

Gender, Place, and Identity of South Asian Women

Moussa Pourya Asl

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

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Section 1

Gendered Geographies and Geographies of Gender

This section uses a spatial lens to explore women's conditions both in South Asia itself and in diasporas. It focuses on narratives from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh through a meaningful exploration of national and transnational constructs of space, shifting boundaries, displacements, the changing face of gender politics, and the geographies of discrimination and empowerment. Most of the essays in this section deal with the materiality of places that have a transformative effect on gender relations.

Chapter 1

(Dis)Locating Homeland: Border(Home)Land in Taslima Nasreen's French Lover and Monica Ali's Brick Lane 1
Shilpi Gupta, University of Granada, Spain

This chapter examines the construction of imagined homelands in a post-national world with a particular focus on the transnational, South Asian, brown women who are expected to display their dis/interested love and sacrifice. Drawing upon Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of Nueva Conciencia Mestiza and the notion of borderland, this chapter studies Taslima Nasreen's French Lover (2002) and Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2004) to address the following questions: How do the female protagonists of the novels—that is, Nilanjana and Nazneen, respectively—succeed to negotiate their position as in-betweeners between imagined homelands? How different are the male and the female characters' perceptions of their home/land? How do the women imagine their homeland when they are asked whether they want to go back or what is their homeland like? Both novels propose a new discourse of home/land in response to such (rhetorical) inquiries. It is argued that the two case studies demarcate the idea of border(home)land as a notion that is neither geographically nor imaginarily fixed.

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Muhammad Safdar, University of Gujrat, Pakistan

Musarat Yasmin, University of Gujrat, Pakistan

This chapter examines the agency of third-space gender subjectivity in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Broken Verses* (2005). To achieve this goal, two objectives are pursued in this chapter: First, it aims to interrogate and contest the reductive binary perception of women's gender identity in Pakistan as the secular and the religious. Second, it seeks to examine how the female characters, situated in their local power constellations in the novel, are empowered from their spatial mobility to redefine their gender subjectivity and expand their social spaces through performativity. It is argued that women's subjectivity transcends the set meanings associated with traditional religious or universalist secular womanhood. The chapter concludes that women's subjectivity, as shaped by their diverse sets of mobility, is variously inclusive, dynamic, fluid, and complex rather than monolithic, linear, or dualistic. The findings of the study contribute to the growing discourse that views gender and identity as constituent of and constituted by space and place at the same time.

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Moulina Bhattacharya, University of Calcutta, India

The concept of 'border' in the context of diasporic subjects revolves around both spatial and psycho-cultural dimensions. The Partition of India has led to the emergence of the 'Hindu' or 'Bengali Diaspora'. This dispersion has jeopardized the lives of South Asian women, making them undergo a process of 'selfing' in the new (host)lands. This chapter deals with the impact of the process of rehabilitation on the conflicting forms of the 'new' identity or the identity 'shift' among South Asian women in diaspora. The goal is to reinscribe the geo-political borderline as a symbolic threshold to the self-construction of the Bengali women, a corollary question to the dichotomous changes in their societal stature, as it appears to be a constant cue in their mental space. To this end, Foucault's principles of heterotopic spaces to observe the dissociation of the parallel spaces in the process of the 'selfing' of the displaced women are presented.

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Societies present gender norms as “natural” to enforce an uneven power hierarchy. This “naturalness” often generates a desire within the gendered body to conform to their assigned identity within particular spaces. This chapter aims to explore gender identity and relations within the domestic space of home in South Asian context through an examination of Vijay Tendulkar’s play *Kamala*, translated by Priya Adarkar. To this end, the study benefits from Nivedita Menon’s *Seeing Like a Feminist*. More specifically, the chapter focuses on the characters Kamala, Kamalabai, and Sarita to analyze the protections offered to the “good” women but denied to the “bad/fallen” ones. It is hoped that the analysis highlights the different workings of gendered identity and roles within particular spatial settings.

