. Ellen Barry’s story discusses the locus of mobility and waged work of a pair of young women finding employment at a factory located in Bangalore. Barry’s perspective contains an element of advocacy for these women but it also carries flaws. The author critiques Barry’s idea of freedom as being a narrow one based on “competing notions of Indian femininity” because the major women characters can choose only between factory work and domestic

chores. Moreover, in her critique of Barry seeing the women characters as “precapitalist collective ... [with no] agency in and of themselves” (48), the author presents us with an astute critique of the *NYT* journalist’s perspective, and one that holds imminently true of many whitewashed readings of South Asian literary texts. Furthermore, the author points out the problem of equating waged work with freedom and overlooking “structures of inequality ... tied to domestic life”³ that may well be present in the personal existences of these women. Mangharam urges us to think and move beyond binaries toward a more expansive notion of freedom by revealing how Barry’s vision of freedom is fundamentally flawed.

In her analysis of Umrigar’s *The Space Between Us*, the author includes an additional element of the class factor. She points out how the novel brings up issues of caste in the sector of casualized domestic work in the Indian city of Mumbai. The city serves as the setting for the novel. Mentioning Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum as two of her interlocutors, Mangharam shows, once again, that freedom is classed and that even wealthy women who are constrained themselves, can be perpetrators of patriarchal, casteist violence. The novel adapts the form of an affirmative bildungsroman because it talks about the personal trajectory of Bhima’s life; she is a domestic helper who is treated badly by her wealthy employers. Bhima is ultimately objectified as a dispensable property when she attempts to speak up against an act of injustice in the household and must bear the brunt of a casteist, misogynistic, elitist system. Despite having access to a certain stratum of waged workers, which allows her to transcend her gender identity at times, she still lacks freedom or a guaranteed, secure means of economic independence. At her employers’ house, the domestic help must endure humiliating practices of untouchability, via segregated dishes and kitchen utensils, while at the same time, she must also perform the productive work of generating profit for her employers by ensuring that their needs are sufficiently well taken care of for them to thrive in their respective workspaces. The class question is key here and cannot be viewed in isolation from other nested frameworks of oppression. Umrigar’s novel efficiently captures the tension between “the body as personhood and the body as property embodied in the figure of the female domestic servant,”⁴ thereby successfully illuminating economic and gender relations residing between caste, economic class, and gender equations in India.

Along a similar line of logic then, the author investigates the lack of substantial freedom of Dalit lives in the second chapter. The anecdote, this time, involves a trip to her in-laws’ place in Bangalore, on vacation. It sets the stage for making connections between self-made journeys to affluence, through entrepreneurial means, and an interrogation of the ethics, indeed effectiveness, of such paths. Furthermore, she points out the unequal distribution of access to this means among the various castes in India, and even the dangers of believing in the narrative of independent self-making when it seems only to be peddling an

³ See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 50.

⁴ See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 58.

empty dream to those who need genuine structural support instead. The works she analyses are the documentary film *Daughters of Destiny* (2017) directed by Vanessa Roth; *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* (2017); a Dalit life narrative, by Shilpa Raj, and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt, another life narrative. Do Dalits really have a chance at an improved life if they sell out to the dream peddled by *Freedom Inc.* If so, then what happens to other factors apart from caste and access that will often hinder the individual progress of a Dalit person in India?

No—*Freedom Inc.* does not provide a concrete solution to the stated question; her close readings answer in unison. The author's analysis of the nested frameworks of gender oppression in Dalit communities is clear and comprehensive. Dalit women have significantly less access to opportunities than the menfolk do. Institutional education may be a better means for Dalit women to achieve success at, but that may not remain a universal truth in all contexts. Mangharam rightly critiques Kapur's narrative that a Dalit must pull themselves up by one's bootstraps in order to succeed in life or gain entry into a more affluent class of social individuals. What I was looking for here, in addition to her mentioning the "bootstraps" narrative, is a mention of the abysmal conditions of development, leading to diminishing opportunities, in India, that make such a narrative not simply unjust but also unviable. This section reminded me of the narrative of the American dream, which is sold to immigrants and people of color the world over, as their one true path to economic success. A near-direct importation of the American dream spiel to the South Asian context would be not simply dishonest, but quite frankly, ludicrous, given the asymmetry in social structures and forms of development in the two different locales. Mangharam adroitly reveals the fallacies of such a logic in *Freedom Inc.* Two other things were notable in this chapter. First, her clear articulation of the book's approach toward Dalit stories, which derives from the legacies of "two intertwined Ambedkarite contextual universalisms on Dalit notions of freedom—the Pragmatist idea of individual freedom as 'individuality operating in and for the common interest' and the Buddhist notion that one's responsibility for oneself was in actuality a responsibility for the entire *sangha* or community."⁵ The second thing is that, in her investigation of Shilpa Raj's memoir, she identifies moments of caste shock, much like culture shock, which reveals the unequal structures of power that an apparently similar group of Indian girls might inhabit in an educational space. She reads the novels and films as bildungsroman, in keeping with Debjani Ganguly's assessment of Dalit life narratives as being situated in that genre. Such an evaluation is also informed by Franco Moretti's identification of the capaciousness provided by narratives of "individual development and modern subject formation."⁶

