Reading Fictions of Romance: Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in Postcolonial India

By Radhika Parameswaran

This ethnographic study explores the implications of romance reading for young Indian women’s gender, class, and national identities in one urban setting in South India. The project demonstrates that the practice of reading Western romance fiction is deeply embedded within patriarchal discourses of feminine respectability that exert control over women’s sexuality. Young women’s fascination for the commodities of Western material culture in imported romance fiction is located in their desire to experience their identities as cosmopolitan, global consumers. In negotiating the boundaries of tradition, Indian women readers construct romance fiction as modern manuals on sexuality that afford them escape from the burdens of preserving the honor of family and community. The contradictory character of women’s interpretations of sexuality in Western romance novels highlights the complex dialectic between postcolonial audiences’ resistance to and collusion with the hegemony of global culture.

Media studies has been slow to recognize the rich insights of postcolonial theories and approaches that have gained currency in history, English, and anthropology. In the past decade, however, a small body of empirical work on media texts and audiences has seriously engaged the deconstructive project of postcolonial theory to challenge and advance models of culture in international and development communication research (Breckenridge, 1995; Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 1996). My own entry into the emerging field of postcolonial media studies seeks to bring questions of colonial history, nationalism, and sexuality to bear on audience reception of Western popular literature in non-Western settings. In my ethnographic research among young women in South India, I analyze the cultural space occu-

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pied by the practice of popular romance fiction reading in women’s everyday lives. As imported fiction that Indian women read in the English language, a lasting legacy of British colonialism, the consumption of Western romance novels in India signifies the enabling of postcolonial leisure practices and neocolonial economies of publishing by the trajectories of colonial history. The popularity of Western romance fiction—stories of heterosexual romance that feature Euro American characters—among non-Western women raises questions about readers’ culturally specific experiences in reading global media texts.

Typically, romance novels are read in India by women from urban, English-speaking communities whose power and privilege originated in their access to economic and cultural capital—private school instruction, university education, and professional employment—during the colonial period. As members of the expanding Indian middle- and upper classes, the women readers who shared their time with me belonged to a socioeconomic bloc whose purchasing power fueled the processes of economic liberalization and globalization (Varma, 1998, pp. 170–171). Hypervisible images of elite Indian women circulate in the imaginary economies of consumerism and state discourse; these “modern” women who represent the ideal models of success in national development projects shape the aspirations of poor, working-class, and rural women.

My exploration of elite Indian women’s leisure culture is an intervention against two dominant First World representations of non-Western women. On one level, mainstream development and social science research have produced a chain of associated images that “naturally” aligns Third World women with the categories of rural, agricultural, and backward. On another related level, popular and academic discourses, echoing Orientalist images and writings, have fixed non-Western women’s subjectivity within the dominant trope of static and ancient tradition. As submissive victims of patriarchy, Asian and African women have become indexes of their cultures’ inferiority. My research on elite South Asian women’s reading practices does not confront these problematic images by excavating readers’ oppositional modes of expressing agency or by restoring Indian women’s hitherto hidden subjectivity. Instead I deploy my analysis of ethnographic data to demonstrate the inability of categories such as “resistance/compliance” or “powerful/subordinate” to encompass women’s relationships with popular culture. Rather than resuscitate long-standing (and irresolvable?) debates over active and passive audiences, my ethnographic approach examines the relationships among cultural texts, local contexts, and historically situated audiences’ construction of their identities (Mankekar, 1999).

One significant local force that has established its strength in the face of globalization and predictions of a borderless world is nationalism. Analyzing contemporary nationalism in India and its continuities with 19th- and 20th-century anticolonial struggles, postcolonial critics have identified the patriarchal representation of Indian womanhood that male social reformers strategically constructed to counter colonialism (Grewal, 1996; Jayawardena, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1991). In nationalism’s symbolic construction of ideal Indian femininity, women became the carriers of tradition and were glorified as devoted wives and mothers. Chatterjee (1989) located the idealization of middle-class Hindu women as pure/virtuous within the
ideology of Hindu nationalism, which proposed a powerful distinction between “inner/outer worlds” and, correspondingly, between “home, private/material world, public.” Arguing for the resilience of Hinduism, which had survived numerous invasions, nationalists argued that Indian culture was characterized by a distinctive morality that was absent in European culture. Seen as part of home, the private world, Indian women became symbols of this unpolluted inner life, and hence the ground for establishing difference from Western society. The ideological celebration of Indian women’s chastity and fidelity was thus a crucial element of nationalist rhetoric in colonial India.

Early nationalist ideas of Indian womanhood, although modified by modern consumer culture, continue to have profound significance for women’s lives in postcolonial India. In listening to women readers, I recognized early on in my fieldwork that nationalism as a discursive practice had material and emotional consequences for young Indian women’s everyday lives. Women readers who participated in this research confronted contradictory cultural expectations. They experienced the pressure to participate in consumerism and modernity and yet conform to traditional norms of femininity to preserve the boundaries of nation and community. On the one hand, many young women’s desires for class mobility were nurtured by their families—they were encouraged to pursue careers and gain success in the public sphere of paid work and professional employment. On the other hand, they were forced to lead restricted lives that denied them emotional independence and autonomy. Young women were ordered to return home before darkness set in, trained to perform domestic duties, and required to seek approval from authority figures for their movements outside of their homes. As single women awaiting marriage and motherhood, these daughters learned that their families’ honor and their ability to compete successfully in the “marriage market” depended on their modesty and chastity.

How do elite Indian women explain their pleasure in reading romances even as they contend with a hegemonic ideal of femininity that excludes notions of women’s sexual agency? In a context where Western lifestyles and consumerism index modernity, how do imported romance novels interpellate urban Indian women readers? How are popular texts that narrate stories of sexuality and romance interpreted by women who live in a postcolonial culture that is permeated by the gendered historical legacies of nationalism? What complex accounts of self and other underlie Indian women’s pleasure in reading texts that purport to represent “perfect” heterosexual romance in Western culture? These questions led me to Hyderabad, a city in South India and the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh, where I conducted ethnographic research for 5 months among young, single middle- and upper middle-class women between the ages of 17 and 21 years old.