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This chapter studies the condition of migrant women as represented in certain fictional works by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni and Amulya Malladi. It draws upon maternalist-psychoanalytical perspectives and Homi Bhabha’s notion of third space to examine the relationship(s) maintained by fictional migrant women with the mother figures of their lives within a culinary fictional context. The objective is to explore how certain cultural motifs attain special significance via links with mother figures from the diasporic scene who identify themselves with “Home.” It is argued that culinary fictions challenge the familiar paradigm(s) about women and domesticity. On one hand, they invest familiar (and often devalued) domestic chores with power and agency. On the other, they present the familiar women figures associated with traditional domesticity in a new and empowering light.

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In Butler’s theory, gender is constructed through a constant act of performance and repetition which explains it as an act of becoming. In light of this theoretical perspective, the present chapter aims to explore the Indian bilingual novelist Anukruti Upadhyay’s *Bhaunri* (2019) to analyze the trajectory of the process of becoming a

gendered identity. The chapter examines the various ways in which gender roles and identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through the processes of signification, appropriation, and subversion. The findings reveal that in their struggles for their social and spatial rights, the female protagonist and her mother reassert their power by challenging patriarchal discourses. This chapter contributes to feminist discussions that argue for the fluid nature of gender and spatial relations.

Section 2

Reconstructing Gender Identity: Power, Memory, and Resistance

This section is mostly concerned with the complex processes of identity making and remaking, formations of gender roles and relations, and the significance of women's activism and resistance practices in everyday life as depicted in selected works from the region. The subject matter of essays in this section is women's agency in resisting against discrimination. Issues that are discussed here include negotiation of gender roles in domestic sphere, urban protests and social movements, women's alliance and solidarity across borders, opposition to sexual violence and harassment, and reassertion of subjectivity.

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Nur Ain Nasuha binti Anuar, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Moussa Pourya Asl, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

This chapter seeks to explore the Bangladeshi diasporic writer Tanwi Nandini Islam's debut novel *Bright Lines* (2015) to study the subtle nuances of (female) identity and sexuality as portrayed through its main characters. The chapter draws upon the poststructuralist feminist Helene Cixous's notions of the feminine, the other, queer intimacy, and *l'écriture féminine* to explore the various ways in which prescribed definitions of gender and sexuality are contested and reconstructed. The focus on main characters Ella and Maya revealed that female excess and other bisexuality render the rewriting of one's destiny through the body possible. Whereas the former owns himself by forsaking her female body and embodying a male one, the latter owns herself by using her body as a channel of resistance and rebellion against conventional gender expectations. It is concluded that both characters find fulfilment of self by rewriting their gender and sexuality.

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Garima Singh, Himgiri Zee University, India

The chapter examines the works of Afghanistan's female authors' writings to understand the discursive identity construction concerning the appropriation of relational (i.e., symbolic) space. To pursue this goal, the chapter focuses on four novels by female writers: Nadia Hashimi's *Sparks like Stars* (2021), Homeira Qaderi's *Dancing in the Mosque* (2020), Fawzia Koofi's *The Favored Daughter* (2012), and Atia Abawi's *The Secret Sky* (2014). Drawing upon Michel Foucault's techniques of discourse analysis, the chapter seeks to delineate the dominant and the contested discourses on how resistance is enumerated and change is initiated by the female characters in the novel. It is argued that throughout the narratives, the relational space functions as an active participant in the construction of women's identities as well as in the exercise of power and the acceptance of truth and knowledge in the society.

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*Kiron Susan Joseph Sebastine, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University,
India*

This chapter explores the United Kingdom-born author of Indian origin Jasvinder Sanghera's autobiographical work *Shame Travels* (2011) to study the construction and reconstruction of gender, place, and identity through textual representations. To achieve this goal, the study benefits from the critical perspectives of the feminist geographers Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose as well as the feminist theorist Judith Butler. The analysis is concerned with the juxtaposition of identities that are formed in two different places, that is the Indian immigrant community in Great Britain along with the narrator's native village Kang Sabhu, in rural Punjab, India. It is argued that the perceived spaces in the text are constructed out of social relations and are not necessarily independent entities.

