**Introduction**

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South Asian women are in crisis. The region has been identified as one of the worst places in the world to be a female, along with Sub-Saharan Africa (World Vision, 2016). South Asian women’s position in society is constantly evaluated within patriarchal domination, right-wing nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and capitalist exploitation. Under these conditions, it has become essential to revisit the dynamic area of women’s identity constructions in the region.

Colonial nationalist discourse in India responded to similar condemnation of tradition-bound Indian women by creating the image of the ‘new woman,’ who was culturally refined and educated, yet also a devoted wife and mother. She represented a reformed tradition and nationalism based on the grounds of modernity, and also marked her superiority to Western women, traditional Indian women and low-class women (Chatterjee, 1989).Partha Chatterjee (1989) called this a new patriarchy, which capitalised on women with the ambiguous honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture. To respond to the present predicament of the oppressed South Asian woman, we reconstruct contemporary ‘new womanhood’ in the region as a self-constructed – as opposed to imposed by patriarchal powers – agential complex intersectional identity. Using poststructuralist methods and deconstructing classification systems and discourses, this volume remakes ‘new women’ as those who perform constant boundary work to expose, negotiate and challenge the boundaries of identity around ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’, culture and religion, local and global, class hierarchy, and discourses around sexuality and feminism. The purpose of the volume is to unpack and undo existing discourses around South Asian womanhood in order to evaluate how women use their heterogenous practices of ‘new womanhood’ as a privilege in neoliberal societies, and the implications of these practices for gender relations.

To date, the impact of scholarship on gender in South Asia has been centred around three things: new and innovative empirical studies to broaden the field of feminist research and its contribution to South Asian studies such as religious fundamentalism, secularism, economic development etc.; rethinking of theoretical concepts from various scholarly fields such as colonialism, nationalism, women’s movements, human rights, war, peace, globalisation, labour etc. (Loomba and Lukose, 2012); and opening up new areas of inquiry that complicate the understanding of gender through a focus on intersections between gender and class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality and religion (Fernandes, 2014). This volume addresses all three areas, primarily contributing to the third – reconfiguring ‘new womanhood’ as a symbolic identity denoting ‘modern’ femininity at the intersection of gender, class, culture and religion in South Asia. Studying ‘new womanhood’ through these intersections enables a more complex, dynamic and plural understanding of the concept than the existing, exclusively class-based ones. This volume provides disciplinary and interdisciplinary understandings of the concept, highlighting heterogeneous constructions of the ‘new woman’. Through this focus on ‘new’, however, we do not propose replacement of old categories of womanhood with newer ones. Rather, we resist any boundaries of identification and highlight the process of identity construction as one that is never ending and perpetually unfinished. The volume captures the depth and range of various sites and expressions of femininities in the region today, addressing issues like cultural and literary representation, sexualities, education, labour, fashion, feminism, women’s empowerment and domestic violence.

**Redefining the Third-World Woman**

For a long time, postcolonial feminists have been concerned, among other things, with analysing and rejecting the production of the ‘Third-World Woman’ as a singular, monolithic subject by both some Western and some middle-class, urban third-world scholars (Mohanty, 2003; Mani, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1991; Spivak, 1993). Both Western (in all its complexities and contradictions) and local elite feminist scholars use textual strategies to set themselves as the norm and codify others such as rural, working class cultures and their struggles as ‘others’ to this norm. Recently, three South Asian countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan and India – were placed in the top five most dangerous countries to be born a woman by Thomson Reuters Foundation (Bowcott, 2011). Other South Asian countries appear no better. For example, in Bangladesh, studies of gender based violence identify social, economic, and political structures in the country as discriminatory towards women, denying women any agency or autonomy (Jahan, 1994; White, 1992; Zaman, 1996, 1999). Similarly, in the 1980s female factory workers in Bangladesh were presented as the emblem of capitalist and patriarchal exploitation (Elson and Pearson, 1981a, b; Chapkis and Enloe, 1983). More contemporary scholarship around Islam highlights *fatwas*[[1]](#endnote-1) against NGOs and credit institutions, which are seen to be facilitating rural poor women's independence, as repressive religious measures against women (Feldman, 1998; Hashmi, 2000; Shehabuddin, 1999; Shehabuddin, 2008). Meanwhile the practice of the Islamic veil or hijab is often identified as oppressive, flagging the need for partnership with Western organisations and cultures to set an agenda for political action in the country.