As part of my fieldwork, I moderated discussions about romance novels among seven groups of women. Women in each group were friends before my arrival, and some women had known each other since their childhood. I conducted 2- to 3-hour-long interviews with 30 regular romance readers and read over a hundred novels they recommended. To gain insight into the discourses about romance reading that young women encountered, I interviewed parents, teachers, library owners, publishers, and used book vendors. My involvement in readers’ everyday
routines included “hanging out” with them at their colleges; joining their visits to lending libraries, restaurants, and movie theaters; accompanying them on shopping trips and picnics; and eating meals with women in their homes. Although I visited colleges scattered throughout the city to seek out readers, I do not claim that my informants were part of a randomly chosen “representative” group. My interactions with women and the close relationships I developed with a few informants were shaped by our personal histories and the specific conditions of ethnographic research.

The first section briefly outlines the historical and economic context of romance reading in India. The second section analyzes women’s leisure reading as a material practice that is shaped by patriarchal forms of control over women’s sexuality. The following three sections examine Indian women’s local responses to the idealized representations of consumerism and courtship in global romance novels. In the concluding section, I argue that densely contextual ethnographies can unravel audiences’ overlapping and cross-cutting experiences of resistance and compliance.

The Circulation of Global/Colonial Culture
The romance novels that Indian women read are commonly referred to as “Mills & Boons” after the publishing company Harlequin Mills & Boon Ltd., which exports these paperback books to more than 100 countries (Mills & Boon, 1997). A precursor to the Canadian Harlequin Enterprises, the Mills & Boon company, founded in 1908 in London, became an early pioneer in producing mass-marketed fiction, creating markets for mail-order catalogs and popularizing the use of private lending libraries (Grescoe, 1996, pp. 41–45). In the early part of the 20th century, before publishing firms refined the techniques of mass production and export of paperback fiction, Mills & Boons were brought into India by the wives of British colonial administrators and military personnel, and by British women teachers and governesses who lent these books to urban Indian women in their social circles. Gradually, these books also became part of the private fiction collections stocked in gentlemen’s clubs in Indian cities where wives of male club members (Indian bureaucrats, professionals, and entrepreneurs) had access to leisure reading material. During the 2 decades before India achieved independence in 1947, British publishing firms with Indian divisions—Macmillan, Blackie & Son, and Collins William—began exporting small quantities of Mills & Boons along with other series paperback fiction.

In postcolonial India, Mills & Boons were initially distributed by two bookstores in Mumbai, New Photoplay Book Company and Happy Bookstall. During the 1960s, with the rapid growth in the middle-class reading public, two of India’s largest publishing firms, India Book House and India Book Distributors, gained exclusive rights to distribute Mills & Boons. Until the mid-1980s, in the interest of promoting education, the Indian state mandated that publishing companies’ fiction imports could not exceed 10% of their gross sales from other books. However, after the Indian government launched a series of economic reforms in the 1990s to facilitate India’s integration into the global economy, publishers were allowed to import and distribute unlimited quantities of fiction. Indian readers
today have access to Mills & Boon romances and other imported fiction at bookstores, small lending libraries, used book vendors, and private clubs.

Public Images, Private Practices
Pointing to the deep tensions among gender, caste, and class structures in India where gender ideology has historically defined the contours of national, middle-class culture, Mankekar (1999) writes that middle-classness as a moral virtue is predicated upon women’s sexual modesty (p. 114). As lived practices that embody feminine respectability, women readers’ behaviors, movements, clothing, and leisure practices are closely monitored by parents, elders, and male siblings anxious to ensure that young women, soon to be married, not jeopardize their reputations. Along with the other forms of discipline they continually experienced, romance reading also became a site where women learned to negotiate surveillance over their sexuality.

I met Ritika and Mythili just outside the gates of their segregated women’s college before classes were due to begin at 10 a.m. While I waited for them to arrive, I watched groups of women in blue jeans, shalwar kameezes, and saris walk through the open gates as they cheerfully greeted the two guards standing outside. Just as I began to wonder about the delay, two women arrived together on a scooter. They stopped in front of me and introduced themselves after apologizing for being a little late. Half-seriously and half-jokingly, Ritika said, “You mean you want to talk to us . . . the bad girls?” Anticipating my curiosity, Mythili immediately elaborated, “We’re the bad girls. We always get caught by our teachers reading Mills & Boons in class!” Explaining further, Ritika, who began to look a little angry now, pulled out two Mills & Boons from her bag and began to point to short, hand-written, scribbled messages in these books that she claimed were written by men in the neighborhood. I was surprised to see several sentences marked in red on the margins of specific pages that contained descriptions of sexual encounters between the hero and heroine: “You bad girls, why do you read these things,” “You should be ashamed of yourselves,” and “Do your parents know you’re reading this?” Indicating her ambivalent position as a “modern” woman, Mythili shook her head in exasperation and said, “Yeah, we can ride scooters on the roads and go to college, but these men can still say whatever they want about us.”

Later in the day, I met Ritika and Mythili on their campus grounds for lunch along with several other friends, a routine ritual where women chatted and caught up with the latest news in their lives. After we had settled down under a shade tree and completed introductions, Ritika described the scribbled lines in the Mills & Boons she had shown me earlier and passed the book around. Reading the messages aloud with an affected accent that marked the writer’s lack of sophistication and unfamiliarity with English, Ritika’s friend, Payal, asserted her superior class identity. She sarcastically pointed out spelling errors in the messages and said that the “ghatiya” (rural and uneducated) men referring to them as “bad girls” were ignorant because they assumed that Mills & Boon readers were “fast girls,” a term that denoted “desperate” women eager for sex and romance with any man. In response to Payal’s comment, Revathi continued: “Actually, these men and others don’t know. Girls who act good, well, they’re doing things they
shouldn’t be. They know how to cover up things.” Complaining that two English teachers had recently confiscated several Mills & Boons and lectured her about reading “rubbish,” Revathi insisted that supposedly good girls concealed their promiscuity under the guise of conforming to society’s norms. Mythili, looking agitated by now, clapped to signify her approval of Revathi’s comments and said that many good girls who were “experts at acting and fooling others” actually lied to their parents to conceal their movements; she claimed these women watched movies at theaters secretly with men and dined in restaurants far away from home with boyfriends. Anxiously reacting to suspicions over their character, some women thus felt compelled to defend their pleasure in reading Mills & Boons by disavowing other women’s deceitful public performances of feminine modesty.