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Debalina Banerjee, Vidyasagar Metropolitan College, India

The aim of this chapter is to study the impact of marital rape or intimate partner violence in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and how it leads to the mutilation of physical and sexual autonomy of the female protagonist Saru. The focus will be on her journey from subjugation to assertion. Deshpande portrays

women trapped in varying degrees within the threshold of middle-class Indian life, resulting in fractured identities and violated bodies. Marriage and family are the sites of patriarchal machinations that for women like Saru become spaces of wrath. Such structures coerce women into the system through appropriation of archetypes/ stereotypes. The disproportionate power dynamics within marriage and motherhood dictate the distribution of gender roles. Her female protagonist smothers her protests, anger, and defiance in a ‘long’ practiced silence. The burden of wifehood subsumes Saru’s identity, despite the fact that she is a successful doctor.

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Uncovering the Veiled Experiences: Women, Memories, and the Bangladesh Liberation War211

Kirankumar Nittali, Presidency University, India

Sandhya Devi N. K., Presidency University, India

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the atrocities against women during the Bangladesh Liberation War using memory narratives, historical accounts, and fiction. Through a particular focus on Sorayya Khan’s Noor (2003), the chapter analyzes women’s memories of such traumatic experiences to argue that Bengali women were not only subjected to sexual violence by the West Pakistani military but were also ostracised by their nation to create a true Bangladeshi identity. Furthermore, this chapter explores how female identities were reimagined depending on the then prevailing political ideologies. The findings reveal that the indelible recollections of female war victims later resurface involuntarily in their lives and cause continued grief and anguish.

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Quest for Space and Identity of the East Indian Diasporic Female Laborers: The Selected Poems of Ramabai Espinet’s Nuclear Seasons.....232

Renuka Laxminarayan Roy, Seth Kesarimal Porwal College, Kamptee, India

The literature of the Indo-Caribbean is replete with stories of migration and enslavement of bonded laborers brought from India. The West Indian literary tradition has for a long period overlooked the issue of real representation of East Indian female folk. The Indo-Caribbean female writers started contesting their space in the West Indies literature in the 1970s and 80s. This chapter argues that Ramabai Espinet’s anthology Nuclear Seasons (1991) delineates the evolving identity of East Indian indentured female laborers from the state of complete ‘obfuscation’ to ‘self-assertion’. The expressions of an anguished individual who faces cultural alienation and displacement owing to her hyphenated identity forms the major subject of the poems in the collection under study. The chapter analyses and establishes the

ascendance of the East Indian indentured female laborers from the state of complete ‘annihilation’ to ‘self-actualization’ and final ‘recuperation’ as has been portrayed by Espinet.

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Sarottama Majumdar, Sarsuna College, University of Calcutta, India

Narratives by women travelers to European colonies from the early 19th century were marked by incomprehension because they experienced cultural unfamiliarity. Early encounters between European women and non-European people resulted in geographical and racial segregation in the “contact zones” of South Asia. Immigrant women’s writings record strategies of utilizing their sense of spatial alienation. The notion, which was identified by colonial feminists such as Elizabeth Buettner and Mary Procida, establishes a narrative strengthening social fault lines in colonial India and South Asia. This chapter critiques relevant textual evidence to examine how women made use of reified moral/cultural coda from “home” (Britain) and reinforced racial identity in an alien land (India). The aim of the study is to establish how these uniquely gendered markers created colonial legacies of social entitlement in India.

