

# Zenana of the havelis

Thinking about female fiction in India

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Geetanjali Singh Chanda

INDIAN WOMEN IN THE HOUSE  
OF FICTION  
348pp. Zubaan Academic. Rs495 (US \$27.50).  
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Margaret Paul Joseph

JASMINE ON A STRING  
A survey of women writing English fiction in India  
200pp. Oxford University Press. Rs1145 (£24.99).  
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Traditional Indian houses, or *havelis*, typically privilege spaces for family life over spaces for the individual, and provide separate spaces for men and women. The segregated women's space, the *zenana*, fosters female friendships across the boundaries of class and generation and collective identity. Contemporary designs, however, such as bungalows, signify a social reorganization along Westernized lines; here it is the couple who dominate domestic life. As Geetanjali Chanda argues in *Indian Women in the House of Fiction*, divisions of domestic space determine familial hierarchies in fiction as they do in life. In English novels written by Indian women, "the villa, bungalow, kothi and other housing models have been superimposed upon the *haveli* typology, not so much architecturally but as a continuity of social patterns". In spite of a non-traditional lived space, and a redefined role for women in urban life, women have been encouraged to internalize traditional ideology, with the myth of the self-sacrificing woman as an ideal, and marriage as the ultimate goal for a woman.

While the act of narration by female protagonists in fiction from India, of storytelling within the *zenana* of the *havelis* might be read as an empowering act, any attempt to reinterpret the myths that seek to control women's identities poses a challenge to powerful, age-old hierarchies. "The momentous stepping out of women protagonists in Indian English novels is often a subconscious recalling of the mythological tradition of Sita crossing the protective boundary in the *Ramayana*." That is why Geeta, in *Inside the Haveli* (1977) by Rama Mehta, accepts the subordinate gender role of a feudal *haveli* dwelling, which "entails unlearning the cosmopolitan, more liberal upbringing of her urban, apartment dwelling childhood". Patriarchal hierarchies and conventional marriages that propose to provide economic and social security for the women, tend to silence their voices. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), the protagonist Jaya comes to realize that women have always been alienated from the word. Even in Sanskrit drama (also the language in which scriptures have been written), women were made to speak in Prakrit (the language of the common people), which to Jaya sounds like the incoherent lisps of a baby. As Chanda points out, however, alternative households do not necessarily provide freedom of expression, or liberality. All-female households in novels such as Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) are places of isolated, temporary refuge but never permanent or viable dwellings. Moreover, these households, while they provide a women's community of shared experiences, continue to reproduce the internalized patriarchal ideology and its hierarchies. Even women-only homes "can become confining for women", Chanda argues, because "they exist within the ambit of

male-dominated spaces and cultures". All of this takes on especial significance when we realize that the conceptualization of India as a nation draws on conventional domestic practices: "the traditions of political India are handed over specifically to the women just as the traditions of the home were also specifically handed over along a womanly line of inheritance". Partha Chatterjee has emphasized that unlike the public women's debates of Europe and America, the arena for women's struggles in India was the domestic space; that "the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home". And in turn women's public participation in politics, especially during the Indian

freedom movement, precipitated the reimagining of the traditional domestic space. Hence Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1983), Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* (1991) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) – novels that use "self-conscious and self-reflective exploration of . . . [a] specific political moment in the larger history of India [as] a lens through which to view and take stock of the nation".

As Chanda critically explores a wide variety of novels from the past five decades, her book offers a critical compass for understanding the various nuances of "home" in relation to gender and nation in contemporary women's fiction. Aimed at the undergraduate reader, Margaret Joseph's book *Jasmine on a String*, on the other hand, avoids deep critical analysis, makes unqualified generalizations and perfunctory observations, and often contradicts itself. Joseph proposes a fresh, if ambitious approach of making a survey of writings by women "who live or lived in India at some point in their lives, were not necessarily born there, but write about their perceptions of the country, thereby contributing to its ethos". Privileging the geographical location rather than the intellectual leanings of a writer, Joseph summarily dismisses Indian women living and writing in the West by calling their work hackneyed and lacking in originality. The "opportunity for individualism and psychological probing is, for the most part, overlooked in most Indian expatriate writing", she asserts.