Some women’s uneasy awareness of their parents’ perceptions of Mills & Boon reading as a transgressive practice affected their decisions about where and when they could read. I was invited to Payal’s home to meet her and her two friends, Archana and Beena, for lunch, a convenient time because Payal hinted that in the absence of her parents we would talk freely, and that she would feel comfortable showing me her Mills & Boon collection. After we finished lunch and settled down in Payal’s room, she pulled out a locked suitcase from under her bed explaining that it contained her Mills & Boon collection. During our conversation, I learned that Payal and Archana, whose strict mothers had expressed their strong dislike of Mills & Boons, rarely if ever read their novels in the living and dining rooms, or when elderly guests visited. Archana also said that she did most of her reading in her own room or at college. Payal complained that she was angry with her mother because she could not visit the lending library in her neighborhood to bring Mills & Boons home.

Ironically, in some cases, the practice of Mills & Boon reading facilitated middle-class, patriarchal ideologies of control over women’s mobility and sexuality. Advocating women’s confinement within the safe and protected spaces of home/indoors, these ideologies operate under the assumption that women who walk the streets and occupy public spaces are typically prostitutes, homeless women, or poor and working-class maids (Mernissi, 1987). Mallika and Sangeeta informed me that their parents were very busy and did not know what their daughters read, but were content as long as they stayed home and were not going to the movies, or as one mother put it “roaming the streets.” I was not surprised when Mallika and Sangeeta requested that I not interview their parents because I could potentially stir up trouble with my questions. For some other parents, unsure of what exactly their daughters were reading, romance reading at home became a “gentle” practice they conflated with women’s academic reading. A few mothers’ fears for their daughters’ safety in streets, theaters, and parks that were largely occupied by working-class and poor men led to their qualified tolerance of Mills & Boon reading as an appropriate feminine activity that women could quietly pursue at home, under the watchful eyes of parents.

For some women, the private act of reading and buying Mills & Boons demanded that they carefully evaluate the public boundaries of acceptable and forbidden visual representations of sexuality. Reading romances in living rooms, on college grounds, or even in the city buses and trains they used to commute to
college was awkward, as a few women testified, because the covers of these novels had become increasingly explicit over the years. Rachna, a seasoned romance reader who often recommended authors to her friends, said that she covered Mills & Boons when she read in public so people would not misunderstand her:

If I’m reading one of the newer Mills & Boons on the bus, I cover it with newspaper. People might think we want to do the stuff they see on the covers. Just last week I read a book by Anne Mather—Brittle Bondage. The awful cover showed a half-naked bottom of a woman. If someone we know sees such covers it’s worse because my parents might find out.

Jayshree and Latha said they covered some new Mills & Boons when they read at home because they did not want to risk the possibility of elderly and male relatives casually picking up their books and glancing at the covers. Criticizing the images on the covers that interpellated readers using conventions typical of the male gaze in pornographic films, Latha argued,

We don’t need such covers to know the books have masala (synonym for sex) in them. It’s what is inside that matters. I feel insulted. The covers look like blue films and exaggerate. There is romance, not just sex in Mills & Boons.

Demonstrating her expert semiotic skills in coding the covers, Latha brought out a pile of books and began deftly sorting them into two stacks, “Look, the OK covers, the not OK covers. I’m a good censor of Mills & Boon covers. I’ve been reading them since I was 13.”

*Gendered Pleasures, Consumerist Fantasies*

In her pioneering ethnography of romance reading in the United States, Radway (1984) urged feminist scholars to pay attention to readers’ favorite books as well as the books they actively dislike, “failed romances,” because women’s subtle reading choices allowed a glimpse into the blurring lines between fantasy and fiction and experience and reality. The middle-class women whom Radway interviewed enjoyed historical romances, but rejected books within this genre that portrayed rape and the excessive sexual brutalization of women. Radway argued that readers’ rejection of violent sexual relationships in fiction mirrored their fears of encountering physical violence in their own lives and offered a critique of male sexual aggression as a natural outcome of heterosexual desire.

Many Indian women also expressed a similar distaste for sexual violence that was insidiously coded as romance. However, in contrast to readers in the United States, they rejected the entire genre of historical romances because they claimed these books were “long, unrealistic, and boring.” On pressing one group of women to elaborate on their rejection of historical romances, I learned that middle-class women’s gendered locations within the narratives of class mobility and consumerism that saturate urban Indian culture shaped their reading choices. At first, my demand for more details about their dislike for historical novels was met with dismissive responses such as “They’re too long,” “We just can’t connect with the stories,” and “They’re not easy to carry around.” Soon, however, Tara impatiently...
interrupted her friends and asked, “Can I tell her why we really don’t like historical books?” After several friends nodded in agreement, Tara explained:

Well, it’s silly, but we like to read about people’s lives in foreign countries today. The cars they drive, food they eat, their parties, houses they live in, dresses they wear, places they go to. We like books about now, about how other people live in today’s world, not hundreds of years ago. It’s all wrong history anyway in those novels so it’s even dangerous.

Affirming Tara’s explanation, Mallika said, “It’s fun to read about the heroine, her apartment, the busy cities, even the nice baths she takes, and her clothes.” Once Tara and Mallika broke the ice, their friends began sharing their pleasure in reading Mills & Boons that described contemporary culture in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and other metropolitan tourist locations.

Romance novels that readers recommended were filled with details of gourmet food (Marchant, 1990; Stafford, 1991; Wentworth, 1995); designer clothing and bathing rituals (Darcy, 1987; Jordan, 1995; Mortimer, 1994); cruises and vacations in Mediterranean islands (Lamb, 1995); and landscaped gardens and interiors of expensive homes (Stafford, 1991). Aspiring to reach out to the audience of young, middle-class readers soon to acquire earning and purchasing power, Indian producers of luxury commodities used to regularly insert advertisements (before television became popular within this niche market) for cosmetics, lingerie, tennis shoes, deodorants, soaps, and perfumes into Mills & Boon books before they reached bookstores and libraries.

