

Introduction

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Popular culture plays a significant role in literature, while simultaneously reflecting and commenting on societal values, beliefs, and trends. It serves as a rich source of inspiration for writers, allowing them to connect with readers on a relatable and accessible level. By incorporating elements of popular culture into their works, authors can engage readers, create vivid and recognisable characters, and compellingly explore contemporary issues.

A key aspect of popular culture in literature is the use of references to movies, music, television shows, and other forms of entertainment. These references serve multiple purposes, by adding depth and authenticity to characters by revealing their interests and tastes, making them more relatable to the readers now connected by a sense of nostalgia or familiarity. When readers encounter familiar cultural references, it enhances their reading experience, fostering a deeper connection with the narrative. Additionally, popular culture provides a platform for authors to explore and critique societal norms, ideologies, and values. Through their works, authors can offer insightful commentary on contemporary issues, such as politics, gender, race, and consumerism. By incorporating popular culture, authors can address these issues in a way that resonates with a wide audience, sparking conversations and promoting critical thinking. Whether it's a dystopian novel that reflects on the dangers of media manipulation or a coming-of-age story that explores the complexities of identity in a digital age, literature infused with popular culture allows readers to engage with relevant social issues in a familiar context.

This special issue on Popular Culture, published by the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, takes on several pressing issues of the current day and age, both in the literary world and beyond. I must take this opportunity to thank the contributors and all people associated with this issue who have been the epitome of patience and understanding. I am also immensely grateful to all my teachers and the experience I have gathered in my publication journey in the last few years, allowing me to undertake this rather challenging task of editing an issue on a topic as broad as the sea, and as wide as the sky. Popular Culture, now a major area of academic endeavour, in both undergraduate and postgraduate curricula of many universities in India and abroad, has been increasingly taking up its worthy space in literary research as well. The subsequent parts of this introduction will briefly discuss the papers that grace this issue.

The paper "Indian Television and the Search for Empathy: Poverty Porn Popular Culture in Indian Television" by Adith Suresh and Sony Raj discusses the presence of poverty porn in Indian television and its impact on society. Poverty porn, here, refers to the exploitation of human suffering for entertainment and profit. It highlights how television programming in India often romanticises Third World tragedies, using recurring images of weakness and suffering to evoke empathy. The media's role in constructing stories and shaping public understanding is highlighted, with a focus on the biases and misrepresentations present in media narratives. The paper delineates how media sensationalism and the sharing of exploitative imagery create a sense of guilt and compel viewers to react accordingly. Suresh and Raj focus on the influence of Western media in constructing narratives, that reinforce power structures and perpetuate stereotypes. They dwell on how colonial-era narratives depicted colonised countries as inferior, promoting a power equation that normalised

inequality. Raising effective questions like how Western media continues to prioritise dominant power positions, disregarding India as an emerging power, it emphasises the impact of media representations in establishing specific viewpoints and constructing a collective reality. Finally, it discusses the emergence of poverty porn as a genre that sensationalises suffering and facilitates structuring the “Other” in popular culture, perpetuating Western perspectives and control.

The paper “Why Do You Keep Saying I’m A Boy When I’m A Girl?: Exploring Queer Desires, Identities and Expressions in Indian Children’s Illustrated Fiction” by Ananya Sarkar explores the essay “The Case of Peter Pan” by Jacqueline Rose, which challenges the notion of a simple and homogeneous child reader in children’s literature. The paper highlights the suppression of social, historical, and sexual differences in children’s books, particularly the invisibility of queer representation. However, recent years have seen more overt challenges to heteronormativity in children’s literature, aiming to provide a sense of belonging for queer children. Concentrating on children’s books from India, she discusses “Guthli Has Wings” and “The Boy in the Cupboard”. The author takes the readers on a journey of understanding queer narratives from a fresh perspective. Furthermore, she also takes the instances of texts like “The Unboy Boy”, “Ritu weds Chandni” and “The Boy and the Bindi”, to highlight the possibilities of queer experiences in visual art. Providing the readers with many snippets of the images and dialogue used in these texts, Sarkar effectively creates an ambience of interdisciplinary reading in her work. The paper finally discusses how both books use illustrations and minimal text to engage young readers, promoting empathy, inclusivity, and understanding of diverse identities.

