

Beyond Rabindranath: Popular Literature, Working-Class Readership, and the Politics of the Popular in Syed Mustafa Siraj's Colonel Series

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Abstract

This paper examines Syed Mustafa Siraj's Colonel series — one of the most beloved yet critically underexplored bodies of popular Bengali fiction — as a site where questions of class, rural identity, humour, and cultural power are actively negotiated. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, Raymond Williams's concept of structures of feeling, and Janice Radway's ethnographic methodology, this study argues that the Colonel series occupies a uniquely democratic space in Bengali literary culture. The series simultaneously challenges the elitist boundaries of the canonical tradition, gives voice to the working-class milieu of rural Bengal, and mediates the anxieties of a modernising society through laughter and embodied folk wisdom. Through close attention to the cultural conditions of its production and reception — including its circulation through the thek (neighbourhood lending library) system — the paper argues that the dismissal of such fiction as subliterary reproduces class hierarchies that literary studies must urgently interrogate. The paper situates the Colonel series within its comparative literary-historical context, examining how it relates to other popular Bengali traditions across the Partition divide, and concludes that recovering vernacular popular fiction is not merely an act of scholarly recovery but of cultural democratisation.

Keywords: Bengali popular fiction, Colonel series, cultural capital, Bourdieu, vernacular literature, thek library, working-class readership.

1. Introduction

In the vast critical literature devoted to Bengali writing, a peculiar silence persists. Thousands of scholarly articles and conference papers have been devoted to the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, and Mahasweta Devi — the towering figures of the Bengali literary

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canon. Yet for every reader who has encountered these canonical authors within a university seminar, there are dozens who have grown up reading something entirely different: the Colonel, Syed Mustafa Siraj's corpulent, eccentric detective-adventurer, making his ungainly way through the mud and forests and small-town mysteries of rural Bengal, dispensing justice with equal measures of cunning and absurdity.

The Colonel series — spanning dozens of novels and novellas published from the 1970s onward — represents one of the most sustained popular fiction enterprises in modern Bengali literary history, yet it has received almost no sustained academic attention. This neglect reflects a structural feature of Bengali literary culture: the reproduction of taste hierarchies that designate certain forms of writing as worthy of serious critical engagement while consigning popular and mass-market fiction to the margins of scholarly concern. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has shown, such distinctions are never merely aesthetic; they are always social, encoding the class positions of those who make them.

This paper argues that the Colonel series demands serious critical attention not despite its popularity but because of it. In its humour, its investment in the rural, its embodied working-class protagonist, and its wide circulation through the lending library networks of West Bengal and Bangladesh, the series offers a rich archive of popular consciousness and literary pleasure. To read it carefully is to read Bengal differently: not through the lens of elite literary nationalism, but from the ground up, through the eyes of the millions of readers who never attended a College Street bookshop but knew every Colonel story by heart.

2. Review of Literature

The scholarly study of popular fiction in South Asian contexts has expanded considerably since the 1990s, though Bengali popular fiction remains at its margins. Pierre Bourdieu's foundational work in *Distinction* (1984) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) provides the essential framework for understanding how literary taste hierarchies are produced and sustained. For Bourdieu, the opposition between restricted and large-scale cultural production maps onto class position: the preference for serious literature encodes cultural capital, while the enjoyment of popular genres signals its absence. Applied to the Bengali literary field, Bourdieu's framework explains why figures like Tagore are consecrated as universal while a figure like Siraj — despite his enormous readership — is treated as subliterate.

Stuart Hall's (1980, 1981) encoding/decoding model and his essay on deconstructing the popular offer the tools to understand popular culture's vitality as a site of social negotiation. Hall argues that popular culture is a terrain of struggle in which dominant meanings are encoded, but audiences actively negotiate, resist, and transform those meanings. Raymond Williams's (1977) concept of structures of feeling further illuminates how popular texts carry emergent social experiences — lived, affective dimensions that exceed the categories available in official discourse. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) provides a methodological model insisting on the material conditions of popular reading: the lending library, the price-point of the paperback, the social act of communal reading.