Race, reality, and courtship. Although several women agreed with Tara’s comments about the dangers of learning “false history” from historical romances, by contrast they argued that the background details of material life in these novels were “real” because these facts confirmed their ideas about the wealthy lifestyles of affluent “foreigners” (read White Americans and Europeans). Some readers went so far as to claim that contrary to people’s misconceptions, they read these books not just for sex and romance, but because representations of Western material codes and practices in Mills & Boons taught them lessons about modernity and “how to live and enjoy life” unlike their conservative parents. During group discussions, I discovered that none of my informants were aware of recent multicultural romance novels, which were launched in the early 1990s to cater to Hispanics, African Americans, and Africans. Although some women responded indifferently that they would not be interested in reading these new books, several women in one group were puzzled with my questions about multicultural Mills & Boons. Irritated with my insistence on probing issues of race and reader identification, one reader, Meera, exclaimed, “But these books are not Mills & Boons. We would not like them. A Mills & Boon has to be a certain way and has to have certain people.” Noticing my confusion, Shobha chided Meera for her vague use of “certain” and without any further prodding she elaborated on the masculine aesthetic that fulfilled readers’ vision of fantasy in romance fiction, “It just won’t be fun. We would not be able to think of Chinese or African men dating, giving a woman flowers, or driving Ferraris and drinking champagne.” Race, class,
material consumption, and sexuality were thus linked in a seamless semiotic chain of pleasure. A good Mills & Boon, by definition, had to transport readers into a “realistic” fantasy world of love and courtship that was embedded within particular class and race structures.

It was thus not surprising that Rupa & Co., one of India’s largest distributors of fiction, encountered resounding failure when they decided to produce Indian romances, books set in India with Indian characters, to compete with the market for imported Mills & Boons. Launching them in Delhi and Mumbai in 1994, Rupa & Co. decided to test the waters by initially producing six romances, authored by Indian women claiming credibility as writers in the promotional literature because they had read “scores and scores of Mills & Boons.” When I interviewed the editor of the Rupa romance series, Aditya Mukherji, at his office in New Delhi, he threw up his hands in despair and said, “These girls only want Mills & Boons. They want to read about foreigners. Our books could not replace that Mills & Boon feeling.” Explaining the failure of Rupa’s romance novels, Mukherji spoke about a survey his associates had conducted with women in Delhi, “I believe they all said our books are fake. Several women told him that the hotels, houses, and how people lived was [sic] not realistic.” Although none of the women I interviewed in Hyderabad had read these books, many agreed that, like readers in Delhi, they too would not have enjoyed Rupa & Co.’s romance novels.

Young Indian women’s rejection of Rupa & Co.’s romance fiction does not imply that their inner realms of imagination and desire are successfully interpelated only by Western popular culture. In the multimediated world they live in, Indian middle-class readers’ admiration for Western material life in Mills & Boons coexists with their intertextual pleasure in consuming narratives of Indian romance in vernacular films. Women’s preferences for Western Mills & Boons can be traced to their leisure reading culture that has been shaped by the colonial history of book publishing and the limited production, until recently, of pulp fiction, comics, and tales authored by Indians. Apart from reading romances, many women spoke about their immersion in India’s vibrant electronic media culture—films and vernacular television productions. Explaining her lack of interest in Indian Mills & Boons, Mythili argued, “When we want to enjoy good Indian romance we watch Indian movies. A lot of films are trash, but I love good Indian films like Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Maine Pyaar Kiya, and Roja. They were great. I think Indian romance is best on film not in books.” Anuradha, Mythili’s friend and neighbor, added, “Indian romance is different. It’s slow and grand. It needs to be in a movie or on TV. It needs music and color!” Like Indian television audiences, whose preferences for indigenous productions over imported programs have challenged simplistic views of cultural domination, Indian romance readers’ comments on Western material culture speak to transnational fantasies linked to consumerism, but they do not necessarily indicate that their identities are constituted solely by Western narratives.

Selfless women, selfish consumers. In some readers’ gender-inflected interpretations of material culture in Mills & Boons, young, single heroines’ freedom as consuming subjects was conflated with women’s emotional struggles in needing and experiencing unfettered or guiltless pleasure. At the conclusion of one discus-
sion during lunch break, just when a loud ringing announced the beginning of classes, Sonali, a shy woman, asked if I had a little time. She waited for her friends to leave and then said, “My friends might think I’m strange. What I like most is the travel. I can imagine when I read a Mills & Boon set in Rome that I have traveled alone, all alone, without anybody. I want to enjoy life.” In another interview, 2 days later, Poonam’s comments brought back memories of Sonali’s insistence on the pleasures of traveling alone, “The heroine has a great life. She lives alone, drives her own car, buys what she wants, travels everywhere, and answers to no one. I want to do that before I have to grow up.” For some women, the heroine’s ability to make autonomous decisions, travel, and pursue “selfish” material pleasure, unencumbered by responsibilities and the “selflessness” expected of women, resonates with their own lives where they are being prepared to become dutiful wives and responsible mothers.

Given the dominant construction of travel as a masculine privilege and the undercurrents of danger that surround middle-class women’s movements outside the private sphere, Indian women readers’ fascination for travel as a cosmopolitan experience is thus intertwined with their gendered desire for physical and emotional distance from the constraints of “home.” Analyzing women’s travel as a specific mode of modernity in 19th-century colonial India, Grewal (1996) wrote that middle-class Indian women, unlike men who sojourned for pleasure or education, typically undertook travel within the parameters of tradition—to join religious pilgrimages, visit relatives, or accompany their husbands to places of employment (pp. 160–162). Indian women’s “problematic insertion into colonial modernity” through the mode of travel, Grewal noted, was viewed as disrupting tradition and rendering women vulnerable to threats of rape and sexual assault (p. 161).

