



BOOK FORUM

Expanding Freedom: A Response

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Abstract

This is a response to the engagement of scholars with my argument in my book, *Freedom Inc.: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*. I expand on my argument about the way that the novel form can nuance Orientalist or Eurocentric assumptions about freedom, the links between neoliberalism and Hindu Nationalism, whether a theory of freedom that takes into account the constraining contexts through which agency is produced can ever include rebellion, and the contradictory discourses and contested subjectivities through which agency is constituted.

Keywords: freedom; neoliberalism; agency; India; novel

I. Introduction

2020–2021 was an uncomfortable yet incredibly generative time to write this book. It was a period marked by the ongoing catastrophe of the pandemic, Trump’s attempt to end American democracy through an authoritarian coup, the murder of George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed. In Center City Philadelphia where I lived, the sounds of helicopter blades whirring, shop windows being smashed, and ambulance sirens screaming, were constant. It felt like the capitalist promise of the end of history had culminated in the *literal* end of history, manifested as the end of the world. The news coming out of India was similarly dire. The Indian government’s decades-long neglect of public health care infrastructure—the result of the devastation wrought by three

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decades of privatization—was having a catastrophic effect on ordinary Indians. By May 2021, India had recorded more than 19 million cases of coronavirus—second only to the USA. It has also confirmed more than 215,000 deaths. Social media was saturated with distressing images of families begging for hospital beds and life-saving supplies, while morgues and crematoriums were overwhelmed.

This book, in other words, was born amidst a recognition that the government's favoring of profits over people had consistently eroded the sustaining infrastructures necessary to meet times of crisis. The systematic production of precarity over decades was accompanied by the strengthening of ethnonationalist governments such as Trump's and Modi's, the racial and religious discord they sewed, and the impending death of democracy through authoritarianism. At that moment, the task of the book—to map the cultural shifts that have bolstered but also challenged neoliberal policies of privatization—felt urgent.

Freedom Inc. explores one of these cultural shifts as manifested in the contraction of what it means to be free in post-liberalization Indian literature and culture. The neoliberal discourse of *Freedom Inc.* redefines freedom through the concept of absolute autonomy, in which individual actors are imagined as having complete power over their circumstances; despite rising inequality, they are conceptualized as free to mold themselves into revenue streams regardless of the oft insurmountable social constraints—of caste, class, and gender—they face.

I am grateful that Ulka Anjaria, Apala Bhowmick, Nalini Iyer, and Pranav Jani took the time they almost certainly did not have to craft such thoughtful replies to this argument. It is a pleasure, too, to be able to steal glimpses of their own work—both academic and activist—in their responses. I am happy to have these colleagues and to work in this field.

2. Reading freedom through story structures

In her response, Nalini Iyer encourages me to expand my argument by considering the role that diasporic Indians play in propagating the idea of *Freedom Inc.*, thereby calling attention to the globality of the discourses that accompany the material restructurings of the post-liberalization era. She pushes back against my reading of Thrity Umrigar's novel, *The Space Between Us*, as a critique of *Freedom Inc.*, on the grounds that Umrigar, herself a diasporic author, endorses *Freedom Inc.*'s entrepreneurial myth of absolute agency in her sequel to the novel. Iyer writes, "The narrative here subscribes to the fundamental myth of *Freedom Inc.* that one can overcome social constraints through entrepreneurship."¹

Iyer is right when she suggests that Umrigar seems to undo the nuanced depiction of gendered freedom in *The Space Between Us* in her other writing. Such an undoing, for example, is apparent in Umrigar's collaborations with Ellen Barry, a New York Times Journalist whom I critique for setting up Orientalist

¹ Nalini Iyer, "A Response" in A Forum on Mukti Lakhi Mangharam's, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*.

gendered binaries between modern, capitalist, Western freedoms and traditional Indian oppression. In an interview, Umrigar is full of praise for Barry:

a few years ago, I came across a series of stories written by Ellen Barry in the *New York Times* about the oppressive conditions of women in parts of rural India. Barry's description of the punishment meted out to those who strayed from tradition made my hair stand up. Things we take for granted, such as women working outside the home, were considered transgressions punishable in ways that recalled the Dark Ages...The world that Barry described was alien to me. I was a city kid, raised in a tolerant, Westernized, middle-class family in which it went without saying that women had to be educated and independent. But even so, I had spent the first twenty-one years of my life in India. How had my privilege blinded me to such injustice?... I was as stunned by the medieval punishments Barry described (making women walk on coals?) as I was by the patriarchal mindset. But at the same time, I was impressed by the determination displayed by the women of the village who rebelled against the old ways.²

