
Maryam Mirza. *Intimate Class Acts: Friendship and Desire in Indian and Pakistani Women's Fiction*. Oxford UP, 2016. Pp. xxx, 193. CAD \$50.95.

Maryam Mirza's *Intimate Class Acts* offers an incisive review of the complex inter-class relationships represented in Anglophone fiction by South Asian

women writers. Heretofore, Mirza argues, subaltern characters have garnered little attention from Indian and Pakistani literary critics despite “the omnipresence of economic subalterns within the domestic spaces of the privileged classes to which the vast majority of the exponents and readers of South Asian literature in English belong” (xv). She contests the traditional method of reading South Asian English literature through a historical and political lens “where hegemony and subalternity are often understood in terms of the colonial encounter” and suggests that such readings undermine the ubiquitous presence of deep-seated economic disparities in the region (xv). She also criticizes conventional Marxism for focusing only on the labour class and ignoring “domestic servitude” (xxiii). To address this gap, Mirza analyzes the interplay of class, caste, and gender within the domestic sphere in select South Asian literary works while simultaneously challenging stereotypical representations of subaltern characters’ agency. She analyzes a diverse trajectory of cross-class intimacies that include (but are not limited to) inter-class heterosexual romance, female friendship, and master/mistress-servant relationships. Her close reading of ten novels by Indian and Pakistani female writers is attentive to hierarchal alliances across class and caste as well as the textual (mis)representation and translation of subaltern characters’ alterity in English, which is considered the language of the “elite.”

The first two chapters of the book explore relationships between lower-class female servants and their elite female mistresses. The third chapter focuses on intimate inter-class heterosexual relationships and emphasizes the family as an institution that impacts these relationships. The fourth chapter discusses the complex intersection of hierarchy and power operative in intimate relationships between lower-class female employees and their rich male employers. The fifth chapter examines heterosexual relationships between lovers with class differences against the backdrop of national turmoil. The final chapter of the book investigates the political implications of representing subaltern characters’ speech in English.

Chapter One analyzes relationships between bourgeois children and young domestic servants in three novels by Pakistani writers: Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), Rukhsana Ahmad’s *The Hope Chest* (1995), and Moni Mohsin’s *The End of Innocence* (2006). Mirza argues that, in all three novels, the children’s age and class identities intersect with gender norms to “inform the complexion as well as the longevity of [their] emotional ties” with their caregivers (1). Although their youth means that the privileged children are less tainted than adults by class prejudices and helps advance transgressive intimacies with their *ayahs*, those intimacies also engender an early class consciousness and facilitate the wealthy children’s transition to their positions as

future “leaders and perpetrators of a sexist, class-divided society” (11). By highlighting how the dynamics of class and desire function in the transient relationships between middle-class children and their caregivers, Mirza adds a fresh perspective to readings of these South Asian novels.

Chapter Two builds on this discussion and attends to the emotional bond between adult women characters from heterogeneous economic backgrounds in two Indian novels: *The Binding Vine* (1992) by Shashi Deshpande and *The Space Between Us* (2006) by Thrity Umrigar. Mirza suggests that the inter-class bonds experienced by these adult women provide them with an awareness of the patriarchal culture in which they exist as well as “the marginality of women” (32) within that culture. While both novels represent strong bonds between women from polarized classes, neither novel “lets the reader forget that theirs is a highly unequal relationship” (33). Thus, Mirza persuasively underscores how the novels question the possibility of enduring inter-class female solidarity and reject the universal experience of womanhood often claimed by mainstream feminism. Mirza’s analysis adds an important angle to existent postcolonial feminist readings of the texts by emphasizing class as an important social factor that prevents South Asian women from uniting for common political causes.

Chapter Three discusses the representation of heterosexual romance between upper-class female protagonists and lower-class men in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2000). Mirza observes that an inter-class love affair is disruptive on two levels: “[I]n addition to breaching class boundaries, it flouts social taboos that are still associated with romantic love in the Indian sub-continent” (61). She highlights how, in both novels, the woman’s family perpetuates hierarchies by promoting class ideologies that are primarily based on honor and reputation. In exploring the politics of sexual desire in *The God of Small Things*—a novel condemned by Aijaz Ahmed as inadequately subversive and celebrated by Brinda Bose as an emancipatory political act—and *Salt and Saffron*, Mirza offers a balanced view of the political implications of the disruptive relationships the novels depict and underscores the mixture of class, desire, penalty, and politics at work in the novels’ representations of inter-class heterosexual relationships.

In Chapter Four, Mirza evaluates the depiction of sexual relationships between powerful men from influential families and their poor female servants in Brinda Charry’s *The Hottest Day of the Year* (2001), *The Space Between Us*, and *The God of Small Things*. She analyzes the overlap of desire, pleasure, and coercion that haunts the sexual encounters between upper-class masters and lower-class female employees and illustrates how the abuse of power en-

acted on lower-class women stems from a patriarchal culture and “the socio-economic privilege conferred upon the male by a highly unequal society” (87). Yet she also refuses to reduce sexual relationships between upper-class men and subaltern women to mere exploitation. She argues that negating the subaltern woman’s desire and pleasure in establishing an intimate relationship with her rich master can deprive her of agency. Although Mirza highlights subaltern women’s agency in uneven sexual relationships, however, her analysis ultimately reinforces the stereotyped binary of wealthy, oppressive men and weak, vulnerable female domestic workers.

Chapter Five analyzes Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* (1985) and Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Specifically, it explores the complicated relationships the novels depict between cross-cultural couples. Contesting Fredric Jameson’s claim that all third-world texts are “national allegories” (Mirza 111), Mirza argues that the romantic relationships represented in Sahgal’s and Desai’s novels are affected by national crisis but are not necessarily national/class allegories. The chapter complicates discussions about interclass relationships by considering ethnicity and nation as broader class categories that extend beyond familial factors.

The sixth and final chapter problematizes the use of English to represent subaltern characters’ speech in all ten novels discussed in *Intimate Class Acts*. Mirza notes that these novels highlight “the hegemonic position of ‘upper-class’ English language in India and Pakistan and its implications for human intimacy” (137) and identifies the limitations of the different linguistic devices used to represent the non-English languages of the subaltern characters. She argues that these methods either “infantilize” (142) subaltern characters by using grammatically or syntactically incorrect language to represent their speech or “simplifly] . . . the linguistic diversity” of the sub-continent (147). Mirza’s attention to the linguistic aspects of the novels accentuates how language is a class-defining factor in South Asian societies, a dynamic that is not often discussed by critics of South Asian fiction.

Intimate Class Acts is a well-researched and comprehensive study that aims to make the invisible visible by exploring the politics of desire and intimacy in South Asian fiction. By investigating cross-class intimacies to explore the dynamics of power and inequality, Mirza re-evaluates the scope of postcolonial fiction and complicates the debate over postcolonial identity politics by foregrounding the many ways in which subaltern positionality intersects with gender, class, and caste.

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