Migration, Mills & Boons, and patriotic materialism. With one group of young women, a heated discussion about material culture in Mills & Boons captured the location of women’s identities within subjective spaces traversed by forces of both consumerism and nationalism. As members of the Indian middle- and upper middle-classes, many of my informants were part of a transnational elite consumer class; their fluency in English, educational and professional ambitions, interactions with relatives living in the West, and easy access to Western media formed the context within which they read Mills & Boons. Describing her future plans, Latha informed us that she was traveling to the United States the following year to attend graduate school. She joked about leaving India to pursue the “Mills & Boon” life, a label that was frequently used by writers in *Femina*, India’s oldest and most widely circulated women’s magazine, to describe luxury vacations, handsome men, and good sexual experiences. To Latha’s obvious discomfort, her casual remark produced strong reactions from some of her friends. Not looking at Latha, Meera angrily commented, “Everyone in India has become so greedy today. They all want to leave. I want to stay.” Agreeing with Meera, Payal said with some frustration in her tone, “Yes, all my friends are studying for the GRE, GMAT. It’s America, America all the time. What’s wrong with India?” Gently and diplomatically deflecting her friends’ anger, Shailaja interjected with a smile, “It’s their choice, but I too want to stay in India. It’s not like our parents’ life anymore. We have everything here—good restaurants, toilet paper, air-conditioned cars, and Domi-
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nos Pizza. Arre yaar (hey friends), the Mills & Boon life is in Hyderabad now.” Latha, by now self-conscious and defensive, responded, “I never said I was going to stay there. India has a lot to offer. I’ve been in the supermarkets. I know if educated Indians leave, India will not improve.”

Meera and Payal’s anger over their friends’ abandonment of India refers to the dramatic increase in Indian immigration to the West or the “brain drain” since 1965 when immigration laws in the United States were liberalized (Vepa, 1992). Commenting on the “alarming” migration of educated Indians from Hyderabad to the U.S., the local newspaper, Deccan Chronicle, declared, “It is for most an obsession to the point of being a question of life and death to quite a few” (Madhav & Krishnan, 1996, p. 1). References to supermarkets, pizza, and toilet paper reflect the changes wrought by the Indian government’s deregulation of the economy since the late 1980s, which has made it easier for multinationals to sell their commodities and services in India. This conversation between Latha and her friends, which began as a discussion about Mills & Boons and then slipped into a tense exchange about migration and the possibilities of class mobility for patriotic Indians who chose to stay in India, foregrounds the materiality of interpretive practices; it offers one example of fictional tales becoming sites where audiences engage with the realities of their own lives. Shailaja’s comment also highlights the recuperative strategy she deployed to defuse emotional tension and to affirm her identities as national citizen and middle-class consumer. Because material culture would enable India to join the family of modern, developed nations, Indians no longer had to “betray” the nation to fulfill their dreams.

Scripts of Sexual Identity: Accommodating Feminine Respectability

Whereas readers’ rejection of historical romances indicated their aspirations to participate in consumerist practices associated with modernity, conversations about favorite Mills & Boons encapsulated women’s struggles to both critique and accommodate middle-class gender ideologies. Among the eight different Mills & Boon genres sold in Hyderabad, the most popular series among women was the “Contemporary Romance” series. As the oldest of all the eight series, Contemporary Romances represent the latest evolution of the earliest romances that were first published by Mills & Boon and defined by the publishers as “simple, modern love stories” (Dwek, 1991, p. 17). As the word “contemporary” suggests, these novels are always set in contemporary times in well-known global tourist locations or in rural or pastoral locations in the West. The basic formula for the romantic story is based on a young, working-class or middle-class heroine who meets a much older, sexually experienced upper class hero. Typically White/Caucasian characters, the hero and heroine declare their love for each other after negotiating obstacles such as lack of communication, pressing family responsibilities, conflicting loyalties, problems in the workplace, and occasionally social class differences.

Imagining socially possible fantasies. The popularity of Contemporary Romance books among young, single Indian women, who are anticipating marriage and sexual intimacy, is not surprising. These novels facilitate the greatest reader-identification among women by tracing the sexual awakening of virginal heroines who meet successful and powerful men, fall in love, and marry at the end of the book.
The Mills & Boon heroine experiences her sexuality as pleasurable for the first time with the hero, and only he is able to encourage her to fully realize her sexual identity. The scripting of female sexuality within a heterosexual, hierarchical, and monogamous relationship that ends in matrimony interpellates young Indian women as subjects, who learn early on from their culture that sexual intimacy has to be morally sanctioned by marriage, an institution that promises women social status and class mobility. Challenging or violating their assigned roles as modest daughters could result in exile, emotional pain, and loss of family support. As narratives that encourage women to accommodate sexual pleasure within their material and social conditions, Contemporary Romance books thus function as “socially possible” fantasies that mask and eroticize gender inequality and power differences.

Although women’s choice of books suggest that they passively accept patriarchal structures of male power, their preferences for particular authors within the Contemporary Romance series challenge such simplistic and linear analysis; books by their favorite authors within this series reflected readers’ resistance to the social construction of women as dutiful, submissive sexual objects. Many readers’ favorite Contemporary Romance authors—Penny Jordan, Janet Dailey, Charlotte Lamb, Emma Darcy, Miranda Lee, Carole Mortimer, and Sally Wentworth (ranked according to their popularity, from greatest to least) wrote much racier plots and descriptions of sexual scenes than unpopular authors—Rosemary Carter, Sara Wood, Marjorie Lewty, Carol Grace, and Betty Neels—whose books they dismissed with words like “boring,” “bland,” “nothing happens,” “hate the heroines.” Heroines in stories written by informants’ favorite authors sought out sexual pleasure actively, challenged expectations of women to perform docility and suppress desire, and questioned the natural links between femininity and domesticity. In the romance novels women disliked, such as Betty Neels’s books, for example, the plots typically featured prim and proper heroines, who rarely challenged the hero or expressed professional ambitions. Among Mills & Boons that promoted socially possible fantasies of romance and sex legitimized by marriage, women readers thus enjoyed more subversive narratives that allowed them to critique and stretch the ideological boundaries of respectable middle-class femininity in their own cultural context.