Forceful critiques of the construction of the South Asian Third-World woman as a monolithic group oppressed by social structures have been prominent in the region since colonial times. In historical writings Mani (1992), Sunder Rajan (1993), Loomba (2003) and Sangari and Vaid (1990) characterise women in colonial India as agents in political struggle rather than passive victims of oppression. Generalisations about Islam’s oppression of women in contemporary South Asia have been refuted using Mahmood’s (2005) provocative exploration of the Eurocentric understanding of the key feminist notion of agency, and the need for theorising religious agency in Bangladesh (Rozario, 2006; Hussain, 2010; White, 2010), Pakistan (Jamal, 2012; Roomi and Harrison, 2010) and India (Kirmani, 2013). In Sri Lanka, women have been redefined by Nesiah (2012) as agents of peace rather than just victims of conflict through a study of women’s inclusion in conflict resolution and reconciliation positions in state’s policy. Similarly, Abdela (2008) argues that in Nepal, issues of land distribution, minority rights and federalism-related differences between Maoists and the seven-party alliance are resolved using woman-identified values, such as patience and empathy, in political engagement.

Following this tradition, our theorisation of ‘new womanhood’ in South Asia not only challenges the essentialised notion of the oppressed ‘Third-World Woman’ but also establishes ‘new women’ of South Asia as part of a new and potentially powerful symbolic social group, whose aspirations resemble what Mohanty (2003) identified as those of the privileged of the world – located geographically in both the global North and the South. South Asian ‘new women’ are symbolically produced through the challenging of normative practices of gender and sexuality, new aspirations around education, employment, fashion, and feminism, and self-construction of their identity as global neoliberal subjects.

**Redefining ‘New Woman’**

The 19th century Victorian ‘New Woman’ has been configured as a type, a symbol and a figure of feminist rebellion. Predominantly a journalistic phenomenon – a product of discourse – the ‘New Woman’ with her short haircut and practical dress, her demand for access to higher education and to voting and income rights, challenged the accepted views of femininity and female sexuality as docile and subservient. The New Woman was viewed as an ambiguous figure who triggered both anxiety and debate in Victorian Britain (Beetham and Heilmann, 2004, p.1). The concept was a somewhat semi-fictional one, with only some precise similarities with the lived experiences of the upper middle-class feminists of the late 19th century women’s movements (Ledger, 1997, p.3). The ‘New Woman’ was set in opposition to the ‘pure’ and ‘traditional’ identity of the Victorian woman, who was a nurturing wife, subordinate and dependent on her husband with a strong emphasis on cultural purity, virtue, integrity and honour – which symbolised the Victorians’ respectability in society (Beetham and Heilmann, 2004).

During the same period in New Zealand the New Woman was presented in similar ways – in rational dress, especially knickerbockers, and frequently riding a bicycle (Simpson, 2001). Unlike in Britain, however, New Zealand’s New Woman tried to reconcile her position with conventional beliefs about femininity to create alternative yet respectable identities (ibid.:54). Particularly when riding a bicycle, they employed a number of ‘protective’ strategies, such as ignoring remarks from bystanders, riding in groups, avoiding certain streets and places where they might find themselves in vulnerable situations in relation to unwelcome attention.

In the early twentieth century in Germany, China (Schmid, 2014), Korea (Suh, 2013) and Uzbekistan (Kamp, 2006) the ‘New woman’ became a symbol of social transformation through women’s education, participation in paid work, consumerism, social freedom, fashion, and beauty practices. Women’s increased access to jobs, education and participation in consumer culture through their income offered them greater independence from superstitions, arranged marriages, and extended family settings in rural areas, and granted access to Western fashion. But soon after, the ‘new woman’s lifestyle choices, such as night time socialising in dance halls and bars in Berlin and Shanghai or provocative Western clothes and hairstyles in Korea, began to be associated with sexual promiscuity and immoral consumption. ‘New Women’ were blamed for the ills of society due to their excessive spending on Western fashion polluting national culture, loss of sexual and moral order due to increased participation in night life, and finally increased presence in the labour force and the drop in childbearing (Schmid, 2014).

