

85 | book reviews

Woman and Indian Modernity: Readings of Colonial and Postcolonial Novels

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In *Woman and Indian Modernity: Readings of Colonial and Postcolonial Novels*, Nalini Natarajan, through readings of 20th century novels and (in some cases) their film versions, explores how 'gender is reconstructed in the literary representations of modernity' (p. 1). Accordingly, the chapters that follow the introduction discuss the theme of modernity and the representation of women in colonial and postcolonial India. Natarajan's navigation across temporal, historical and generic boundaries and spaces is particularly effective and constitutes one of the strengths of the book.

After introducing the central issue in Chapter 1, Natarajan offers, in Chapter 2, an insightful analysis of women and Indian modernity through an intercultural comparison of Austen's texts with Saratchandra Chatterjee's 1915 Bengali novel *Swami*, which, in its time, circulated to widespread acclaim for its portrayal of a modern heroine. In order to situate *Swami* against the backdrop of the 1970s, a time when Austen was still an important pedagogical influence in India, Natarajan deliberately analyzes the 1977 film version of this text. In Chapter 3, she presents an analysis of gender and caste modernity in UR Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* through its focus on the theme of 'modernity and the invisibility of women's physical and cultural labor' (p. 43) at the moment when khadi came to symbolize Gandhi's struggle against colonialism. Reading Rushdie against Bombay cinema, she explores, in Chapter 4, the 'symbiotic connections' (p. 76) between Bombay cinema and *Midnight's Children* and the use of gender 'as a trope in the narrative imagining of nation' (p. 88) through both genres' representations of the female body. In Chapter 5, she reads Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in light of the property struggles that became an important and contested issue for feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s (such as the Shah Bano case that received nationwide coverage). She sees Roy's novel as a significant intervention in the discourse around property and gender and the contradictions within the inheritance laws of 1956 'which entitled Indian daughters to family property' (p. 89) yet within the Syrian Christian community, to which Roy belongs, legally denied inheritors through the female line, their due share. By focusing on the ways in which women inhabit the post-colonial city of Bombay, Natarajan examines, in Chapter 6, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* as a novel that tracks 'moments in the emergence of a

modern subjectivity' (p. 111). She argues that Mistry's narrative, through the participation of one of the key female protagonists in the heterogeneous forces operative in the modern city of Bombay, 'opens up a space where female subjectivity may be explored outside the confines of the middle-class home' (p. 121).

Natarajan's study is a useful and timely contribution to the field of social 'modernity' and reform in India as well as to larger discourses on colonial, cultural, and feminist studies that continuously engage with, debate, and examine the intersections of gender, nationalism and modernity. Her contextualization of *Swami* against the backdrop of Jane Austen's popularity in India is an especially timely intervention in light of Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*, a film based on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that seeks to establish the relevance of Austen for Indian audiences. What makes Natarajan's analysis particularly appealing here is her amplification of the reasons for the relevance and popularity of Austen for the middle classes. Natarajan attributes such reasons, in part, to Austen's emphasis on the notion of 'daughterly value' (p. 14) and explores the implications of transporting this notion into India during colonial times and its persistence in the postcolonial era. Further, her argument that Rushdie's 'use of woman's body as signifier for nation implicates it within a critique of male-dominated culture' (p. 76) effectively intervenes in studies that view *Midnight's Children* as an allegory of nationalism at the cost of subordinating the question of gender. And her examination of the treatment of women in *Samskara* with respect to Brahmanism provides crucial insights about how caste enters discourses of modernity. Of critical importance here is her discussion of the ways in which Brahmanism gets embodied in Ramanujan's translation of the novel and in the 1970 film version, both of which, in varying degrees, insert Brahmanism into Hindu modernity from a male viewpoint. Finally, Natarajan's reading of *The God of Small Things* makes us think about the ways in which Roy disrupts the patriarchal nationalist construction of 'home' in terms of a spiritual space and introduces the notion of 'home' as a space of domestic economy where inheritance rights come into play.

Supported by contextual detail and a sound theoretical framework, Natarajan's book presents exciting ideas and is a welcome addition to ongoing academic discussions of the ways in which policies and cultural practices affect and shape notions of women and modernity in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

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