*Manuals on sexuality.* Interviews with women about representations of sexuality in romance novels were often awkward conversations. These women rarely discussed sexuality explicitly. Instead, many relied on innuendoes and metaphors and narrated anecdotes about absent “others”—friends and relatives—to diffuse the uneasy silences, giggling, or furtive and shy eye movements my questions produced. For instance, during one such moment of discomfort, Maya described her older sister’s large collection of Mills & Boons, which she had inherited after her sister’s marriage 2 months earlier, “My sister and I talked, you know, about their wedding night, and she said if she had not read Mills & Boons she would not have known what was coming!” Unable to control her excitement, Deepa, normally reserved, exclaimed in response, “That’s what my friend Anu told me too. She just got married. We’re supposed to have happy marriages but no one will tell us the basic ABCs.” Joining her friends, Archana complained about women’s ignorance of “human biology” and sarcastically said, “I was reading *Femina* magazine’s
advice column the other day. One stupid woman asked if she would get pregnant if she kissed a man! I’ve seen a lot worse. Those questions tell you everything.” Summarizing her friends’ anecdotes, Mythili, forthcoming and blunt, blurted out, “Mills & Boons give us information about men and women. We learn things from them.”

Mills & Boons, according to these women, were instructional manuals on sexuality that prepared them for the transition to womanhood in the absence of other resources and taboos that discouraged women from seeking out information on sex at schools, colleges, and in their homes. Sex education gained through Mills & Boon reading, as these women envisioned, would ultimately empower women to experience the “happy and lasting marriages” that their parents and communities wanted for them. Mythili, Maya, and Deepa’s complaints about the difficulties and emotional constraints they experienced in discussing sexuality echoed the opinions that many young men and women have expressed in other parts of India (Nabar, 1995). Furthermore, Indian women’s class-based interpretation of Mills & Boons as sex education firmly situates these books within utilitarian ideologies of sexuality—as professionally medicalized knowledge necessary for modern female subjects, not as pleasurable or erotic sexual representations.

**Gender, generation, and youth culture.** Women’s talk about Mills & Boons as a source of knowledge on sexuality was embedded within larger significatory chains of meanings that alluded to generational differences, women’s autonomy, and notions of progress in postcolonial India. When I contacted Jayshree’s mother, Lakshmi, a vice president at a large national bank, she readily agreed to an interview. Unexpectedly, when I was shown into Lakshmi’s lavishly furnished office, Jayshree was also there and I could immediately sense tension in the air. Jayshree looked at me pleadingly and said, “Tell her things have changed. We can’t live like she did. She yelled at me in front of my friends for being 10 minutes late last night.” Jayshree’s angry words about her mother’s resistance to change surfaced in another context when I joined a few women for a picnic at the local Gandipet Lake. After we had settled down to eat some snacks, Priya, who had offered to begin our official, formal discussion that day, argued that her Mills & Boon reading was a sign that women today expected different relationships with their husbands, “I want to enjoy life, not just cook, clean, and work. In Mills & Boons, women express their thoughts to men and feel close to their husbands. That’s what I want.”

Defending her freedom to make decisions independently about her leisure time, Ritika said, “It’s not the old days. We don’t have 10 children. We have a right to read what we like. I study, I do everything else, and plan on having a good job in marketing. I get to choose how I relax. My husband should support that.” Ritika’s assertive language, which referenced women’s rights within the home, provoked other women to agree with her that in exchange for conforming to their parents’ “serious rules,” they deserved some autonomy and trust. In emphasizing intergenerational differences, some women’s construction of Mills & Boon reading as a ritual of modernity centered on their desire for more egalitarian romantic relationships than their mothers experienced. Their aspirations for a “Mills & Boon” romance with their husbands foregrounded many women’s reconfiguration of
marriage as an intimate and modern institution—a two-person universe—that could potentially offer refuge from the demands of extended families and communities.

In contrast to Payal and Ritika’s anxious and assertive crafting of Mills & Boons as resources they needed to successfully participate in modern marriages, other women defensively argued that romance reading was a transient rite of passage, an indulgence of youthful modernity before they stepped into the world of tradition. When I arrived at Beena’s home to interview her, her mother offered me a cup of tea and we chatted briefly. She was clearly pleased that her hardworking daughter was studying to be an accountant. Inquiring about my research, she asked, “You mean you’re here from America to talk to my daughter about Mills & Boons? That’s good. Please request her to stop.” Relieved when her daughter walked in and saved me from responding, I thanked her and escaped into Beena’s room. When I communicated her mother’s concerns to Beena, she responded, “I tell her all the time that this is what young people do—it’s not wrong. You eat out, you watch lots of movies, and you read Mills & Boons.”

The next day I joined Beena and her friends Mallika and Shailaja at the Igloo cafe, a restaurant that had a youthful ambience; colorful Coca-Cola advertising posters adorned the walls and pop singer Alisha Chinai’s lyrics boomed in the background. The small space was filled with young men and women from several colleges in the neighborhood. After listening to Beena’s complaints about her mother, Mallika impatiently argued that Mills & Boons were “harmless” books, youthful diversions that were a part of the larger cultural landscape of being and feeling young, “This is the age to be enjoying romances just like this is the age to be at the Igloo drinking Coke and eating chips. I’m not going to be a strange old woman reading Mills & Boons.” Hinting that the pursuit of fantasies centered on romance and sex was, to some extent, culturally permissible among young women, Guru Singh, a lending library owner, commented, “Older women come early in the morning or late afternoon when it’s quiet. They rent out romances on a weekly basis so they don’t have to come often. I know they are shy about being caught with Mills & Boons.”

Urban middle-class women’s subdued languages of sexual identity could relate to their discomfort in discussing sexuality in the public context of ethnographic research. However, Indian romance readers’ rhetoric of accommodation and compliance also derives from the subject positions created for women within 19th-century liberal nationalist discourse. As feminist historiographers argue, the historical process of modernization, initiated in urban Indian centers, included the systematic obliteration of performances detailing women’s experiences with sexuality. For example, in 19th-century Calcutta, emerging notions of educated middle-classness recast Bengali womanhood according to genteel norms and virtues. Bannerjee (1989) writes that the colluded forces of “Christian missionaries, English administrators, and Bengali Bhadralok (educated Indian men)” made concerted efforts to suppress sensuous oral forms of popular culture because these “bawdy” narratives could corrupt “proper” Hindu women (pp. 140–141).