Barry's Orientalist binaries are alive in Umrigar's words here, serving as an intertext for Umrigar's later novel, *Honor*. Umrigar, like Barry, contrasts the "Westernized middle-class" with the "Dark Ages" of rural India, in which women are punished for working for a wage. In doing so, she buys into Barry's simplistic binary between women who are free because they participate in the global wage economy and those who are unfree because they do not. She draws on a crude idea of capitalist freedom as the "end of history," with any rural non-Western context being depicted as "medieval," as stuck in a barbaric past. As I argue in my book, critiquing these binaries is not to support the kind of horrific patriarchal transgressions that Umrigar, via Barry, rightly disparages. It is only to contest the idea that a conflated notion of "Westernized/capitalism" is the only route to freedom.

Yet, even if Umrigar personally buys into the Orientalist binaries that are central to Freedom Inc., do her novels necessarily perpetuate the discourse? In asking this question, I bring us back to one of my book's main interventions, that literary novels, perhaps in spite of the author's own beliefs, often complicate predetermined single-stranded narratives such as Barry's. In considering the sequel that Iyer brings up, *The Secrets Between Us*, we may ask: how do literary story structures offset or rewrite the simplistic narratives of Freedom Inc.? Does the realist novel, by virtue of its form, encourage us to read it against itself. If so, how?

Turning to *The Secrets Between Us*, may be instructive here. The story celebrates the small fruit and vegetable business that Bhima and an old homeless ex-prostitute, Parvati, start together. The circumstances of this beginning, however, are not a product of Freedom Inc.'s notion of absolute autonomy, which allows protagonists to climb out of their circumstances against all odds. Rather, the novel traces the constraints through which Bhima and Parvati become entrepreneurs,

² "Reclaiming Honor, An Essay by Thrity Umrigar," Accessed March 5, 2024 (<http://umrigar.com/honor-essay>).

which include the brutal communal murder of a neighbor who was a fruit seller, leaving them with his unsold stock to sell. The small income from selling the unsold stock she has inherited from the unfortunate victim allows Bhima to save for her granddaughter to attend college. It is a freedom, then, that is contingent on someone else's misfortune, and not one that is guaranteed nor produced through an entrepreneurial embodying of absolute autonomy. The city of Bombay is not portrayed as a land of opportunity, where grit and hard work pays off, but as a city that "will consume its poor, parasitic residents the way a big fish swallows up hundreds of little fish, and then cast about, looking for its next prey."³ The book ends, not with Bhima becoming rich, but with Parvati dying of untreated cancer and Bhima visiting Parvati's village to scatter her ashes. Thus, even as the novel celebrates Bhima's enjoyment of "employing other parts of herself—her intellect, her ability to size up a customer, her deftness at closing a sale...of making a profit,"⁴ it does not portray her journey as an unmitigated triumph of entrepreneurial freedom. Instead, the novel's literary storytelling depicts the circumstances and individuals that produce the network of junctions that Bhima faces, and through which Bhima forges a long grueling journey toward being able to sustain herself. In doing so, the novel complicates Freedom Inc.'s notion of absolute autonomy by virtue of its form, almost despite itself.

3. Exploring the links between Freedom Inc. and Hindu Nationalism

Iyer also invites me to consider the role of diaspora in propagating Hindu nationalism. As I argue in my coda, Freedom Inc. is intertwined, both at home and in the diaspora, with Hindu nationalism. In Githa Hariharan's novel, *In Times of Siege*, a middle-aged history professor, Shiv, is compelled to take a political stance against the forces of Hindutva when a lesson he prepares on the medieval poet and social reformer, Basava, comes under attack by a vigilante group called the Itihas Suraksha Manch (the Society for the Protection of History). The group is invested in depicting India as a homogenous and essentialized Hindu nation. Interestingly, the novel depicts diasporic Indians as instrumental to such assaults on freedom. In the novel, the diasporic group, *The Voice of Hindu Americans*, works towards making Hindu Indians in the United States "honorary whites," imagining "an India extending from the Indus in the far north to the Arabian Sea at its southern tip as one unbroken landscape of lustrous gold," with "no Afghanistan, no Pakistan, no Bangladesh."⁵

Hariharan connects these diasporic Hindu nationalist imaginings of 'Akhand Bharat' to Freedom Inc. In the novel, Shiv's daughter, Tara, subscribes to Hindu nationalism's simplification of Indian history and culture, and its aggression against other minorities, because it allows her to embody a 'model Hindu minority' within the US economy. Tara personifies the forces of neoliberal globalization in

³ Thrity Umrigar, *The Secrets between Us* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2019), p. 89

⁴ See Umrigar 2019, p. 128.