An insightful paper on the Bengali film industry, Debjani Sengupta’s “‘It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause...’ Interrogating Race and Caste in the Bangla film *Saptapadi*” discusses the popular cinema of post-Independence India, particularly in West Bengal, focusing on the growth of romantic melodramas in the 1950s and 60s. It highlights the emergence of the Tollygunj studios in Kolkata as filmmaking centres during that time. The films explored themes of nationalist modernisation and depicted the struggles of the heroines in a changing social landscape. Taking *Saptapadi* as an instance, featuring the heartthrobs of Kolkata Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, as star-crossed lovers from different castes, Sengupta frames her paper. The film tackled issues of caste, religion, and race, and aimed to redefine a new conjugality in a modern society. The paper then examines *Saptapadi* and its representation of caste, religion, and gender in postcolonial India. Sengupta focuses on the characters of Rina and Krishnendu and their romantic relationship, allowing them to transcend societal boundaries. The film explores how Rina and Krishnendu are caught amidst a complex web of love, sacrifice, and the gradually widening role of women in the nation-building process. They appear as the stalwarts of the new India, rising above birth, caste and its identity and religious fanaticism, offering a completely new dimension to the modernisation project of Indian nationalism. The paper suggests that the film challenges traditional gender roles and emphasises the importance of love, inclusivity and service in constructing a new paradigm of conjugality within a secular and free nation.

Elwin Susan John’s “The Conflict of the Subaltern and the Popular in South Indian Indie Music” begins with a discussion on the optics of the relationship between the popular and the subaltern in the context of South Indian indie music. It highlights the work of Indian scholars who have questioned the normalised mainstream national historiography and proposed alternative models. She argues that this trend in the southern part of the country is a recent addition to the Indian music industry, and reflects the socio-cultural ecosystem projected to the global audience. It challenges the dominance of Bollywood music as the representative genre of Indian music, with a view to narrate local stories of national importance beyond the mainstream narrative. The influence of digital technology and global music genres, particularly American Rap and Hip-Hop culture, is evident in the production of South Indian indie music. The later sections of the paper also emphasise the role of this genre of music in questioning caste divides and exploring subaltern issues by destabilizing the exist-

ing national historiography and acts as a rhetoric of resistance. It analyses the songs “Vaa” by Vedan, “Raven” by Adarsh Kumar Aniyal, and the album “Therukural” by Arivu. These artists use their music to voice resistance against the existing cultural framework. The paper argues that the subaltern becomes popular through representation and agency, dismantling traditional hierarchies. It also discusses the role of media technologies and liberalisation in facilitating the emergence of a youth subculture that embraces cosmopolitan influences. Overall, South Indian indie music provides a platform for dissent and collective resistance, redefining the relationship between the popular and the subaltern.

The paper “Binge Watching, Binge Eating: Popularity of K-Dramas and the Emergent Korean Cuisine in India” by Srijita Biswas and Pratiti Roy discusses the growing influence of Korean popular culture, known as Hallyu or the Korean Wave, in India, particularly among urban millennials. It highlights the increased consumption of Korean noodles and the rise in viewership of K-dramas and K-pop on online platforms like Netflix. The author’s aim is to analyse the reception of Korean culture through the lens of food and its role in constructing identities of belonging and non-belonging. It further explores the permeable nature of media and collaborative practices between brands, influencers, and celebrities that contribute to the global spread of Korean culture. Tracing the history of Hallyu, its expansion through South East Asia and Western nations, and the role of the internet and social media in its popularity, the paper moves on to the K-pop group BTS, the growth of the K-drama phenomenon, and the increasing popularity of Korean cuisine, showcased in K-dramas and promoted through YouTube channels and OTT platforms. The paper discusses the popularity of Korean dramas (K-dramas) and their influence on Indian society, particularly, how K-dramas use food as a powerful tool to convey emotions, culture, and nostalgia, bridging the gap between the past and the present. Food becomes a metaphor for healing and hope, creating relatable experiences for the audience. Additionally, the paper highlights the impact of K-dramas on promoting Korean food and culture globally. The use of product placement, such as Subway and fried chicken, subtly integrates popular food items into the storylines, making them relatable and appealing to viewers.