Colonial literature in India represents ‘new women’ as those who practised respectable femininity within the home and the public sphere, as opposed to the understanding of the ‘new woman’ in other parts of the world as a symbol of decadence. The middle-class ‘New Indian Woman’ was expected to acquire education and cultural refinement which would make her a worthy companion to her husband, but she would not lose her feminine spiritual (domestic) virtues or jeopardize her place in the home (Chatterjee, 1989, p.628; Gilbertson, 2011, p.119). New women’s nationalism, femininity and middle-class morality were evident in their merits of *pativrata* (the perfect wife) (Leslie 1989), merged with the Victorian image of the ‘perfect lady’ (Banerjee 2006, p.78). During the early and mid-19th century the Indian nationalists split the domain of culture into two spheres- the inner domestic and spiritual worlds of women, which represented the Indian nation’s true identity; and the outer material world of men, which fostered Western modernisation. The domestic and spiritual ‘new women’ of colonial India marked India’s ‘own version of modernity’ and the country’s anti-colonial stance. The nationalist ideology of the middle-class Indian woman and her domestic virtue distinguished ‘new women’ from both Western culture and the ‘traditional’ or ‘low class’ India (Chatterjee, 1989). This ‘new woman’ is also visible in various colonial literatures (Roye, 2016; Bezbaruah, 2016; Azim, 2002; Chatterjee, 1989). It is worth noting that despite this divide between the public and private, many women of the time, both Hindu and Muslim, such as the Muslim writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, participated actively through their writing in the nationalist movement to free India from imperialist power, and at the same time to free women from the seclusion of the home (Azim, 2010).

Hence, the ‘new woman’ of the 19th and early 20th century was the female figure of ‘modernity’, which took its own course in different parts of the world, breaking the boundaries of normative forms of femininity through education, paid work, visibility in the public sphere, redefining sexuality and fashion. In this volume, to study postcolonial South Asia we use Partha Chatterjee’s (1997) conceptualisation of ‘our’ modernity, which he defines as the experiences of societies which entered modernity under double violence –the violence of imperialism and the violence of alien structures of modernity such as capitalism, industrialisation, individuation and the gradual decline of communal forms of belonging. South Asia’s history of colonialism distinguishes its own version of modernity from the European one. For postcolonial societies, contemporary processes of globalisation, migration and capitalism are not new phenomena, but build upon older histories of colonialism, race and empire (Loomba and Lukose, 2012). While Western modernity looks at the present as the site of one’s escape from the past, ‘our’ modernity sees the past as when there was beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability. Hence, postcolonial South Asia’s relationship with modernity is ambiguous; to fashion ‘our’ modernity, we need to have the courage to reject the modernities established by others (Chatterjee, 1997, p.20). In this volume, we see past and present, the local and the global as necessarily interconnected. The regional framework of this volume should not be misread as local to South Asia only; rather, we scrutinise the politics of the postcolonial local to understand the relationship between the local and the global.

*Contemporary ‘new women’ of South Asia*

Contemporary perspectives on ‘new womanhood’ in South Asia can be categorised into two groups: the ‘new woman’ represented in the media and literature, and the ‘new woman’ engaged in neoliberal economy, consumerism, and transnational mobility, constantly negotiating with social, political and economic changes around her.

