

August 2020

## Book Review Essay: Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia

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### Recommended Citation

Mandal, Soma (2020). Book Review Essay: Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(6), 511-515.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss6/40>

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## **Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Soma Mandal<sup>2</sup>

One of the fundamental and formative questions of contemporary feminist inquiry has revolved around breaking the in/distinct perceptions of dualities: aesthetic and political, private and public experiences of marginalised communities. Hussein's *Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia* explores what it means to become the 'new woman', whose stakes are involved, and what is implied in forging a new concept of womanhood in the global context. Feminist futures are built on constructing new narratives of change, and this volume through its inter-disciplinary, intersectional, theoretical, and conceptual analysis provides exemplary narratives on the symbolic embodiment of 'new womanhood', 'new femininities,' and 'new identities' in the South Asian region. For the readers, Hussein breaks down the category 'new woman' exploring how 'new' as a category demands new ways of knowing the lived experiences of women and genderqueer communities. Hussein notes, "The volume demonstrates femininities for us, new womanhood as agential, heterogeneous, fluid subjectivities in which individuals make their own choices, are critical of their situations, think and organise, individually or collectively, against oppression. Such a construction of South Asian women as political subjects, as opposed to docile and oppressed objects, challenges the 'oppressed postcolonial women's predicament in dominant South Asian gender perspectives'" (14).

The volume is divided into two sections: section I is entitled, *Politics of Representation: New Woman in Literature and the Media*, and section II, *New Women Subjects in Everyday Life: Practices of Gender, Sexuality, Class, Culture and Religion*. By using a qualitative framework for the first section and ethnography as a feminist empirical process to understand the journeys of new women in the second, Hussein demonstrates how the critical lens of intersectionality, historical representation, and theoretical study is crucial in examining women's lived experiences, which negotiate with patriarchy in deterministic terms. The sexual politics of women's representation in media, transforming aspects of ethnographic fields and a renewed focus on contemporary feminist practices, represent a few channels of how the working presence of the 'Third-World New Woman' in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal is understood. Socio-political conditions of class, gender, religion, and culture offer richly detailed, comprehensive account of individual and shared experiences of communities and their experience at the intersection of gendered politics.

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<sup>1</sup>Reviewed book citation: Hussein, N. (2018). *Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

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The 'Third-World New Woman,' as Hussein describes, does 'a considerable amount of boundary work.' She is involved in precarious conflicts, tensions, crossing the threshold, and finally reaching the new horizon of alternative life-worlds that must provide the gateway to autonomy and non-discriminative gender structures. The nine chapters of the book redefine what the features of new womanhood are, how they challenge nationalist constructions of gendered citizenship and question the socio-cultural institutions of marriage including the patriarchal, heteronormative family which is complicit in maintaining the traditional identity of the 'third world woman.' Despite the misogynist culture of gender violence, narratives of new womanhood are stories of promising journeys of border-crossing.

Contradictions, diversity and differences are part of the feminist world. The shared understanding that communities of women have a unique perspective on how women and marginalised communities have been systematically disadvantaged makes them responsible for transformation. Contradictory existence of women's lives as victims of violence, as symbolic agents of transformation, does not always mean positive border crossing negotiations but rather being trapped as victims within dark structural fault lines and blurred interstices of the home and the nation. Does this newness mask and perpetuate gender discrimination, or does it go beyond it to be perceived as structural discrimination? How do we affirm this elusiveness of the 'new woman' caught in a dichotomous change between victimisation and agencification by the patriarchy and the neo-liberal state? In the second chapter of the book, Chowdhury's observation that 'the 'new' is a continuum of, rather than a break from, past oppression,' provides crucial linkages between structural violence, memory and trauma to understand the violence of developing postcolonial societies. Her representational analysis of the women garment workers' lives in Bangladesh is, however, insufficient to assert new notions of womanhood since victims of natural/industrial/humanitarian disasters are locked in collateral systems of damage, rarely able to articulate new womanhood. Nevertheless, reading their lives as symbolic resistance to dominant systems of power that in specific ways supports the claim of being remembered in the memory of the nation as 'the new third world woman' makes them different from the historical past. Testimonial accounts of Bangladesh garment factory women workers could have also added a poignant dimension to this chapter.

