



Editorial: Popular Literature: Culture, Power, and the Politics of the Popular

Arka Chakraborty

**Guest Editor, New Literaria & PhD Researcher, Department of Music, School of Arts
SOAS, University of London**

The study of popular literature and culture is rarely a neutral exercise. It has always carried questions of power, cultural value, and the everyday. What counts as “popular,” who holds the authority to produce or consume it, and under what conditions these exchanges take place remain fundamentally political questions. This special issue emerges from the premise that popular forms are neither simple mass entertainment nor pure commercial products. They function as active sites where social meanings are negotiated, subaltern agency is tested, and structures of feeling take shape.

This volume draws on several theoretical arguments to map these dynamics. Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) account of hegemony is foundational, as it shows that dominant social groups must continually secure cultural consent across civil societies. Popular forms become essential spaces where hegemony is both constructed and exposed to disruption. As Gramsci observed in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, “the philosophy of the praxis does not tend to leave the ‘simple’ in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life” (1971, p. 332).

Raymond Williams’s (1977, 1989) insistence that “culture is ordinary” offers another key point of departure. For Williams, culture is neither an elite aesthetic ideal nor a fixed inheritance from the past; it is the shared process through which people make sense of their historical conditions: “Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings” (1989, p. 3). Within this framework, the popular sits at a charged intersection of residual, dominant, and emergent cultural elements. His concept of “structures of feeling”-emergent, affective experiences operating at the edge of articulate thought- helps us recognise how popular narratives register social anxieties before they become institutionalised (1977).

Stuart Hall (1981) extended this argument by treating the popular as an active site of struggle rather than a finished category. In “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” he argued that popular culture is neither simply imposed from above by cultural industries nor spontaneously generated from below as pure resistance. It is a continuous negotiation between dominant and subordinate meanings: “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” (1981, p. 239). Hall’s idea of articulation-the contingent linking of cultural forms to specific social and political forces-offers a useful methodology for analysing popular texts without reducing them to pure ideological replication or resistance.

Subsequent theorists have further expanded these frameworks to address audience agency, distinction, and global media. John Fiske (1989) complicated top-down models of media dominance by highlighting how audiences rewrite dominant texts for their own purposes, while Pierre Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated how taste and cultural distinction

continue to mark class boundaries even within accessible forms, noting that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (p. 6). Lawrence Grossberg’s (1992) work on affect and cultural economies has carried the discussion into digital platforms and transnational media flows. The popular today is shaped as much by algorithmic visibility and platform capitalism as by traditional print and film economies.

The first group of essays in this issue investigates how power works through the body, the senses, and speculative futures. Payel Hazra opens with an olfactory reading of George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, demonstrating how the politics of smell functions as a mechanism of class exclusion, tracing Orwell’s anxieties with industrial “stench” and working-class bodies to reveal how olfaction becomes an unspoken measure of moral and economic worth.

Moving from sensory politics to speculative technology, Reny Skaria bridges cyberpunk world-building with contemporary platform capitalism. Reading Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* alongside platform services such as Blinkit and Swiggy, she draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concepts of assemblage and control societies to show how platform networks turn human movement, speed, and data into new regimes of bodily discipline and precarious labour.

Dilpreet Kour and Sadaf Shah extend the critique of technological governance through an intermedial reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* and its film adaptation. Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism,” Alison Landsberg’s “prosthetic memory,” and Michel Foucault’s biopolitics, they show how soft power operates not through open force and physical coercion, but through the management of affect, memory, and institutional care.

Katharina Wegerer concludes this group by examining the changing literary personifications of Death in contemporary speculative fiction. Focusing on Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* series, Wegerer introduces the theoretical framework of “figuration through familiarity.” She argues that by transforming the traditional Grim Reaper into an empathetic and curious character who insists that “there is no justice, there is just us,” contemporary fiction reworks familiar narrative tropes to help readers engage with grief, uncertainty, and mortality.

The second group of essays turn to South Asian literary and cinematic landscapes, examining how subaltern voices and post-digital practices challenge elite historiographies and established linguistic norms. Manjari Johri reads Bama Faustina Soosairaj’s *Karukku* as a site of vernacular resistance. She demonstrates how Bama’s use of Dalit Tamil spoken dialects and *ketta varthai* (subaltern profanity) functions as radical decolonial practice. By bringing these oral registers together into a published testimonio, Bama challenges the dual hegemony of liturgical upper-caste Tamil and elite English literary standards.

Debaroti Sarkar addresses similar questions of preservation and marginality in Indian cinema historiography. Examining biographies of Bollywood icons Madhubala and Meena Kumari, she treats life writings as “living archives” and film memorabilia in the post-digital era. The essay addresses gaps in official film archives such as the *National Film Archive of India* (NFAI), arguing that these biographies function as essential counter-archives, recording the gendered, domestic, and studio-system pressures faced by women during the golden age of Hindi cinema.

Kunal Debnath widens the geographical scope by investigating global media flows and cross-cultural translation. Debnath analyses the representation of Hindu mythological figures in Japanese anime series such as *DanMachi*, *High School DxD*, and *Rage of Bahamut: Genesis*. Drawing on Julie Sanders’s categories of appropriation, allusion, and bricolage alongside

Jolyon Baraka Thomas's concept of "show," his essay demonstrates how East Asian popular culture appropriates global mythological frameworks for world-building and visual aesthetics without simply repeating Western Orientalist patterns.

The final group of essays question how gendered agency and identity are constructed, performed, and subverted across popular genres. Keito Mori offers a third-wave "Girlie" feminist reading of Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries*. She questions the postfeminist tendency of dismissing teen "chick lit" as mere consumerist fluff. Working with the feminist arguments of Jennifer Baumgardner, Amy Richards, and Debbie Stoller, Mori argues that this style of writing can embrace third-wave contradictions, presenting traditional "girly" aesthetics not simply as signs of oppression, but as possible sites of self-determined agency.

Sona M. M. and M. Mary Jayanthi investigate the subversion of maternal archetypes in popular mythological retellings by Kavita Kane and Madeline Miller. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's critique of motherhood as an institution and Erich Neumann's archetypal psychology, they illustrate how these writers unsettle the binary of the "selfless mother" and the "monstrous female". By allowing space for maternal ambivalence, rage, and regret, the novels reframe motherhood as a more complicated and contradictory experience.

These essays collectively show that popular literature and culture remain useful places for thinking about representation, power, and everyday life. The contributors refuse older hierarchies that dismissed popular media as trivial mass culture and at the same time, resist the opposite assumption that every popular text is inherently progressive or counter-hegemonic. What emerges instead is thus a theoretical landscape; a field of tension where dominant narratives are simultaneously contested, reproduced, and re-articulated.

In an era marked by platform capitalism, cultural nationalism, and the rapid circulation of transnational narratives, critical attention to the popular is more urgent than ever. The popular continues to shape how communities remember their pasts, interpret their presents, and imagine their possible futures. Studying them carefully means engaging directly with the cultural forms through which everyday life is actually lived.

I am grateful to all the contributing authors for their scholarly rigour, to our peer reviewers for their insightful evaluations, and to the editorial board of *New Literaria* for their steady support throughout the publication process. I hope this special issue will prove useful for ongoing conversations in cultural studies, literary theory, and popular media research.

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