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Preface

In the past century, South Asia underwent fundamental cultural, social, and political changes as countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan progressed from colonial domination through nationalist movements to independence. Since the beginning of the millennium, the social landscape of the local societies in the region has continued to be affected by both progressive transformations such as economic growth and urban-societal developments and retrogressive changes like civil conflicts, wars, rise of dictatorial political figures, religious fundamentalism, global ramifications of 9/11 attacks, natural disasters, etc. (Fischer-Tiné & Framke, 2022; Jacobsen, 2016; Riaz & Rahman, 2016). Such radical transformations have been intricately bound up with the spatiality of social life in the region. This connection has maximized the significance of (social) spaces within transformative politics and identity formations, initiating discussions on social and spatial justice, equity, equality, and freedom in the region (Channa, 2013; Patel, 2020; Raju, 2011; Soja, 2010). In this relation, women's social, cultural, and spatial position across South Asian countries has been identified as a complex and changing area deserving particular attention.

Over the past few decades, the ways in which spatial injustice and gender inequality have been studied in both colonial and postcolonial South Asia have been somewhat inconsistent (Bose & Jalal, 2017). On the one hand, studies have contributed to development of feminist identity and politics in the region (Boehmer, 2009; Rajan & Desai, 2013), and on the other, the stereotypical image of South Asian women as passive victims of patriarchal culture and oppressive society have been deployed as a pretext to rationalize a number of conservative standpoints about this region and its people, both at home and in diaspora (Anagol & Grey, 2017; Anuar & Asl, 2021; Fernandes, 2014; Keikhosrokiani & Asl, 2022; Nazneen et al., 2019; Pourya Asl, 2018, 2019). Within this context, a growing need is still felt for the study of nuances of spatial experiences and identity constructions in the region to highlight gender identity as one that is simultaneously shaped by and shaping the places. Whereas other disciplines address matters of space and spatiality in social

scholarship, the spatial analysis of literary writings has received little attention in the South Asian context.

This edited book investigates the contemporary Anglophone literature of South Asian women through the triple lens of gender, place, and identity. The concern with place and space has long been pivotal to understanding the formation of gendered identities (McDowell, 1993). The intersection of the three concepts has attracted global attention in the past few decades as the transformational impact of postcolonialism, border-crossings and mass mobility, and rapid advancements in science and computer technologies have promoted the status of space and spatiality to a principal concern. In recent years, feminist geographers (e.g., Massey, 1994, 2005; McDowell, 1999; Rose, 1993; Hanson, 1992) have underlined the dynamic relationship between gendered identities and constructed space, arguing that gender and space are mutually constitutive entities. The reassertion of space in literary studies has also been highlighted recently by scholars (Tally, 2017, Pourya Asl, 2021, 2022; Soja, 1989) who argue that creative writers partake in a form of literary cartography by which they figuratively map the real and imagined spaces of their worlds, both within the confines of the narrative and with reference to actual places outside of the text.

The present volume is concerned with South Asian women's writings (fictional and auto-/biographical) that offer unique insights about the material and discursive formation of gendered identities with regard to their geographic locations and experiences. Some of the questions that are of interest in this volume are: How spaces are constructed, experienced, and inhabited by women in South Asia; How identities are formed and form themselves within places and spaces; How individuals relate to others and to themselves within particular spaces; How space is utilized to forge new identities; How space is remembered against the master-narratives; How space is appropriated or re-appropriated to make adjustments at micro- and macro- levels. These questions and related ones are addressed in relation to what happens both inside and outside of the text. Contributors to this volume mainly use spatially orientated approaches to explore the complexities of the makings and re-makings of gendered identities that are often occluded from the partial and misogynist historical records or mainstream narratives. As Anglophone literature is not exclusively published by resident, migrant, or transnational authors, attempts have been to include literary works from each group. Furthermore, the contemporary proliferation of different forms and genres (life writing, chick literature, graphic novel, etc.), by women writers in South Asian literature in English (Tickell, 2016, 2018), has provided the rationale to include essays that explore literary works of various genres with the hope of better surveying, understanding, and showing intricacies and complexities of everyday spatial women's experiences in contemporary South Asia.