Aatika Singh’s “Analytics of Subaltern Performance: Subversion and Solidarity in Bengali Jatra Pala Gaan” provides a comprehensive overview of the Jatra tradition and its significance in the context of Indian performance culture, with specific reference to the semiotics of the Jatra Pala Gaan in Bengal. Placed under the rubric of Performance Studies, it highlights the embedded fault lines of caste, gender, and marginalisation that permeate these performances, shedding light on the lived experiences of the communities involved. Beginning with an introduction to the Jatra Pala songs and the overall cultural outlook of Bengal, the paper moves on to a discussion on violence in the videos surrounding Jatra Pala. The paper offers valuable insights into Jatra, allowing readers to understand the nuances of performance studies from a unique perspective. Effectively bringing in the angles of gender, caste and other types of discrimination in Jatra Pala, Singh charts the ways in which Jatra Pala has been one of the potent avenues of discussing and foregrounding possibilities of discrimination in the masses. Furthermore, the paper touches on the impact of neoliberalism and mainstream appropriation on Jatra but does not fully explore the implications. She concludes her paper with an essential discussion on the nuanced nature of performances as an extension of one’s identity, and how that corroborates with the gender and caste biases that are inherent in all sections of society.

The paper “Avengers, algorithm and Bhangra: MCU vids in India and the world” by Ajay Pateer explores the practice of vidding, a transformative media form within fandom culture, specifically focusing on fan-made videos (vids) based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Vidding involves creating remixes or music videos by juxtaposing footage from popular media sources with unrelated music to convey a new narrative or effective layer. The historical roots of vidding trace back to the 1970s, primarily associated with women who challenged gender roles and offered queer

readings of the source material. With the advent of digital platforms like YouTube, vidding transitioned from closed fan events to public online platforms. The paper highlights the rise of MCU vidders, including an example of an Indian vidder named Ratin Mohan, who gained popularity by matching Bollywood music with MCU footage. The study illustrates the transformative power of vidding in expanding popular culture and engaging fan communities within the context of participatory internet culture. Vidding refers to the practice of fans creating transformative works by editing and reinterpreting media texts such as music, films, and TV shows. The paper examines the motivations, techniques, and experiences of vidders, highlighting their emotional connection to the source material and their expressive use of editing as a form of artistic expression. It also discusses the global nature of fandom communities and the labour involved in vidding, which is often unpaid but driven by passion.

Nakshatra Chatterjee's unique insights in "Return of the Alternative as the Popular: Nostalgia and the Music-making of Moheener Ghoraguli" explores the countercultural musical representations of Arunendu Das and the band Moheener Ghoraguli in Bengal, India. It delves into their subversive vision and their use of music to enhance social and political consciousness, particularly in the context of urban spatial politics and postcolonial modernity. The paper examines the opposition faced by alternative musicians in Bengal, challenging the mainstream Bengali music dominated by Victorian morality and patriotic fervor. It highlights the unique approach of Moheener Ghoraguli in connecting with the urban audience, breaking the traditional norms of performance and creating a collective musical experience. The paper also discusses the complex history of Bengal's alternative music scene and its struggle against colonial influence and nationalist ideologies. It analyses the songs of Moheener Ghoraguli that reflect the dualistic existence of rural and urban life, presenting a utopian vision of the countryside while grappling with the realities of urban discomfort and injustice. The paper concludes by emphasising the role of alternative music in challenging the dominant narrative and offering a critique of urban modernity.

My paper "A Marvellous Addendum: Ethics of Collateral Damage in the Superheroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe" delves into a rather interesting exploration of the thrilling and adventurous universe created by Marvel. The paper seeks to locate the instances of collateral damage, and, in due course, question its ethicality. Within a span extending over a decade, there has been a gradual rise in the visual representation of collateral damage, both in intensity and proportion, that are no longer impeded by the scrutiny of censorship or the sensitivity of its ever-broadening viewership. In this paper, I argue that the transformation of Tony Stark into Iron Man, one of the most impactful avengers, as a result of collateral damage. Under the lustrous armours and advanced technology handled by these impeccably powerful superheroes, collateral damage often seeks to eulogise and prolong American warfare and the devastation that it entails. In fact, in certain films, collateral damage has also been justified under the cloak of the euphoric killing of the deviants operating within a mysterious set of morals of the MCU. The paper, however, makes a very interesting observation on collateral damage as a phenomenon that does not spare even these otherwise undefeatable pillars of strength. While few Avengers sacrifice their lives, the rest are compelled to make grave compromises. With the recent expansion of the multiverse enmeshed in multiple deaths, the chances of collateral damage only witness a steady rise. Such an expansion of multiple deaths and their instantaneous resurrection in their OTT versions not only complicates the case of collateral damage but also raises serious questions on the nature of the twin principles of death and damage.