⁵ Nayantara Sahgal, *The Fate of Butterflies* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2019), pp. 121–2. In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 165.

her role as an immigrant employee at Yahoo!, one of the pioneers of the early internet era in the 1990s. The link between this career and her Hindu nationalism is apparent in an email to her father, within which she complains about Shiv's notoriety following the controversy over his Basava lesson:

I've been getting messages from friends in Delhi and some Indians here. It's sort of weird and embarrassing to explain why you have written something against our temples and priests and all that. It's only after coming to the US that many of us have learnt to appreciate Indian traditions. What does it matter one way or the other? It all happened long ago, didn't it? Only professors are obsessed with details. The rest of us only need to know enough to be proud of our past At the bottom of Tara's message is a line that has recently begun to border all her email. The exact words change from time to time, but they are all variations on the same theme: Joy, peace, and love—may these blessings find their way to you. Below this sweet if impractical thought is the ubiquitous question, Do you yahoo?⁶

In order to “Yahoo!,” one must subscribe to a homogenous Hindu heritage that is to be made synonymous with Indianness and then traded like a brand within a multicultural symbolic economy. This is why Tara enjoins Shiv to let go of any details that would get in the way of Indians being “proud of our past.” The brand of freedom allowed to diasporic Indians can only be Freedom Inc., through which they are reduced to embodying a harmless cultural difference within the discourses of US multiculturalism that accompany their employment in a globalized corporate labor economy. This puts Freedom Inc., or the injunction to “Yahoo!,” in direct collusion with the crushing of other freedoms by forces of Hindutva back in India.

Apala Bhowmick, like Nalini Iyer, invites me to expand my argument about Hindutva and Freedom Inc. further through what she calls a “deep tissue critique” of Hindutva ideology. In response, I would like to turn to my book's reading of Nayantara Sehgal's *The Fate of Butterflies* as a text that speaks to the link between Hindutva and the creation and sustenance of neoliberal economics in India. The novel suggests that regimes like Hindutva are necessary to preserve the balance of power in a neoliberal global economy. In the novel, Sergei, an international arms dealer, is on business in India at a time when a right-wing Hindu regime has begun a widespread genocide against the country's Muslims. Sergei explains this massacre in the following terms:

It's not about rights. It's about trade and being in control of it. It's what empires were about. Trade is what makes the world go round. You have to keep the upper hand. You don't need to occupy Asia and Africa to do that anymore. You just stay in control by making sure your kind of people are in power over there.⁷

⁶ Githa Hariharan, *In Times of Siege* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2018), 112, In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 166.

⁷ Nayantara Sehgal, *The Fate of Butterflies*, 132. In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 164.

By Sergei's estimation, right-wing Hindus are the "kind of people" needed to "retain the upper hand," which means that a binary "other" of Hindus must be created and then obliterated. Sergei reflects that right-wing Hindus propound theories of a "master race" just as Cecil Rhodes once did. While such theories in the past had been "represented by the English upper class" who proclaimed that "the British empire had a divine right to conquer and rule the 'uncivilized world,'" they are also features of the neocolonial present. Sergei realizes that the economic "sentiments, the language...that sanitized brutality" not only persist but continue to ensure that "a version of divine right still ruled the planet and the formula for the capture and control of commerce still relied heavily, if not openly, on arms."⁸ The novel here is pointing out that the colonial logic of Hindutva, in which certain identity groups are favored over and pitted against others, works hand in hand with the neocolonial nature of economic liberalization. Another facet of the economic cementing of hierarchies is apparent in the way that, as one commentator puts it, as "select-few family-controlled conglomerates dominate the business scene in an opaque manner," with the Adanis and Ambanis, both Hindu family businesses with close ties to PM Modi, serving as prime examples.⁹ Literature has emerged as a medium through which the cultural contours of this colonial logic are embedded as well as challenged within the social fabric.