Constructions of the ‘new Indian woman’ have been analysed by feminist scholars through explorations of media such as television commercials (Sunder Rajan 1993; Munshi 1998; Chanda 2000), beauty pageants (Oza 2001; Runkle 2004), popular magazines (Daya, 2009; Thapan 2004) and novels (Daya, 2010; Mahajan, 2015; Roye 2016; Bezbaruah, 2016). These depict ‘Indian new women’ as an ‘object’, and their bodies as the surface upon which contradictory cultural messages are inscribed through a depiction of past and present, local and global, traditional and modern (Talukdar and Linders, 2013). However, the majority of this literature is limited to studies of women’s bodies as a vehicle of expressing ‘superficial modernity’, failing to penetrate beyond appearance. Thapan’s (2004) study of Indian women’s magazines demonstrates that magazines project new Indian women’s bodies as glamorous through their choice of consumer goods, yet emphasize that such a lifestyle can be achieved by Indian women who are status-conscious, economically independent, capable of taking decisions, ‘modern’, yet enshrined in tradition through adherence to family and national values, thus expressing their Indianness (ibid, p.410). Similarly, in the Bollywood movie ‘English Vinglish’, the ‘new woman’ protagonist is a model of development and modernization who embraces crossing borders to the USA, seeking opportunities to learn a new language and lifestyle, and moving beyond the restrictions of the local and traditional, yet remains Indian, Hindu, nationalist, family-bound and domestic -legitimising truly Indian qualities of motherhood and wifely duties (Chatterjee, 2016). However, some alternative perspectives are also available. Hard Kaur, an Indian-born, British-raised female hip-hop artist, is defined as the ‘new *Desi* (of homeland) woman’ who represents young, transnational, future-oriented, capable and assertive postcolonial femininity, as opposed to meek, subservient, docile femininities of the past (Dattatreyan, 2015).

Like the majority of the studies in India, the Bangladeshi media representation of ‘new woman’ is similar to the Victorian new woman, who represented the fallen woman, thus not respectable, a contrast to the ‘angel in the house’ image of ideal domestic womanhood, the respectable ones. The ‘new woman’ represented in Bangladeshi media, particularly in television, is professional, ‘modern’, ‘bold’ and ‘outrageous’ (Begum, 2008). In terms of appearance, the new woman in Bangladeshi media has short hair, and wears the sari in a modern way[[2]](#endnote-2), demonstrating her educated middle-class taste. Yet Begum notes how the narrative of the dramas often depicts these women as a dark force, disobedient of elders, who behave outside the prevalent value system of joint families, engage in immoral consumerism, and reject caring and nurturing roles. Hussein’s (2017) research participants self-identify as new women, but disavow media representation of modern women as ‘new woman’. As new women audiences, the participants argue that the Bangladeshi media represents either traditional women bound by patriarchal oppression, or Westernised over-ambitious and hypersexual women; both representations fail to capture the complexities of new women’s lives, which intersect with gender, class, and cultural and religious systems simultaneously. Alternatively, Chowdhury (2010) identifies the ‘new woman’ in Bangladeshi media as an ‘efficient’, ‘skilled’ and ‘trained’ development professional, whose (middle) class position allows her to transcend gendered vulnerabilities and assume the role of ‘feminist saviour’, rescuing the poor, rural, uneducated women who are victims of the patriarchal system of society (ibid., p.316). Chowdhury argues that representation of the new woman as saviour of women victims symbolises her as an agent of neo-patriarchal relations among differentially located women and reflects a consensual (patron) and contractual (the one to be saved) structure of patriarchy, much like that between men and women: the development expert who provides services to the client.