The problematic binarisation of the 'good womanhood-bad womanhood,' is an extension of the good Muslim-bad Muslim debate' (Mamdani 2005) that helps in the gendered construction of women's identity in Pakistan. (71) As feminist rights-bearing subjects, the new-age heroines (women) in Pakistani media who 'defend women's rights,' (71) and question the status quo of patriarchy while living their lives in the conventional moralities of the contemporary period is problematic. In the first chapter of the second section of the book, Hussein's theoretical analysis of classed mobility and respectable femininity visible in urban middle-class women's sartorial choices in Bangladesh is also partially liberating. Sartorial choices as symbolic markers of power, affluence and economic development create misleading patterns that new womanhood has arrived. While modern neo-liberal capitalist economies have secularised the dress code, and cultural values have been inscribed on dresses to represent national and traditional identities, sartorial choices highlight gender differentiation and class positions in society. Excluded are a discussion of clothing as indicators of political and religious affiliations. In India, there has been a visible saffronisation in the cultural landscape. The new Bangladeshi middle-class woman with her smart dressing and sartorial choice of 'sari and bindi' who prefer not to wear the more 'religious hijab' due to

her increasing access to the public sphere, might also fall into the trap of the neo-liberal state, religious politics and communitarian interests that are reflective of majoritarian interests of the society. There is a limitation of this choice in the private space, and context-specific dressing characterises a limited sense of autonomy. However, Hussein's observation of context-specific dressing shapes alternative identities and sartorial transgression. But context-specific dressing also involves secrecy, ambiguity, fear, and repercussion which inhibits the conceptual ideation of new womanhood. It efficiently helps to hide and normalise the broader context of gender ideologies that are at work.

Following Hussein is Adhikari. Though her discussion explores the sexualised nature of women's work in the Nepalese hotel industry, it does not include in the ethnographic analysis, the lens of trafficking, which is an essential aspect of Nepal's sex-tourism industry. Further Nepal's constitutional laws and legislative interventions in this area are missing. Anti-trafficking and legal prostitution/sex-work laws are measures that can counter the sexual division of labour and are also heavily exploitative forms of gendered transaction. The gendered occupational segregation, low-paid remuneration and management-driven (sanctioned-subscribed-prescribed) (127) invisible sexual labour markets and their spatial dimension which exist and co-habit the invisible extant space of hotel culture, also remain mostly unexplored.

As a critique, *Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia* is in most parts repetitive and in some places, forcibly asserts construction of new womanhood through dress, class, culture, and religion as indicators of social change. Given that the socio-economic conditions in South Asia are much more complex and layered than this apparent ethnographic study would reflect, understanding the fundamental positions of women as embodied subjects within the discourse of tradition and religion is contested and contentious. In Assam, entanglement with broader issues of immigrant infiltration, patriarchal, heteronormative family structures and nationalist narrative of Hindu majoritarianism makes identities of new Muslim womanhood precarious. Hussein's vindication of the emergent discourse of 'new Muslim girlhood' among lower, middle, and upper-class Muslim families does not include the intersectional and complex position of Assamese Muslims who constitute a minority both in terms of religion and nationality. Here, Muslims are not just minorities but are assumed to be border-crossers (outsiders); their lives intertwined with citizenship rights. Karmani's economic liberation of women inquires whether earning is empowering and explores how earning empowers as well as dis-empowers women who are increasingly subject to domestic violence as a result of their work autonomy. Women in low-paid, informal, and precarious forms of employment, which are characteristic of neoliberal economies, do not necessarily experience a strengthened position within the household, and neither are they insulated from domestic violence. (172) Instead, they often face multiple forms of violence and are often exploited within and outside the home. However, Kirmani finds a positive correlation between independent womanhood and economic participation of women even in cases of under-paid and low-paid working conditions.

In Bangladesh, the ethnographic study on sex workers subverts heteronormative structures of sexuality in society. Sexual heterogeneity is one aspect of defining new womanhood or perhaps not according to Karim. Feminist poststructuralists and post-modernists have been critical of the 'concept woman' assuming that woman is a constructed concept to perform essentialist gender roles, gender identities, and gender performances. (Butler 1990) Karim's chapter on sex workers deconstructs this essentialist subjectivity of the

'new woman' by placing a critique of what constitutes new womanhood and asserting that it can be radically different in terms of how she differs in experiencing gender. Disruptive and subversive, women sex workers' sexual choice of non-heteronormative partners while being in heterosexual labour processes not only breaks down the category 'new woman' but defines the new woman within the embodied gender experience. Finally, in the last chapter, Chatterjee situates contemporary new feminisms and feminist movements as a continuing reflection of western feminist influence in India. (212) Contemporary women's movements and feminist utterances on breaking taboos, which question sexist biases in society and demand feminists' rights, are taken as examples to provide a rapidly developing form of postcolonial feminist-activism in third world countries that is accommodative of differences and diversities.

Overall, conceptually bringing new directions in feminist scholarship, *Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia* is extensive, well documented and adds to the existing resource on the conception of contemporary 'new woman'. The construction of 'new womanhood' however, represents a continuum in which newer interpretations, embodied subjectivities, different experiences and expressions continue to be interpellated, inscribed and articulated in a dynamic flux.

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