Preface

This edited volume contains essays that examine gender, place, and identity of South Asian women in contemporary literary writings of the region in two ways. The first section, 'Gendered Geographies and Geographies of Gender', uses a primarily spatial lens to explore women's condition both in South Asia itself and in diaspora. It focuses on narratives from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh through a meaningful exploration of national and transnational constructs of space, shifting boundaries, displacements, the changing face of gender politics, and the geographies of discrimination and empowerment. Most of the essays in this section deal with the materiality of places that have transformative effect on gender relations. The second section, 'Reconstructing Gender Identity: Power, Memory and Resistance', is mostly concerned with the complex processes of identity making and remaking, formations of gender roles and relations, and the significance of women's activism and resistance practices in everyday life as depicted in selected works from the region. The subject matter of essays in this section is women's agency in resisting against discrimination. Issues that are discussed here include, negotiation of gender roles in domestic sphere, urban protests and social movements, women's alliance and solidarity across borders, opposition to sexual violence and harassment, and reassertion of subjectivity. The essays in both sections examine a wide range of literary forms and genres including novels, life writings, poetry, drama, and historical accounts from disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, focusing on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and South Asians in diaspora. Taken as a whole, the collection of essays in this book aim to show the fluid boundaries of gender and spatial relations in contemporary South Asia, which challenges the traditional perceptions of gender, space, and identity as fixed, static, and unchanging.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into 13 chapters. A brief description of each of the chapters follows:

Chapter 1 examines the construction of imagined homelands in a post-national world with respect to the transnational condition of South Asian women in diaspora. Focusing on Taslima Nasreen's *French Lover* (2002) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004), the chapter explores the various ways in which the leading female characters Nilanjana and Nazneen negotiate their position as in-betweeners between imagined homelands. It sheds light on how the two protagonists define their home/land compared to their male counterparts. It shows that the novels demarcate an idea of border(home)land that is not geographically or imaginarily fixed.

Chapter 2 discusses how gender and identity are simultaneously constituent of and constituted by space and place. The authors of this chapter present an analysis

of Pakistani Muslim women's gender identity in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Broken Verses* (2005). They argue that the novel interrogates and disrupts the prevailing dualistic views about Pakistani Muslim women which reduces them to the binary of the secular and the religious. It is contended that the spatial mobility empowers the female characters in the story in such a way that they succeed to redefine their gender subjectivity and expand their social spaces through performativity.

Chapter 3 carries out a qualitative theoretical survey on the accounts of phenomenological studies on women migrants across borders in South Asian context. It reviews the effects of the Partition of India on the emergence of the 'Hindu' or 'Bengali Diaspora' in early 20th century South Asia. The chapter seeks to reinscribe the geo-political borderline as a symbolic threshold to the self-construction of the Bengali women, a corollary question to the dichotomous changes in their societal stature, as it appears to be a constant cue in their mental space.

Chapter 4 studies women's conformity to societal norms within the domestic space of home as portrayed in South Asian literature. In this relation, the authors of this chapter analyze Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kamala* in light of Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist*. With a particular focus on the main characters Kamala, Kamalabai, and Sarita, the chapter explores the elusive nature of the difference between good and bad women. It is argued that as the society offers certain protections to the "good" women, gender norms are presented as "natural" phenomena in the society.

Chapter 5 analyzes and compares the condition of migrant women in fictional works of Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni and Amulya Malladi. To locate their works within a framework of gender, place, and identity, the chapter focuses on the relationship(s) maintained by migrant women with the mother figures of their lives within a culinary fictional context. The study is grounded on Homi Bhabha's notion of Third Space and benefits from maternalist-psychoanalytical perspectives. The author examines the concept of home, arguing that the selected stories contest and dismantle familiar paradigm(s) about women and domesticity. This alternative view not only invests devalued domestic chores with power and agency but also presents female figures associated with traditional domesticity as empowered.