Feminist scholars have drawn on Partha Chatterjee’s (1989), theorisation whereby negation of private and public or home and outside world is used to explain classed gender subjectivities and the practices that define postcolonial new women. This is most prominent in economically liberalised India, particularly in the 1990s, where a substantial amount of research that addresses contemporary Indian women’s balance of old and new, tradition and modern, and national and Western conceptualises these women as middle-class new women. With a strong emphasis on class and gender, Radhakrishnan (2011) identifies the Indian new women as IT workers who are urban, upper caste, educated, English-speaking professionals, who identify with the symbolic and cultural identities of India’s middle class and are bearers of nationalist, family- and home-centred Indian culture, yet economically are a segment of the global elite class (ibid., p.8). They are ‘at the frontline of the global economy, and assert their symbolic position at the helm of new India’ (ibid.,p.5). Talukdar and Linders (2013) identify new liberal Indian women as part of a modest segment of a ‘new’ middle class, who cannot be defined solely through material signs (e.g. income, wealth, work, education), but are new in terms of their distinctive social and political identity, which is an outcome of their close encounter with liberalization (ibid., p.108). In Bangladesh, the class reference remains intact and ‘new womanhood’ is defined as urban middle-class women, whose education and profession provide them with the respectability and ‘acceptability’ to live their lives on their own terms (Karim, 2010; Hussein, 2015). Living ‘on their own terms’ may include non-heteronormative relationships (Karim, 2010), avoiding the stigma of divorce (Parvez, 2011), hybrid fashion, 50-50 work-life balance and female individualisation (Hussein, 2015). Feminist concerns in Bangladesh have changed to address ‘new’ women of the country who are fighting for their rights around sexuality, marriage, transnational mobility and paid employment, rather than motherhood, children and housework, considered matters relevant for previous generations of women (Azim, 2007).

Although ‘new womanhood’ did not gain as much attention in feminist research in other parts of South Asia, like Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, these countries still address ‘new’ practices of femininities as legitimate, such as career aspirations and female militancy in Sri Lanka (Fernando and Cohen, 2013; Thiranagama, 2014), romantic love, fashion and commodified beauty practices in Nepal (Liechty, 2003), and religious modernity in Pakistan (Jamal, 2013; Toor, 2014). Although the public discourses around ‘new womanhood’ in South Asia raise important questions about gendered postcolonial modernity, they are also a useful tool to analyse the permeable boundaries of gender, class, and cultural and religious norms, and to evaluate how ‘new women’, whether as an object in the media or a subject outside of it, can test these boundaries and self-construct themselves as the ‘new woman’.

‘New women’ of South Asia distance themselves from other women within their country and from Western women, creating inter- and intra-group distinctions in their communities (Hussein, 2015, 2017). Distinctions are drawn in four ways. First, class boundaries are drawn between ‘aggressive’ westernised women who give up their families to fulfil career goals, and respectable middle-class women, who are ‘not so ambitious’ and view a career as a supplement to married life and children (Radhakrishnan, 2011, p.149). It is also recognised that many women must assume the breadwinner role in families and use their economic power to hire domestic help to look after their family (ibid., p.153). Others co-opt other female family members such as mothers-in-law, or paid household help, who carry out new women’s domestic chores for them, so they can achieve 50-50 work-life balance and maintain respectability (Hussein, 2017). In Nepal, Liechty (2003) demonstrates that middle-class women constantly distance themselves from prostitutes, who are from the lower classes and sexually available in the public sphere, as opposed to the respectable middle-class women who are visible in the public sphere, but are still within the bounds of middle-class sexual propriety. Existing literature on ‘new women’ in South Asia constructs them as those practicing respectable femininity, which is fundamentally a middle-class symbolic capital. But as Saba Hussain in this volume articulates, respectable femininity is associated with larger progress of communities and nations and an expectation of enactment by individual women and girls from all class backgrounds. Such a discourse of respectable femininity helps reimagine nations like India as developed, and communities like Hindus and Muslims as modern or progressive. Elora Chowdhury expands this further in her chapter by arguing how narratives of ‘[new] women’s uplift’ and emancipation in the region fail to convey the precarity of the everyday struggles of ‘new women’, regardless of their class, living on the borders of neoliberal progress.