Margaret Joseph refers to the works of both Indian and British women writing in India, providing plot summaries of some of the little-known novels and poems (hardly contributing to the ethos of a nation), often in the placid, didactic tones of an Edwardian gentleman scholar, and thus reproducing the colonial ideology, which she initially proposes to critique. This book could be useful, however, for its bibliography, and its wide range of references.

## Films in a cinephobic land

Pakistan's fractious national story told through its neglected cinema

MADELINE CLEMENTS

Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad, editors

CINEMA AND SOCIETY  
Film and social change in Pakistan  
398pp. Oxford University Press. £65 (US \$105).  
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Published work on Pakistani film is scarce enough for Hamid Dabashi to claim, in his foreword to Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad's *Cinema and Society*, that the book has a symbolic importance. In his view, it helps to establish a sense of "a national cinema" – a sense of the cultural realm of Pakistani film and its relationship to social shifts within the Islamic Republic's increasingly conservative populace.

This is a country where "cinophobia" has become "hegemonic", and where related repressions and censorship predominate. All the same, cinema may function, as Ahmad argues, as "a barometer of society's actual pleasures and discontents". *Cinema and Society* draws together a stimulating and eclectic selection of scholarly articles, photo essays, autobiographical recollections, comic literary pieces and excerpts from earlier, foundational publications, such as Mushtaq Gazdar's *Pakistan Cinema, 1947–97*. Together these trace the changing features of Pakistani filmic ventures from the heydays of the 1950s and 60s to

the multifarious "New Cinema" of the present – at times satirically (Musharraf Ali Farooqi's "Foot-worshippers Guide" to the cult classic *Maula Jatt* will tickle the cognoscenti). The reproduction of a substantial number of hand-painted posters and photographs taken on set, behind the scenes, also offers an important aid to understanding the elements that combine to create Pakistani cinema.

Certain concerns predominate here. The emphasis falls on the legacies of Partition and Pakistani productions' close but strained relationship to films made in India; the influence of the dictator Ayub Khan in fostering docu-

mentary filmmaking and shaping the values and aesthetics of the Urdu "Socials"; and on these domestic dramas' displacement by more muscular, violent, action-oriented Punjabi-language films following the secession of East Pakistan; the premiership of the socialist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; and the censorious regime of General Zia. Also prominent are the peculiar, fascinating Pashto horror films of the 1990s, populated with supernatural and morbid creatures, bloodbaths and rape, through which gender stereotypes may nevertheless be reversed and subverted. Questions of gender, language and ideology, and the effects of technological transformations (such as the migration of melodramas to the television screen) are also considered in some detail.

Perhaps the most arresting of the essays, however, is Ahmad's own polemic "Fascism and Real Estate: An inquiry into the strange death of traditional cinema halls in Pakistan". Here, and in his concluding discussion of twenty-first-century productions, Ahmad unapologetically links the continued destruction

of film theatres – and hence the evacuation from the public sphere of the popular, affordable, vernacular cinema that this book values – to Pakistan's neoliberal elites, who prefer to turn them into shopping centres; as well as to angry mobs mobilized by hate preachers whom the state would rather placate than prosecute.

As a result, the limitations of the celebrated "New Cinema" which has emerged in recent years, whether patronized by the state or supported by foreign NGOs, and exhibited within gated multiplexes, are laid bare. Yet Ahmad, musing on other cultural and cinematic precedents, from the popular music series *Coke Studio* to small-budget British films, still finds reason to search for the traces of "a reflective medium which can offer diverse perspectives with honesty". *Cinema and Society* demonstrates the capacity of Pakistani film to do a great deal more than reinforce statist or religious agendas throughout the nearly seventy-year duration of the fractious nation's history, even as it struggles under their influence.