Nalini Iyer picks up on this analysis to note that it is worth interrogating the links between economic liberalization, anti-Muslim violence, and the scarcity of narratives by Muslim Indian authors critiquing Freedom Inc. She points to my analysis of the work of a Pakistani writer rather than an Indian Muslim writer, arguing that such a choice indicates just how difficult it has become for Muslim writers to speak up against the current political regime in India. I would agree, and yet at the same time, I would like to take up her invitation to consider the work of Indian Muslim writers who critique Freedom Inc. from the standpoint of their religious positioning as besieged minorities in the new India.

One such writer is Omair Ahmad, whose novel, *Jimmy the Terrorist*, was shortlisted for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize and went on to win the 2010 Vodafone Crossword Book Award. The book traces the life story of Jamaal, a Muslim boy who grows up in a small town in India around the time that the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is demolished by right-wing Hindu mobs. His hometown's Muslim community is stalked with fear as the community's Maulana is murdered in cold blood by Hindutva goons. Jamaal, who dreams of earning a "fabled" MBA and gaining entry into the ranks of those who are liberated via Freedom Inc., realizes that the story of India he was taught in school was a lie:

⁸ See Sahgal, *The Fate of Butterflies*, 137. In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 165.

⁹ Deepanshu Mohan, "The Undeniable Rise of Oligarchic Capitalism in Modi's India," Sept 2023. Accessed March 12, 2024 (<https://thewire.in/political-economy/modi-adani-oligarchy-stock-off-shore>).

He should never have studied history. In the textbooks he had read, it was a subject of hope, of promises and dreams. When he and countless others like him read Indian history in school, they often thought... "Now we are free. Now is our time. Now the world will see."¹⁰

Jimmy realizes that this idea of India has been betrayed, that he is not free, and that the constraints of his religious identity as a tortured Muslim in an increasingly intolerant Hindu state cannot be simply overcome by embracing Freedom Inc. It would not matter, Ahmad, writes "if he, after the fabled IIM MBA, earned a king's ransom. He knew that he didn't have the strength to....challenge those [Hindutva bullies] not much older than him, and the state would look at him from across the street, dressed in official khaki, and pay its respects to his intimidators. There was no place to which he could flee. This was his home. Wherever he went, it would go with him."¹¹ Stalked by fear, anger, and a desire for revenge, the possibilities of who Jimmy can be in the new India are cut down to one outcome, that of "Jimmy the Terrorist."

Nalini Iyer is right that Indian Muslim writers like Omair Ahmad who contest the status quo are scarce and that this may have something to do with the fact that Muslims find it increasingly difficult to speak up against the current regime. Ahmad himself is well aware of the kind of censorship directed at those who dare to question the majoritarian order. In 2014, Penguin India decided to pulp Wendy Doniger's history of Hinduism, *The Hindus*, after right wing Hindutva pressure. The publisher justified its decision on the grounds that the Indian Penal Code makes it "increasingly difficult for any Indian publisher to uphold international standards of free expression." It went on to cite section 295A which threatens up to 3 years imprisonment against those who "with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens in India, by words, either spoken or written ... insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class." In response, Ahmad asked the publisher to cancel his contracts with them.¹²

The dearth of Indian Muslim writers who speak out against the repression of their life possibilities is also possibly a function of the widening gap in education between Hindus and Muslims in India. Significantly, a 2016 study found that Hindus and Muslims are the only groups between whom gaps in formal schooling have widened across generations.¹³ This is a worrying sign of the growing lack of opportunity that Muslim minorities face in the new India.

¹⁰ Omair Ahmad, *Jimmy the Terrorist*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), Location 1798, Kindle Edition.

¹¹ See Ahmad, *Jimmy the Terrorist*, Location 1804.

¹² Mahima Kaul, "Penguin India's pulping of controversial title roils authors," 28 February 2014. Accessed 4th March, 2024 (<https://www.indexcensorship.org/2014/02/penguin-indias-pulping-controversial-title-roils-authors/>).

¹³ Among those in the oldest generation, 43% of Hindus and 36% of Muslims have at least some formal schooling, a gap of 7 percentage points. But in the youngest generation, that gap has grown to 11 percentage points as Hindus have made more rapid gains than Muslims. Among the youngest Hindus in the study, 71% have at least some formal schooling, compared with 60% of the youngest Muslims (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/12/13/hindu-educational-attainment/>).