Secondly, cultural boundaries construct ideal femininity through women’s conscious engagement with cultural and nationalist attires such as the sari, and the containment of the sexuality or ‘wayward modernity’ of the West. But Indian ‘new women’ merge cultural boundaries through hybrid physical appearance, combining national and Western fashion, body size (thinness) and make-up. However, such hybrid sartorial choices are often condemned by women’s parents-in-law in India (Thapan, 2009). But professional women have challenged such scrutiny by their families through negotiation and strategising to practice multiple fashions in the diverse locations of workplace and family (ibid., p.130). As Nazia Hussein demonstrates in this volume, in Bangladesh ‘new women’ participants merge the boundaries of various classed, cultural and religious clothing practices to construct hybrid and context-specific ‘smart’ clothing practices as a distinctive practice of new womanhood. Finally, in terms of religious boundaries, in Pakistan Jamal (2013) demonstrates how women of Jamat-e-Islami, an Islamic political party, embrace ‘modernity’ in relation to education, employment, political participation etc., yet reject notions of individual autonomy in matters of religious beliefs and practices. In this volume, Virginie Dutoya claims that Pakistani Muslim heroine characters in television serials claim their ‘new womanness’ through disassociating themselves from the superstition and ignorance of uneducated Muslim women and the arrogance of Western female heroines on cable television, simultaneously negotiating the boundaries of religion and culture. Similarly, Nandita Ghosh in the volume studies a Brahmin new woman character who eats non-vegetarian food, rejects arranged marriage and has a boyfriend - all practices far outside the parameters of Hindu upper-caste Brahminical norms.

This volume also expands the above mentioned boundaries to gender and geographical boundaries. Gender boundaries are drawn by flagging practices of ‘new femininities’ located within the context of material existence that are fulfilled through consumer goods but also through recognition of women’s desires and approaches of queering gender and sex. Queer groups have shifted from rooting their claims for rights of same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity to sex workers rights, women’s choices and practises of sexualities and gender identities. In this volume Karim claims acknowledgement of sexuality as part of constructions and expressions of new femininities and womanhood – particularly recognising women’s sexuality in its plurality within the realms of various public/private spaces that they occupy. For geographical boundaries, Elora Chowdhury and Sushmita Chatterjee in this volume rightly note that it is also important to scrutinise transnational circulations of narratives of women’s liberation and feminism in the South. Chowdhury focuses on transnational media representation of Bangladeshi female garment workers exposing structural inequality of globalisation, colonial relations between capitalist West and certain populations in the Global South who are subjected to extreme violence and suffering. In her exploration of ‘new feminisms’ in India which are adaptations of feminist movements often identified as Western, Chatterjee questions the very construction of geographical boundaries when it comes to feminist politics.

The chapters in this volume suggests that boundaries of a variety of social categories determine ‘new womanness’ across time and space. In this way, without explicitly identifying as an intersectional study, the majority of the chapters of the book articulate ‘new womanhood’ as a complex, intersectional and heterogenous identity. In the following section, I explain the concept of boundary work as the primary tool for the analysis of ‘new womanhood’ in this volume.

*Boundary work of new women*

It is necessary to embed an empirical volume on South Asian ‘new womanhood’ into wider theories of boundaries and boundary work. Practices of ‘new womanhood’ constantly challenge and reinvent boundaries of gender/ sexuality, class, culture and religion. A classical element of the social science tool kit, the idea of boundaries has gained much renewed interest in studies of social and collective identity. Studying social relations through the concept of boundaries allows us an insight into how subjects create, maintain, negotiate, contest and recreate social differences, e.g. gender, sexuality, class, culture and religion. It also enables us to look at cultural mechanisms of production of hybrid cultures. Lamont (1992) defines boundary work as personal investment in identity, ‘an intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self; they [boundaries] emerge when we try to define who we are: we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from, others, indirectly producing typification systems’ (ibid., p.11). Lamont’s acknowledgement of ‘typification systems’ indicates that boundary work guides and organises both the self and other social identities into categories. Boundary properties, e.g. permeability, salience, durability, and visibility, as well as mechanisms ‘associated with the activation, maintenance, transposition or the dispute, bridging, crossing and dissolution of boundaries’ (Lamont and Molnar, 2002 p. 187) are particularly important for the studies in this volume.