Within the Bengali detective fiction tradition, scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi and Satyajit Ray's Feluda, both anchored in the urban and culturally prestigious. John Cawelti's (1976) account of formula fiction helps explain their appeal — detective fiction satisfies

readers' desire for familiar structures while allowing local variation — but neither series inverts the class coding of the genre the way Siraj's Colonel does. Priya Joshi's (2002) work on the colonial Indian novel market and Francesca Orsini's (2002) study of the Hindi public sphere establish the comparative vernacular context within which Bengali popular fiction must be understood. Fredric Jameson's (1981) insistence that narrative is always a socially symbolic act encoding unresolved social contradictions provides the final theoretical anchor: the Colonel series is not merely entertainment but a symbolic negotiation of tensions that Bengali modernity has left unresolved. Despite the richness of this theoretical tradition, no sustained scholarly study of the Colonel series exists, a gap this paper seeks to address.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology drawing on two complementary approaches. The first is cultural sociology, particularly Bourdieu's field theory, which is used to analyse the structural position of the Colonel series within the Bengali literary field and to understand the institutional processes by which canon formation marginalises popular fiction. The second is cultural studies close reading — indebted to Hall's encoding/decoding model and Williams's structures of feeling — which is used to read individual Colonel narratives for the ideological work they perform: the class politics encoded in the Colonel's body and epistemology, the spatial politics of rural versus urban settings, and the social function of the series' characteristic humour.

The paper also draws on Radway's ethnographic methodology — not through original fieldwork, since the thek library system has substantially declined since the 1990s, but through the available documentary and secondary record of working-class reading practices in West Bengal. The primary texts engaged are the *Colonel Samagra* (Siraj, 1970s–2010), the first Colonel story *Chhaya Pore* (Siraj, 1970), and the English translation *The Colonel Investigates* (Siraj, 2004, trans. N. Sen). The theoretical literature reviewed above provides the interpretive framework within which these texts are read. No original empirical data collection was undertaken; the paper's contribution is analytical and theoretical rather than ethnographic.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Colonel as Working-Class Hero

At the centre of Siraj's popular fiction stands Colonel Niladri Sarkar — an anti-hero of the dominant Bengali literary tradition in every sense. Where Byomkesh Bakshi is trim, intellectual, and urban, the Colonel is corpulent, earthy, and provincial. Where Feluda's appeal rests on metropolitan sophistication, the Colonel's rests on his appetite for mishti doi and fish curry, his physical awkwardness, and his fondness for ordinary people. Siraj's choice to make his detective a figure of the body — a fat, food-loving, sometimes ridiculous body — represents a deliberate inversion of the cultural hierarchies that associate intelligence and authority with leanness, discipline, and metropolitan self-presentation.

The Colonel's body is, in Bourdieu's terms, a working-class body: not the refined, controlled body of the educated professional, but the unruly, appetitive, pleasure-seeking body that Bourdieu associates with popular taste. Yet this body is also the site of extraordinary intellectual acuity — the Colonel solves mysteries that defeat others precisely because he approaches them with the directness and common sense of someone untainted by intellectual pretension. This populist epistemology — the idea

that genuine knowledge comes from rooted social experience rather than formal education — carries a clear class politics that Siraj's working-class readers were well positioned to appreciate.

4.2 Rural Bengal as Moral Landscape

A key feature of the Colonel series is its sustained commitment to rural and mofussil Bengal as the primary setting and moral landscape of the narratives. The Colonel's natural habitat is the countryside: the villages, river-banks, small towns, and forests of Bengal's interior. In the dominant tradition of Bengali literature, the city — especially Calcutta — functions as the site of modernity and cultural achievement, while the rural is coded as backward and marginal. Siraj's series inverts this hierarchy: it is in the rural and mofussil that genuine human values — community, hospitality, directness, wisdom — are located; it is the city that brings corruption and moral confusion.

This revaluation connects to Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) project of provincialising Europe: just as Chakrabarty calls for unseating Europe from its position as the universal measure of historical time, Siraj's fiction unseats Calcutta from its position as the universal measure of Bengali modernity. The millions of Bengalis who grew up in small towns and villages — who migrated to Calcutta for work but remained emotionally rooted in the interior — found in the Colonel stories an affirmation of their own landscapes and values. This is what Williams (1977) might recognise as an emergent structure of feeling: a cultural experience of modernity from the periphery that the canonical literary tradition had consistently failed to represent.