4. Pondering the nature of freedom

Finally, I would like to consider Ulka Anjaria's and Pranav Jani's thought-provoking responses as they speak to each other and to my book. Anjaria notes that all of the protagonists I read enact their freedom in a way that is "virtuous" or "well behaved." She asks 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?" Anjaria's definition of "bad" here refers to those "who deliberately or inadvertently deviate from or refuse to subscribe to dominant liberal norms" and whose version of freedom "doesn't necessarily correspond with a larger interest; it can be idiosyncratic, ephemeral, spontaneous, and even discomfiting."

Anjaria is correct that my readings do not privilege characters who enact their freedom by disobeying or rebelling against dominant norms. This is partly because I focus on the way that novelistic story structures produce characters' agency in and through their constraining circumstances rather than through Freedom Inc.'s myth of absolute autonomy. Pranav Jani rightly recognizes that this focus is a deliberate critical choice on my part. He writes: "undoubtedly, those oriented towards social justice often... 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?"¹⁴ Jani recognizes that the latter is precisely the question that my book tries to address.

For instance, my reading of *A Suitable Boy* foregrounds the "limited, constrained, and ineffective" nature of Lata's agency when she gives up her love for a Muslim man because she comes from a Hindu family who would not accept such a marriage. Lata understands that her mixed marriage "wouldn't work. No one else will let it work."¹⁵ While giving up her love for Kabir would look like "good behavior," I argue that in effect the novel is suggesting something very different here—that individual choices cannot bear the onus of reforming limiting contexts. Rather, one must reform social contexts to make certain kinds of individual choices possible. To make mixed marriages a viable choice, social reform must result in a nation within which such a choice can realistically yield happiness and enjoy success. The narrative perspective thus rues Lata's constrained enactment

¹⁴ Pranav Jani, "A Response," in A Forum on Mukti Lakhi Mangharam's, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*.

¹⁵ Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern classics, 2005) 1422. In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 150.

of freedom as the inevitable result of a flaw in the social order, and as produced by circumstances that characters cannot meaningfully resist.

Focusing on constrained characters such as Lata allows the novel to problematize the idea that freedom always implies rebellion or resistance against dominant norms, or that autonomy arises from “one’s own” will. As Saba Mahmood points out, such a liberal understanding of an autonomous will and its desires ignores what Charles Taylor has called “the sources of the self,” or the values, “commitments and identifications” through which our wills, desires, and intentions are constituted. This is why, Mahmood argues, agency, or any kind of free action, should be redefined as “a capacity for action that historically specific relations ... enable and create.”¹⁶ These relations form the conditions of the subject’s possibility. The very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent. Lata chooses her family over Kabir not because she is being “good” but because she realizes she cannot be happy without her family—she “can’t give them up” because her desires are produced in and through the structure of an overbearing familial structure that she cannot imagine herself without.¹⁷ Hence the novel’s call to reform an Islamophobic national culture so as to produce freer Latas in the future, thereby making a union between future Latas and Kabirs possible.

Like Lata, Preetha, a Dalit girl who appears in the Netflix documentary, *Daughters of Destiny*, also enacts a constrained agency. She cannot simply embody a pure freedom as resistance to dominant discourses. Rather, she is tortuously constituted through these discourses, torn between a liberal individualism through which she can pursue her dreams of becoming a musician and her headmaster’s injunction that her freedom is best realized in the pursuit of a lucrative career that can enable her to give back to her community. Significantly, the headmaster’s idea of freedom is itself a complex mix of two very different discourses. One is the Ambedkarite vision of freedom as ‘individuality in and for the common interest.’ The second is the frame through which her headmaster contradictorily interprets the first – that of neoliberal freedom’s notion of caste uplift through participation in global capitalism. Preetha’s struggle to constitute herself through and against these discourses may be judged as ‘resistant,’ or as its opposite, ‘selfish.’ But I think it is more accurate to say that her situation testifies to the ways that freedom is contaminated, impure, and messy. Agency is constituted through a tangled mixture of discursive freedoms, producing internally contested subjectivities.