Mythologies of Self and Other
Indian women’s interpretations of sexuality in Western romance novels drew from
discourses of othering that emphasized cultural difference along the axes of their national and gender identities. One late afternoon, Geeta, Dipali, and Meera invited me to attend a movie-watching party at Geeta’s home in Banjara Hills, an affluent neighborhood. After the movie, we sat outside on the lawn and talked about the two Mills & Boon novels that Dipali had read the day before. Dipali spoke wistfully about the “simple” romances in the two books she had just finished reading. When I mistakenly asked her if the term “simple” reflected her evaluation of Mills & Boon romance stories as standardized and formulaic, she vigorously shook her head and said, “No!” Quickly explaining that I had misunderstood her, she assumed the role of a teacher and asked me to think “hard” about the Hindi film, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, we had just watched indoors. She summarized the film’s representation of conflict between an upper caste community/family and the courageous hero, who stood firm in his decision to marry the heroine even though she was poor and from a lower caste family. Drawing my attention to the caste conflict in the film, Dipali, a member of the upper caste Kayasth community, protested the overbearing efforts of elders to contain romance within social boundaries. Describing her mother’s response when Dipali had asked her how she would react if her daughter showed up with a man at the door, she commented,

> You know what my amma (mother) said? She said you can show up with anyone as long as he is a nice Kayasth boy and a doctor! In the Catherine George book *Fallen Hero*, the story shows how the hero and heroine have to learn how to understand each other, not worry about others. The man and woman decide for themselves if they love each other.

Provoked by Dipali’s comment, Geeta clarified further for me the meaning behind their classification of Mills & Boons as “simple,” an insider term that had little to do with my own judgment of these stories as repeatedly enacting a similar formula. Describing a Mills & Boon story she had enjoyed reading, she said:

> These books are simple. In one book, the heroine tells her grandfather a lie that she is married to a rich guy. Because her dying grandfather wants her to be married, she lies to him. The hero and heroine pretend to be a loving married couple in front of the grandfather. There are no parents and uncles giving them advice. The grandfather does not ask how she met him. He’s not angry they got married without telling him. It’s simple! No one tells young people what to do. In America it’s easy to love and marry.

When I asked Meera what she thought of her friends’ suggestion that Mills & Boon novels emulated romantic relationships in the West, she hesitantly explained, “Oh, I don’t know, but I think their lives are easier. They don’t have rules about who does what with whom. It’s not like India. We’re so complicated. They don’t worry about making people happy.” In another context, when I was leisurely chatting with Mallika while we waited for the bus to arrive, she said, “You know what I like best about Mills & Boons? I pretend that I can marry whomever I like. My life is simple just like that of foreigners. I don’t have to worry about whether his family will accept me.”
Readers produced cultural difference here through their construction of Mills & Boon stories as transparent fictional representations that reflected the homogeneous, unbounded quality of courtship practices in Western culture. Women’s determined conflation of representations in Western romance fiction with reality and their evaluation of their own lives as complex became significant as I gradually began to hear confidences from some women about their own attraction to and relationships with young men from different castes and communities. Describing her fears of angering her parents because she was attracted to a South Indian man from a lower caste, Dipali, a North Indian woman, was convinced her parents would never speak to her again, “It’s scary. I don’t know if I can go through life that way. Love may not be worth making my parents so unhappy.”

The absence of secondary characters—members of the community, family, and religious clergy exerting social pressures—in the stories of romance fiction were thus just as compelling as the presence of sexuality and material culture in attracting women to these narratives. For young women like Dipali, living with the tensions of pursuing intercaste and interethnic romances, courtship in Western culture, filtered by Mills & Boon novels, becomes idealized as an intensely personal practice where social hierarchies are easily surmounted.

**Fiction, falsehood, and national identity.** Women’s wishful projection of Mills & Boons as epitomizing utopian love that transcended social differences coexisted simultaneously with their denunciation of Mills & Boons as disguising the “truths” they knew about problems with unfettered modernity in Western culture. One evening, I accompanied Anuradha and Latha when they visited their local lending library, an informal meeting place for young men and women in the neighborhood. After Anuradha had picked out her Mills & Boons, we lingered outside and talked to Rohan, Anuradha’s friend. When I was introduced to Rohan, he asked me with a wink, “Oh you live in America. My friend says girls there date when they’re 13—true? It’s crazy, isn’t it?” Anuradha continued our conversation after Rohan departed, “The women in Mills & Boons, they don’t really exist do they?” Agreeing with her, Latha expressed her sense of emotional attachment and cultural distance from the Western heroines in her favorite Mills & Boons:

In some ways I feel like Mills & Boons were written for us, not foreign women. The heroines are like us, they wait for marriage and the man they will love before they have sex. That is not true in America. Women there have lots of boyfriends before they get married. There are no virgins there. On the other hand, we’re really virgins until we get married.

In another context, when I was interviewing Purnima, she disappeared for a moment and returned with a Mills & Boon in her hand. Waving the book in the air, she urged me to read it soon:

This is a Charlotte Lamb book, *Deadly Rivals*. The hero in the book is surprised the heroine is a virgin when they make love for the first time. Many heroes are happy when they find out heroines are virgins because foreign women have sex with many men. My friends and I discussed this. We said in India it’s the opposite! Here, a man will be surprised and angry if we are not virgins because he expects it as his right.
Interpreting Mills & Boon heroes’ surprised reactions to heroines’ virginity as evidence that sexually inexperienced women were exceptions to the norm in the West, Purnima asserted that Western romances paradoxically echoed the reality of middle-class Indian women’s lives. Citing her impressions of what “real” Western women were like, Purnima discounted the veracity of fictional descriptions of White heroines’ sexual innocence. Similarly, a few other women were convinced, despite my clarifications, that Mills & Boons could not be popular in Europe or the United States because the stories and characters bore little resemblance to the realities of romance and marriage in Western culture. Constructing virginal Western women in romance fiction as pure figments of imagination because real White women were sexually promiscuous allowed readers to experience moral superiority and to repress feelings of guilt over enjoying sexually explicit material. In women’s ideological distilling of cultural difference, White women, in their essentialized and intractable otherness, became symbols of the ills of unregulated Western modernity.