4.3 Humour as Political Strategy

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Colonel series is its humour: earthy, physical, rooted in the body and in social embarrassment. The Colonel's corpulence is a constant source of comic incident; his interactions with pompous officials and self-important professionals consistently expose their pretensions to ridicule. This comic strategy has a distinctly political dimension, connecting the Colonel series to what John Fiske (1989) has analysed as offensive excess — the carnivalesque laughter of the subordinate classes directed against the powerful. The Colonel's humour is consistently directed at those who claim cultural or intellectual authority on grounds that the narratives expose as fraudulent. In laughing with the Colonel, working-class readers participate in a symbolic reversal of the social hierarchy that structures their everyday lives.

4.4 Gender and the Limits of Popular Populism

Any honest account of the Colonel series must attend to its limitations. The Colonel is an emphatically masculine world: women characters appear primarily as objects of male protection, domestic comfort, or victims requiring rescue. The series reproduces, with relatively little critical distance, the patriarchal gender norms of the rural Bengali society it depicts. A feminist reading would need to hold in tension the series' genuine class politics with its uncritical reproduction of patriarchal structures — a tension that reveals the ideological complexity of popular fiction. This limitation does not invalidate the series' class politics, but it does require that any celebration of its populism be qualified by an acknowledgement of whom that populism excludes.

4.5 Comparative Dimensions: The Popular Across the Partition Divide

The Colonel series acquires additional significance when situated comparatively within the broader landscape of Bengali popular fiction. On the Bangladeshi side, Qazi Anwar Hussain's enormously popular *Masud Rana* series (from 1966) represents a quite

different popular fiction tradition: Cold War spy fiction modelled on James Bond, featuring a hyper-masculine Bengali agent operating globally. The contrast is illuminating: the Colonel is rooted, local, rural, and comic; Masud Rana is mobile, global, urban, and heroically serious. These differences reflect divergent visions of Bengali national identity shaped by the different national contexts in which the two series were produced. Humayun Ahmed's *Himu* and *Misir Ali* series in Bangladesh offer yet another tradition — philosophical and psychological popular fiction that crossed national boundaries to reach West Bengali readers — suggesting the existence of a trans-national Bengali popular literary culture that merits sustained scholarly attention.

4.6 The Thek Library as Democratic Literary Institution

No account of Bengali popular fiction can be complete without attention to the thek (or theka) library — a neighbourhood lending library charging a daily or per-book fee for the loan of popular paperbacks. The thek library has been one of the primary reading institutions of working-class Bengali life for most of the twentieth century, yet its democratic significance has been almost entirely overlooked by literary scholars. By making popular fiction affordable — available for paisa per day rather than the substantially higher purchase price — the thek library extended literary culture to social groups who could not otherwise have participated in it, creating in effect a popular literary commons.

The Colonel series was, and to some extent remains, a thek library staple. The physical condition of thek library copies — thumbled, repaired with tape, covered in the residue of many readings — is a material testimony to the democratic reach of popular fiction. These battered paperbacks have passed through dozens of hands, been read in railway stations and factory lunch-breaks, and returned to circulate again. The thek library reader participates in a community of reading, discussing popular novels over tea and generating shared reference points — a communal dimension of reading that Radway's (1984) ethnographic methodology helps us to capture and that the university seminar model of literary culture systematically ignores.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Syed Mustafa Siraj's Colonel series demands serious critical attention on multiple grounds: as a site of class politics encoding a populist vision that challenges canonical Bengali literary culture; as an archive of mofussil life and landscape; as a vehicle of embodied humour that provides working-class readers with a symbolic reversal of power relations; and as evidence of a democratic reading culture sustained by the thek library system. The neglect of popular Bengali fiction by the literary academy is not a neutral oversight but a form of cultural politics — the reproduction, within the academy, of the taste hierarchies that Bourdieu has shown to be constitutive of class power.

To take popular fiction seriously — to read it with the same care and theoretical sophistication that canonical literature routinely receives — is itself a political act of cultural democratisation. The Colonel series, read through the frameworks of Bourdieu, Hall, Williams, and Radway, emerges not as subliterate marginalia but as a coherent and historically significant cultural formation encoding the experiences, values, and social contradictions of working-class Bengal. Future scholarship should build on this foundation with extended close reading of specific Colonel narratives,

original ethnographic work with remaining the library communities, and sustained comparative study of popular Bengali fiction traditions across the Partition divide.

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