Nevertheless, understanding agency as produced in and through constraints should not end up emphasizing those constraints until it becomes impossible to

¹⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 210. In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1027. In Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, *Freedom Inc: Gendered Capitalism in New Indian Literature and Culture*, p. 150.

imagine resistance to them. It would be fair to argue, as Anjaria might, that Seth's depiction of Lata's formation in line with dominant norms allows those constraints to overdetermine her. If we take seriously Anjara's question about whether there is room for rebellion in my theory of freedom, which I believe we must, we must also pay attention to characters who are the products of their circumstances but who, unlike Lata, also insist on enacting extant social scripts differently, even defiantly. In Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, gendered scripts require individual actors' interpretations to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.¹⁸ Therefore, the individual, possibly deviant interpretation of existing social scripts is where the potential for agency lies. Anjaria is right that such resistant characters abound in new Indian literatures, with their actions exceeding both Freedom Inc. as well as other discourses of gendered being. In Omair Ahmad's *Jimmy the Terrorist* we are presented with the character of Shaista, whose circumstances mean that she is married off to a man she initially does not love. But her acting out of the script of arranged marriage involves a deviant, sexually liberating interpretation of said script. Ahmad writes:

It might have been rebellion, what happened next. It might have been Shaista laying claim to her life and her own pleasure at long last, casting aside all the rules and codes that had bound her for so long. Or was it something much simpler?... Something as natural as a young woman discovering the pleasure of her own body, the joy of her muscles, the lustre of her skin, the taste of her sweat?

It was not love. She never murmured his name, not in all the soft and secret sounds she made. She never reached for his face, never once mumbled words of encouragement or desire in his ear... There was only pleasure, the making of it and the partaking of it. It was something she wanted, something she enjoyed, something that opened her body to the world. that allowed her to breathe freely, to sleep soundly, to sigh her freedom with no thought except of her own satisfaction. When she guided him, as she made her way to the particular place she needed to go, he was only an outsider, necessary but, in the end, incidental to the process. The path she took was not one where she went with him, but alone. It took her somewhere inside of herself. He could not go there with her. He was not welcome.¹⁹

This is a freedom that "might have been rebellion" even though it is forged within the social script of dutiful arranged marriage. Shaista's reinterpretation of that script involves using her husband's body for her own pleasure, so that he himself is "rendered incidental to the process." This is a freedom that centers

¹⁸ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), p. 272.

¹⁹ See Ahmad, *Jimmy the Terrorist*, Location 313–6.

herself in and through a script that is supposed to be about his sexual satisfaction. It is thus a “casting aside of the rules and codes that had bound her for so long.” She “sighs her freedom” in a way that does not correspond with any interest but her own and, therefore, in Anjaria’s definition would be considered a “bad” freedom. As Anjaria argues, such an “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.”

Here, I also particularly welcome Anjaria’s invocation of Zoya Akhtar’s film, *Gully Boy*, as a text that also offers a kind of “bad” freedom. Akhtar like Ahmad suggests that freedom is enacted through the choice of which scripts people take up and which they reject, and through the way that they enact their chosen scripts. Through Murad—the protagonist of the film—*Gully Boy* rejects the dominant script of Freedom Inc. and embraces an alternative idea of defiant freedom via the transnational script of street rap:

Akela insaan phir gaadi teri chaar kyun	You’re single, but you have 4 cars. Why?
Ghar mein hai chaar phir rooms tere	You’re a 4 person household with 8 rooms. Why?
8 kyun	I don’t want to become a Slumdog Millionaire.
Aa nahi ban’na mujhe Slumdog	This slum–dog is on a different mission
Millionaire	To unleash the ruling class’s maggots into their own funeral
Yeh slumdog hai mission pe	shrouds.
System ke keede chhode inke apne	Know that you came to this earth naked
kafan pe	Know that you’ll leave with nothing. ²⁰
Tu nanga hi toh aaya hai	
Kya ghanta lekar jaayega	

This is a refusal to enact the entrepreneurial scripts central to Freedom Inc. Murad’s goal is not to “become a Slumdog Millionaire,” but to break apart and reveal the evils of the system that keeps him in his place, thereby “unleashing the ruling class’s maggots into their own funeral shrouds.” *Gully Boy* thus functions as a countertext to the neoliberal script of *Slumdog Millionaire*, which traces the movement of exceptional strivers out of hellish spaces of urban poverty. Shakti Jaising critiques such fictions for “reinforcing the notion that there is no alternative to capitalism if we are to transcend deep-seated inequality and to propel modernization.”²¹

By contrast, Murad’s rap connects his plight to capitalist accumulation by dispossession and uses this analysis to present an alternative that constructs “value” itself differently. Murad claims that one “comes into the world with nothing and leaves with nothing,” so endless accumulation is the wrong way to live. Instead, one must get what one deserves—a chance at a good life built through hard work that is not measured through capitalist scales of value.

