



Review of Elizabeth Jackson,
Muslim Indian Women Writing
in English: Class Privilege,
Gender Disadvantage, Minority
Status

Indrani Karmakar

University of York, York, UK

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Elizabeth Jackson. *Muslim Indian Women Writing in English: Class Privilege, Gender Disadvantage, Minority Status*. New York: Peter Lang, 2018. xii + 170 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4331-4995-5.

The publication of Elizabeth Jackson's study of the literary fiction of Indian Muslim women almost coincided with the Indian Supreme Court's landmark verdict on the "Triple Talaq" (in August 2017) as unconstitutional on the pretext of its violation of Muslim women's fundamental rights. The celebration as well as backlash that this verdict generated – including the patronising attitude of the Hindu Right – testify that issues relating to Muslim women constitute some of the most compelling concerns of India today. Jackson's project is therefore a timely one. More crucially, in terms of the literary landscape, Jackson's book fills a long-standing lacuna in feminist literary criticism in the area of Indian women's writing. Overshadowed by luminaries of the Anglophone literary world, which is largely dominated by writers from a Hindu background, Muslim women writers in English in India have hitherto remained relatively unattended. This book draws our attention to a dynamic corpus of writing that demands further critical attention.

In this extensive and ambitious study, Jackson painstakingly foregrounds the key concerns that the fictions grapple with. From the outset of the book, she acknowledges and addresses the curious position that her selected writers – Zeenath Futehally, Attia Hosain, Shama Futehally, and Samina Ali – occupy in terms of their class privilege but also gender and religious disadvantage. Like her previous book *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing* (2010), she starts by providing a contextual framework, briefly discussing feminist movements in India, most of which have taken place within the urban intelligentsia. In the first chapter, Jackson considers aesthetic concerns, drawing on a range of theoretical and critical works on feminist literary aesthetics by the likes of Indian critic Anuradha Roy and Western feminist Rita Felski. She contends that while the paucity of literary experimentation can be attributed to women's marginalised position within the literary context and the consequent "compliant and cautious" (21) nature of their creative texts, the use of subjective realism has historically been an effective device of feminist critique. She identifies social realism as the dominant narrative mode that corresponds with the authors' preoccupations with the domestic sphere. Jackson maintains that the authors nonetheless use subjective realism to varying degrees, with Shama Futehally and Ali "tend[ing] to go further" than Zeenath Futehally and Hosain in their investigation of female interiority (22).

The historically grounded chapter entitled "Religion and Communal Identity" examines "aspects of religions in the literary texts" (52). Jackson highlights the diversities within the Muslim communities of India,

separated as they are by languages, cultural traditions, and even religious rituals. The communal tension in post-independence India continues to effect masculine anxiety that in turn leads to a renewed assertion of male dominance. The concerns of religious minority groups, Jackson observes, are explicitly addressed in Shama Futehally's short novel *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002), which demonstrates the uneasy effort on the part of non-Muslims to be politically correct, albeit condescendingly. Drawing on influential feminist Fatima Mersini, Jackson counters the popular perception of Islam as a religion that is "inherently" oppressive to women. She suggests that taken together, the texts do not specifically pivot on a religious identity; rather, religion functions as a backdrop for the stories. She astutely observes that religious sentiment bordering on extremism is more prominent in male than in the female characters. Perhaps this is the reason these fictions tend to portray religion in a somewhat sympathetic light, illuminating the "ethical" dimension (72) of religion, rather than its institutionalised form that often tends to be detrimental for women.

The next chapter concerns the texts' representation of marriage, with a particular focus on such issues as consent, wedding ceremonies, power imbalance within marriage, and polygamy. Examining the wedding narratives, the author argues that the protagonists' reaction to and experiences of marriage are constitutive of the texts' feminist critique, as most of the texts present marriage as an "inegalitarian institution" (13). Not all the fictions present compliant protagonists: we see that eighteen-year-old Layla in Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004) defies her parents' dictates, deliberately losing her virginity before her wedding day. Nonetheless, Jackson argues that this act of defiance is rife with questions and ambiguities as the protagonist herself finally gives in to a hostile reality, reflecting on her supposedly impulsive action with considerable doubts. The debates around love and arranged marriage, Jackson argues, figure more prominently in the earlier texts by Hosain and Zeenuth Futehally. The reason for this, Jackson convincingly argues, is the clear distinction between these two kinds of marriage in earlier times. On the contrary, the issue of consent apropos of marriage has assumed a "slippery" nature in the present day, in which a seemingly liberal atmosphere for women nonetheless operates within a circumscribed structure. Providing deft textual readings, Jackson avers that the most "distinct" feature that her chosen writers have in common is their "sustained wedding narrative" – "a particularly notable motif is that of the bride as objectified spectacle" (101).

The next chapter homes in on the singular position of Muslim Indian women writing in English, situated as they are in a contradictory position constituted by their elite class, minority status, and gender identity. Jackson claims that this tension-ridden subject position is explored extensively in the works of Hosain and Shama Futehally. The short stories in Hosain's *Phoenix Fled* collection trace the evolving gender ideologies among elite Muslims, manifest in the form of an expectation of womanly compliance with a

simultaneous non-threatening degree of Westernisation. Although writers such as Futehally and Hosain address class-based sexual oppressions in their fictions, principally through their portrayal of the female servants, their narratives largely focus on the upper class. Through her incisive textual analysis, Jackson examines the class-guilt and tensions in Futehally's *Tara Lane* and *Reaching Bombay Central*. Drawing on Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's analysis of noblesse oblige, she demonstrates how these texts, through the depiction of the upper class, enact a similar idea of noblesse oblige, while also underlining the trope's inefficaciousness in "modern capitalist relations" (128). Writing on the paradoxical position of elite women as presented in the fictions, she avers that "the intersecting axes of privilege and subordination for elite women are thus complex and not always easy to untangle" (129).

Jackson starts the final chapter by re-visiting the much-debated term of "patriarchy". She emphasises the heterogeneity of the institution of patriarchy, especially its continually negotiated nature. Although the writers do not unanimously identify themselves as feminists and are, to some extent, wary of such a label, their literary works provide a sustained critique of the deeply patriarchal structure of Indian family life. This chapter considers the issue of family honour, or *izzat*, as the onus of honour is often on women's shoulders, a concern that is addressed in detail in the earlier novels.

Jackson's overarching argument in this project is that though the "literary vision" of her chosen authors is impinged upon by their unique positionality, their texts are attentive to complex social realities. She submits that the texts demonstrate a relative lack of resistance on the part of women, accentuating a sense of "constructed dependency" (150) of which the female characters are well aware. In her study, Jackson observes that women's writing, in broad terms, have consistently critiqued societal structures perpetuating male privilege, as the "persistence of male hegemony in the domestic sphere is a recurring concern" in this body of writing (155). Although the texts' protagonists are not overtly religious, religious identity is more prominent in the novels written in the late and early twentieth century, owing to rising communal tension and emerging fundamentalism. Finally, Jackson's contention that her chosen authors' "fictional world is unashamedly domestic" (157) reiterates feminism's well-worn but still relevant slogan — the "personal is political".