The last two chapters present analyses of the novels, *The White Tiger* (2008) by Arvind Adiga; Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Asia* (2013); Robin Sharma's

⁵ See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 81.

⁶ See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 88.

The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari (1996); some works by the writer, Chetan Bhagat, and Manju Kapur's recent work, *Custody* (2011). Keeping the novel company on the smorgasbord is a TV show on Netflix called *Indian Matchmaking*. Mangharam recounts the story of her mother-in-law's trials in life, around trying to improve the finances of the family, and her fondness for self-help books as her preferred form of character education. The author candidly discusses her mother-in-law's feelings toward the genre as being one which takes its form at face value, without pausing to ponder deeply upon the illusions created by self-help books by detaching the individual from the systemic structures that make her social existence possible. The third chapter is possibly the most rigorous chapter in the book. Apropos the brand of *Freedom Inc.* offered by self-help books, the author makes her stance clear: "[o]ne's social contexts and ties, one's place within networks—including the family you are born into, and the gender you belong to—constitute the nature of one's choice and agency."⁷ Therefore, social and economic factors determine one's lot in life, and self-help is co-opted into the neoliberal discourse of individual empowerment through autonomous means in neoliberalized capitalistic economy that creates impersonal revenue streams out of real people. To demonstrate how these personified revenue streams are created, the author cites Mrinalini Chakravarty, Sarah Brouillette, and writer, Mohsin Hamid to argue how Adiga's novel points out contradictory ideals of self-help within the neoliberal discourse, and Hamid uses Sufi philosophy to subvert the genre.

The task of Mangharam's book is to reverse the damage done by neoliberal narratives of success in post-liberalization India by repoliticizing and historicizing such perspectives. At the risk of oversimplifying an academic text replete with complex, nuanced ideas, the principal argument in the book is that *Freedom Inc.* is little more than a set of empty promises meted out to disadvantaged Indians. To reclaim oneself autonomously, one must first understand the scaffolding of various kinds of oppression that curtail one's advancement in society. The inheritance of previous forms of caste, class, and gender oppression, which have been refashioned into new methods of dominance in contemporary India are held up to light in the close readings of literary texts that Mangharam undertakes. To this effect, the author presents a set of persuasive and articulate arguments in the monograph, which carry out the task of situating the question of human freedom in a framework of literary discourse. In tandem with presenting her analyses of these texts, she talks about the different audiences of these *Freedom Inc.* narratives. They may be young rural women, as in the first chapter; aspiring entrepreneurs in the second chapter; and small-town men, in the third chapter, among other demographics. The term, "homo economicus" is mentioned in several places in the book and comes to stand in for the ideal that all masculinized subjects who hold *Freedom Inc.* as a viable path to economic success ultimately wish to achieve. Ultimately, however, the author warns, where society is cut from a variegated cloth, discourses of difference as a universalism become an urgent

⁷ See Mangharam, *Freedom Inc.*, 122.

necessity. The real remedy for subverting neoliberalism is to pay attention to the nuances of context. Little else will solve the problems of inequality and uneven development in present-day India.

Author biography. Apala Bhowmick is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at Emory University. Her research focuses on networks of environmental extraction via botanical and zoological means, as represented in African and Caribbean literatures of the 20th and 21st centuries. Her dissertation examines Anglophone and Francophone novels, in conjunction with travel narratives and medical treatises, from these regions.

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