²⁰ Zoya Akhtar, *Gully Boy*, Translation Mine.

²¹ Shakti Jaising, *Beyond Alterity: Contemporary Indian Fiction and the Neoliberal Script* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), 15.

Jitna tune boya hai	You will reap
Tu utna hi toh khaayega	Only how much you sow
Aisa mera khwaab hai	This is my dream, my ambition
Sab kuch mila paseene se	Everything I have, I earned with my own sweat
Matlab bana ab jeene mein	My life has meaning
Ye shabdon ka jwaala	My words are the lava
Meri bediyan pighlaayega	That are melting my shackles
Ab hausle se jeene de	Now let me live with intent
Ab khauf nahi hai seene mein	I have no fear in my heart
Har raaste ko cheerenge	We'll cut through every road
Hum kaamyabi cheenenge	We'll snatch success. ²²

The song strives for a world in which one gets exactly what one deserves: “you will reap/only how much you sow.” Murad sows through the “lava” of his words, insisting that the real measure of value is the “truth” and “meaning” that the words and actions of his alternative script contain, a truth that will allow him to transcend his situation. In doing so, Murad refuses to please his rich uncle by respectfully “singing bhajans” instead of rap, insisting on his “bad freedom” instead:

Murad: I made the right decision. I chose right.

Murad’s father: You chose? What are you? Who are you? What are you worth? We are servants.

Murad: Servants means we serve and work hard. We aren’t slaves. Whatever we are, we deserve respect.

Murad’s father: Who are you? Who do you think you are?

Murad: Who the hell is someone else to tell me who I am? Look at this. Look. Over 400,000 people saw this video.

Murad’s father: So what?

Murad: Read the comments they’ve posted. They’re thanking me for making a song about people like us.

Murad’s father: So what?

Murad: So it means something! It matters to people! After I die, people will still watch it and feel something. That has value. I have value. Don’t ever call me worthless! I am something. And I’m worth something.

²² Zoya Akhtar, *Gully Boy*, Translation Mine.

Murad's father: Listen son, life isn't easy for people like us. We can't afford big dreams. Haven't I told you to keep your head down? The world...

Murad: Did you ever consider you might be wrong? That you've wasted your whole life believing a lie...believing this is our fate...that we only get a life of living off scraps and rubbish.

Murad's father: No. It's not a lie. I've seen more sunsets than you. I am trying to teach you what I have learned. Your dreams must match your reality.

Murad: I will NOT CHANGE MY DREAMS to match my reality! I will change my reality...to match my dream. God has given me a gift. I won't give it back. I've made my decision. That's it.²³

Murad here, unlike Lata, refuses to force his dreams into conforming to his social situation. Rather, his dreams recognize that he is “worth” more than the monetary “value” that is ascribed to him in the new India. Thus, he represents a freedom that refuses Freedom Inc. while also rejecting a reality that is overdetermined by the constraints through which he is produced as a “gully boy.” Yet, significantly, unlike Shaista's version of “bad freedom,” Murad's is still an agency crafted in accordance to a “larger interest” that transcends his individual selfhood. His “bad” rap songs, full of street bravado, slang, and swagger, are consistently and explicitly invested in the good of the collective and in the reform of his social contexts.

Texts like *Gully Boy* insist that we must consider all such alternatives to the absolute autonomy of Freedom Inc.—the freedoms formed in and through contextual constraints as well as the freedoms realized in rebellion in, through, and against those constraints; the freedoms that explicitly seek to expand the good of the collective and those that do not. There must be room for Lata, Preetha, Shaista, and Murad in our theories of freedom. Only then can we form a nuanced picture of the expansive, multi-faceted, and complex nature of autonomy in post-1990s Indian literature and Culture. Only then can we appreciate what Jani calls the “mixed consciousness” of those who strive to better their intertwined individual and collective situations.

²³ See Akhtar, *Gully Boy*, Translation Mine.