The happy endings in Mills & Boons became another site of othering where women intertextually referred to “credible” sources of reality to foreground their concerns about the lack of morality in Western culture. Purnima invited me to her engagement celebration at her home, reassuring me that the event would be small and informal. When I arrived at her home, I was surprised to hear loud and festive music and to see large crowds of people gathered under colorful canopies. Two days after the ceremony, I met Purnima and her friends for a group discussion and a social visit. When I began teasing Purnima for hosting the most lavish engagement party I had ever attended, Rachna rushed to her defense and remarked, “You’ve been away too long. It’s important in India to have a big celebration. We do it only once you know. When we marry, it’s really forever.” Rachna’s uncle was visiting from Los Angeles to make arrangements for his teenage daughter to live at Rachna’s home while she attended high school and college in Hyderabad. Juxtaposing her romance reading with the reasons for her uncle’s visit, she said:

> In the book I’m reading now, *Damsel in Distress*, the hero and heroine first hate each other and have problems, then there’s roses and wine and at the end they get married. They’re supposed to live happily ever after. But we know it’s really not like that—my relatives tell me they get divorced in 6 months! My uncle in America is worried his daughter will not learn Indian values. That’s why he wants her to study in India for a while.

Responding to Rachna, Poonam referred to the news she read in *Time* and *Newsweek* and television news she watched on CNN, “I see it on the news. They have teenage pregnancies, divorces, AIDS, and children are harmed. Even the women don’t care about the children.”

Quietly disrupting Poonam and Rachna’s monolithic representation of the U.S. and foreclosing ideological closure, Beena hesitantly interrupted and said, “But when things don’t work out in India, you know, when the Mills & Boon happy ending does not work out, then Indian women have to face all the music.” Beena’s comment produced an uncomfortable and tense silence in the room that needed no explanation. The silence that we did not rush to end starkly indexed our
common knowledge as Indian women of the illusory quality of the happy endings that supposedly lasted in India. Beena’s words “face the music” referenced the numerous difficulties and social stigma that single, divorced, and widowed women in India encountered in their everyday lives.

Middle-class Indian women readers’ mapping of promiscuous sexuality on White women’s bodies is a persistent legacy of nationalist ideology that continues to inflect and structure numerous vernacular popular culture accounts of wholesome Indian romances, families, and communities. As Chatterjee (1989) notes, the desexualization of the bourgeois Hindu woman in postindependent India was achieved by displacing active female sexuality onto European and local racially and economically marginalized others. The purity of educated, upper caste Hindu women was contrasted with two opposing images, one being the vulgar and sexually accessible low caste, poor Indian woman and the other of Western women as immoral and sexually licentious. In Indian films from the 1950s through the 1980s, a Westernized woman signified the figure of the ubiquitous “vamp,” a woman who defied traditional norms. The vamp wore tight skirts, danced in bars and discos, sported short hair, smoked, drank alcohol, and swore in public (Zutshi, 1993). Although such stark binary contrasts between traditional and Westernized women have become less and less pervasive, television and film heroines who stray too far from tradition usually incur suitable punishment, and fictional Indian women may pursue Western culture and nonconformity in their youth, but with marriage they transform into domestic wives and mothers. More subtly, in vernacular cultural productions, sexuality becomes associated with White women in the images of Indian women dressed in Western clothing (tight shirts, pants, and T-shirts) that calls attention to the contours of their bodies (Srilata, 1994).

Conclusion: Resistance, Compliance, and Cultural Imperialism

Densely contextual audience ethnographies that attend to the dialectic between the micropractices of everyday life and macrostructures of power can reveal audiences’ inextricably intertwined experiences of resistance and compliance. Indian women’s fascination for the cocoon of global consumer culture that envelops stories of romance indicates the celebration of “modernity thick with its connotations of First World prestige and an infinitude of material abundance” (Schein, 1997, p. 73). However, even as women urbanites’ desires to participate in the global culture of late capitalism led them to extol the objects and rituals of commodity fetishism, their aspirations as consuming subjects were simultaneously expressed as a gendered form of resistance against cultural forces that fashion women into symbols of community and nation. In women’s reading relations with heroines in Western romances, the surface of the White female body embedded in scripts of heightened sexual conflict “prickles with polysemy” (Schein, 1994, p. 142). On the one hand, registering White heroines as symbols of freedom in the perceived absence of their mooring to social hierarchies, Indian women resisted the control of elders wedded to perpetuating tradition through the deployment of women’s bodies. On the other hand, in some women’s engagement with White heroines as icons of promiscuous sexuality, romance reading became an active site of misidentification and othering, one that provoked readers to construct
binary configurations of East-West. From a feminist standpoint, Indian women’s gendered Othering of the West is fraught with contradictions: Seeking distance from the “promiscuity” of the White woman reiterates the very forms of social control over their own sexuality that they seek to disturb and rupture.

Indian women’s oscillation between fiction and falsehood and reality and truth in their identifications with White heroines and Western culture indicates the insights this study can offer to recent modifications of Edward Said’s pioneering analysis of Orientalism (Carrier, 1992; Chen, 1995; Nader, 1989). Orientalism, as Said (1978) viewed it, was a colonial/Western discourse and practice that produced representations of the East as static, passive, and inferior. Said’s formulation precludes the possibility of the “West” becoming an object of essentialist representation, and thus denies the “East” agency in manufacturing its own narratives of othering (Carrier, 1992). Indian romance readers’ comparative process of othering White heroines highlights the nationalist and Occidentalist consolidation of the self through the articulation of “positional superiority” over the West (Nader, 1989, p. 326). One strategy for overcoming the marginality of citizenship in a poor, underdeveloped nation is to assert superiority in the realm of culture and morality.

Readers’ contradictory significations of White women and the West in this study thus revise simplistic notions of cultural imperialism that imply unadulterated admiration for the West in non-Western settings. Although Tomlinson (1992) launched a critique of the flawed thinking underlying previous conceptions of cross-cultural consumption practices, his theoretical work has not generated empirical research that reveals the everyday life complexities of non-Western audiences’ engagement with Western culture. This ethnographic study of Indian women’s fiction-reading experiences demonstrates that cultural imperialism alone is inadequate to explain the cross-cutting and contradictory blending of identification and detachment, superiority and inferiority, and admiration and contempt in non-Western audiences’ interpretations of Western culture.

References