Chapter 6 explores the fluid nature of gender and gender roles in the Indian novelist Anukruti Upadhyay's *Bhaunri*. As the story revolves around a married life of a bold rural Indian woman in a village in Rajasthan, it serves as an insightful source for this chapter to examine the workings of gender, space, and identity. The chapter delves into how gender is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through the process of signification, appropriation, and subversion.

Chapter 7 presents an analysis of phallogocentric prescriptions of gender and sexuality in Bangladeshi culture and literature. The overall aim of this chapter is to show how (female) identity and sexuality are negotiated by the leading characters in Tanwi Nandini Islam's *Bright Lines* (2015). The authors draw upon

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the poststructuralist feminist Helene Cixous's notions of the feminine, the other, queer intimacy, and l'écriture feminine to explore how prescribed definitions of gender and sexuality are contested and reconstructed in the novel. They contend that both of the main characters, Ella and Maya, are shown as having the power to rotest against conventional gender expectations.

Chapter 8 delineates the construction of women's identity in marginalized discourses of resistance encoded in Anglophone South Asian literature. The chapter uses qualitative spatial analysis approach and Michel Foucault's discourse analysis techniques to study selected works by Afghan female authors. The author argues that discourses constructed within a spatial context mold objects of knowledge and guide the structures of power and truth. These structures, as the author maintains, are experienced by people seeking orientation through distinct ways of appropriating the relational and physical space.

Chapter 9 addresses the phenomenon of identity reconstruction with particular reference to narrative form and structure. Based on Monika Fludernik theory of Narratology, the author of this chapter contends that South Asian women's narratives are established on cause-and-effect relationships that are applied to sequences of events. In this regard, the author explores Jasvinder Sanghera's autobiographical work *Shame Travels* to examine the triple themes of gender, place, and identity as situated within the narrative structure of the text.

Chapter 10 offers an alternative account of the impact of spaces of violence—i.e., places where marital rape or intimate partner violence take place—on the formation of women's identities in South Asian context. The author develops this view through a reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, in which the female protagonist Saru completes a journey from subjugation to assertion. Deshpande portrays women trapped in varying degrees within the threshold of middle-class Indian life, having experienced violated bodies and fractured identities. Marriage and family are the sites of patriarchal machinations that for women like female protagonist like Saru become spaces of wrath. The chapter explores how the disproportionate power dynamics within marriage and motherhood dictate the distribution of gender roles. It is argued that the female protagonist Saru smothers her protests, anger, and defiance in a 'long' practiced silence.

Chapter 11 uses memory narratives to study atrocities perpetrated against women during the Bangladesh Liberation War and their negative effects on women's experiences of identity construction in South Asia. Through a close reading of the novelist Sorayya Khan's *Noor*, the authors argue that the Bengali women in this novel were not only subjected to sexual violence by the West Pakistani military but were also ostracized by their nation to create a true Bangladeshi identity. The chapter also explores how female identities were reimagined depending on the then

prevailing political ideologies. It is argued that the indelible recollections of female war victims later resurface in their lives and cause continued grief and anguish.

Chapter 12 discusses South Asian women's marginalization in the literature of the Indo-Caribbean, which is replete with stories of migration and enslavement of bonded laborers brought from India. The author of this chapter asserts that the West Indian literary tradition has for a long period overlooked the issue of truthful representation of East Indian women. The chapter presents an analysis of selected poems of Ramabai Espinet's *Nuclear Seasons* to delineate the evolving identity of East Indian indentured female laborers from that of complete 'obfuscation' to 'self-assertion'.

Chapter 13 explores the notion of "contact zones" to examine the early encounters between European women and South Asian people, which resulted in spatial and racial segregations. The overall aim of the chapter is to establish how gendered markers created colonial legacies of social entitlement in India. The authors draw upon Elizabeth Buettner and Mary Procida's feminist theories to show how western women made use of reified moral/cultural coda from "home" and reinforced racial identity in the alien land of India.

Moussa Pourya Asl

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

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