Practices of new womanhood are a form of symbolic boundary work that separates these women into a symbolic group based on feelings of similarity and group membership that crosses national and regional borders. New women are a symbolic group or practices of new womanhood are a symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1992) that women studied in this volume adopt to establish their distinction from other women. Symbolic capital is the form any other kind of capital (economic-money, property; cultural-education, fashion; social-friends and community relations) can take once they are perceived and recognised as legitimate. This process of legitimisation is a key mechanism in the conversion of symbolic capital (Skeggs, 1997, p.8). Legitimisation occurs when one’s privileged taste and capitals are considered part of one’s ‘natural’ capacity, misrecognising all others as inferior and reproducing dominance of the privileged. In this volume, new women legitimise heterogenous practices of gender such as lesbian and asexual identities (Karim, Ghosh), hybrid cultural practices such as fusion clothing and context-specific aesthetic labour (Hussein, Adhikari), reinvention of respectable femininity not just as a middle-class capital but an aspiration for all classes (Hussain), shifting gender order within patriarchy (Kirmani, Dutoya) and new woman’s transnational dispositions (Chowdhury, Hussein, Chatterjee). Hence, new womanhood is an essential medium through which women acquire status and distinction and monopolise resources and create social boundaries (e.g. sexual, cultural or religious).

‘distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power…[it] also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular’ (Lamont, et.al., 2015, p. 850).

For this volume gender as an intersectional subjectivity is not pre-reflexive or unconscious. The chapters of the volume recognise the ambivalent and nuanced efforts of the dominated —in this case women —to capture subjecthood wanting to change and adapt with an ability to add value to themselves. The volume demonstrates femininities —for us, new womanhood —as agential, heterogeneous and fluid subjectivities in which individuals make their own choices, are critical of their situations, and think and organise, individually or collectively, against oppression. Such a construction of South Asian women as political subjects, as opposed to docile and oppressed objects, challenges the ‘oppressed postcolonial women’ predicament in dominant South Asian gender perspectives.

In this endeavour, the volume is organised around two major themes: a) Politics of representation: New woman in literature and the media; b) Practices of gender, sexuality, class, culture and religion: New women subjects in everyday life. Within the thematic sections, the chapters provide original research findings and critical assessment of the field of scholarship under consideration. The chapters make two significant intellectual contributions. First, they expand, challenge and help reconceptualise existing approaches to the study of women and gender in South Asia and the global South. However, these revisions are in continuous dialogue with mainstream women and gender studies in the global North, providing a global perspective on gender. Second, the studies in the volume develop and expand the field of South Asian studies. The chapters show how rethinking constructions and practices of women and gender can contribute to new developments in studies of the region.

**Politics of representation: New woman in literature and the media**

Scholars’ unpacking representations of ‘new woman’ as an object in the media, literature or beauty pageants has deepened contemporary understanding of the ways in which conceptions of the global intersect with nationalist narratives, and of the ways in which new subjectivities are positioned in liminal spaces, unable to be reduced to fixed identity categories or social locations. The chapters in this section expand our understanding of the representation of women, culture, nation and identity in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Nandita Ghosh uses an innovative approach of ‘border as method’ to examine how women’s bodies and sexuality serve as important boundary markers of power and citizenship, of violence and exclusion, and of negotiation and transformation. Through the theory of ‘border struggles’ Ghosh analyses how women resist constraints and open up new possibilities in two selected novels from the 1980s and 1990s and in the news coverage of the 2012 Park Street rape case of Suzette Jordan in Kolkata, India. She shows us how India’s 30-years national discourse of modernity and neo-liberalism stumbles when encountering the non-submissive female bodies of ‘new women’. Elora Chowdhury uses visual and literary representations of Bangladeshi women in the garment industry to highlight the emerging identities of the empowered woman in the capitalist workforce, as well as structural inequalities that constrain their autonomy. She questions racialised and gendered labor in the context of the neoliberal capitalist globalisation of the political economy, and defines ‘new women’ as dutiful workers dependent on wages who are neither self-sufficient nor autonomous, yet are socially constructed as emancipated through narratives of capitalist modernity. Virginie Dutoya shifts our focus to pro-women television dramas of metropolitan Pakistan, which explicitly address ‘women's issues’ such as child marriage, polygamy, violence, the right to education, or parents’ preference for boys. She argues that these drama serials respond to the representation of the victim status of Pakistani women in the international media, which has become a source of ‘national shame’ for the country.

**Practices of gender, sexuality, class, culture and religion: New women subjects in everyday life**

Formulations of ‘new woman’ subjects have been most diverse in different time periods and spaces. The ‘new’ is often presented as a harbinger of modernity and progress, a code for the eclipse of tradition by wayward modernity, and finally a result of global discourses around capitalism and cosmopolitanism. In this volume, following contemporary feminist trends, we provide a picture of women’s emancipation, initiated, developed and achieved by women themselves to gain value as a ‘new woman’ in their respective societies. This is done through exploring social categories of class, culture, religion and sexuality.

Three chapters in this section address intersections of gender and class through the concept of ‘respectable femininity’ without explicitly using intersectionality as a theoretical framework. Nazia Hussein uses women’s sartorial choices as a tool to argue that by merging boundaries of class and respectable vs. ‘modern’ clothing practices Bangladeshi neoliberal middle-class women self-construct their ‘new womanhood’, at the intersection of gender, class, culture and religion (Islam). Her analysis frames the symbolic value of ‘new womanhood’ as a marker of departure from the boundaries and constrictions of national culture and religious (Islamic) norms within which most gender scholarship of the region has been confined. Mona Adhikari researches hotels and casinos in Nepal to assess how women workers maintain respectability while conforming and negotiating with organisational policies of aesthetic and sexualised labour. Saba Hussain provides an unprecedented explanation of practices of ‘new girlhood’ among Muslim girls from diverse class backgrounds in Assam through balancing career and marital aspirations. She uses concepts of respectability, ‘appropriate aspirations’ and post-feminist girlhoods, effectively highlighting future pathways of ‘new woman’ research both in South Asia and more globally.

Nida Kirmani explores the impact of engagement in paid work on women’s empowerment and, in particular, on their ability to negotiate and resist violence at the hands of their husbands and other family members. She argues that, despite the persistence of patriarchal structures, women’s narratives demonstrate the emergence of new models of womanhood at the local level as a result of paid employment, which provides their families opportunities of social mobility (in class structure) and cultural shifts enabling women to challenge abusers and end abusive relationships. Shuchi Karim looks at a group of Bangladeshi female sex workers who practice heterosexuality as labor and homosexuality as personal sexual desire, questioning politics of sexual diversity. She argues that these sex workers’ ‘personal is/and political’ practices, and their almost invisible presence in an otherwise educated middle class fabric of sexuality rights activism, question our middle-class-framed understanding of heteronormativity, womanhood, sexualities and rights discourses in Bangladesh. Finally, Sushmita Chatterjee studies Blank Noise, the pink *chaddi* campaign, *besharmi morchas*, and other forms of urban feminist activism in India as ‘new feminisms’ to rethink the complex, hybrid nature of new feminist theory and activism to ‘counter-perform’ the language of the oppression of women in South Asia. She provides a timely review of Indian feminisms’ engagement with ‘Western’ feminist activism and future pathways for feminist activism in the country.

**Trends and Directions**

The chapters in this volume capture the richness and diversity of feminist scholarship on ‘new women’ of South Asia. We defy any attempts at generalisation of a complex region and the complex concept of ‘new womanhood’. We provide an important review of the key debates that have emerged from feminist scholarship on ‘new womanhood’, and reveal a range of methods and substantive new themes that preoccupy contemporary feminist scholars. Apart from challenging monolithic constructions of oppressed ‘South Asian woman’, this volume introduces new approaches and challenges to existing paradigms in the study of gender and inequality. In this attempt, we have recreated ‘new womanhood’ not just as a middle-class gender identity, like the existing studies available on the concept, but rather as a symbolic identity that can be assumed by women of any class, culture and religion to traverse binaries of local and global, tradition and modernity, oppression and empowerment, change and stasis to recognise that women themselves construct and reconstruct their identities in relation to societal change. We argue that ‘new women’s’ gains are vested in a wider feminist politics and they have the potential to positively influence the terrain of possibilities for all women.

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1. a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A sari can be draped in numerous styles. In the modern style most of the cloth is draped around the

   waist with a single segment going across the breasts and the left shoulder to cover the upper body. The

   midriff is left bare in this style of wearing a sari. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)