

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Choudhury, Suchitra. *Textile Orientalisms: Cashmere and Paisley Shawls in British Literature and Culture*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2023. xiii + 226 pp.

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<1>In *Textile Orientalisms: Cashmere and Paisley Shawls in British Literature and Culture*, Suchitra Choudhury offers a compelling analysis of the historical and literary significance of the shawl in British culture from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. A research fellow at the University of Glasgow and co-curator of a 2023 exhibit on shawls at the Paisley Museum in Scotland, Choudhury had previously published two important journal articles on this topic, and this monograph is a welcome addition to scholarship on shawls and material culture in the nineteenth century. Choudhury's central claim is that, in their capacity as "visual symbols for the subcontinent, for several imaginative writers [shawls] emerged as uneven sites to evoke the mottled experience of the British empire" (3). This argument has laudable historical and geographic breadth – necessary to analyze the cultural significance of a textile that has been in global circulation for centuries – as well as commendable depth in the approach to Cashmere shawls and their European and British counterparts as objects laden with literary significance. *Textile Orientalisms* will interest specialists in British literature in the long nineteenth century, as well as scholars of imperialism, material culture, and textile history, among other fields.

<2>The book opens with an introduction that situates the shawl within the critical and theoretical contexts of object studies, New Materialisms, and the global commodity culture that brought shawls into vogue for British consumers. Choudhury articulates three "frameworks" through which the shawl's long and multifaceted story may be viewed: the "language of fashion" and its connections to gender, class, and consumption; changing discourses of "authenticity," which raised questions regarding the relationship between original and imitation; and the shawl's function in "register[ing] the pleasures and anxieties of global expansion" (4), particularly the concerns attendant on empire. Although the book's focus on this

unique textile may appear to be a narrow one, Choudhury's engagement with scholarship in material culture, including the work of Bill Brown, William Connolly, and Elaine Freedgood, enables a broader claim regarding the value of examining literary texts through the lens of "reflective materialism" and the importance of attending to the "embodied reality" of objects (15). In this way the argument points toward future possibilities for interdisciplinary and theoretically informed research in literary studies.

<3>The first chapter examines the historical contexts for the shawl's function within global economies of exchange. For centuries, as Chitrlekha Zutshi and others have shown, authentic shawls made in Kashmir from the wool of Himalayan goats were highly valued as luxury textiles and markers of wealth and status; the shawl often served as a *khilatin* a formal exchange of gifts. Although shawls were broadly of interest to European consumers, Choudhury argues that "the fashion for Indian shawls was, from its inception, a very British phenomenon" (30). Gradually, officials in the British East India Company and travelers to India purchased shawls for family members and circulated them in both formal and informal trade networks. Interestingly, Choudhury's research also shows that the Indian shawl could function as "an explicit icon of British corruption" (34) as it became an object associated with systems of bribery. Shawls were important enough to make their way into eighteenth-century artworks as well as literary texts; the cover of Choudhury's book depicts an engraving by James Gillray, *The Leadenhall Volunteer, Drest in His Shawl*, which Choudhury reads as an illustration of the culpability not only of the East India Company but also of the larger imperial project. Famously, "India" shawls appear in the works of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell, among other nineteenth-century women writers: in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), the indolent Lady Bertram requests "two shawls" from the East Indies as a gift from her nephew, and in Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) and *North and South* (1855), shawls are similarly valorized as complex narrative symbols. These are perhaps the best known examples of the shawl's appearance in nineteenth-century British novels, and scholars including Urmi Bhowmik and Suzanne Daly have established their literary and cultural significance. Choudhury builds on this existing scholarship and complements it with research on the imitation shawls made in Britain (and to a lesser extent in France) – most famously, the "Paisley" shawl that bears the name of the town in Scotland in which it was made – in the remaining four chapters, which expertly interweave literary and historical analysis.

<4>Choudhury's selection of literary texts is refreshingly unconventional, drawing on works by a diverse set of authors and in a range of genres from the 1780s to the 1930s, including several under-read texts that merit scholarly attention. The second

chapter, on Elizabeth Inchbald's 1785 play *Appearance Is Against Them*, is a case in point. With a comic plot centering on the repeated stealing, borrowing, and gifting of an imported Indian shawl, Inchbald's play frames the shawl as a critique of assumptions around women's susceptibility to fashionable trends as well a "sign of colonial corruption and misrule" (79). The third chapter addresses the depiction of Paisley shawls "made in imitation of the Indian" (80) in two little studied fictions by Sir Walter Scott, the changing perspective on which Choudhury reads as figuring Scott's assessment of the transition from mercantilism to industrial capitalism (17). Whereas *St Ronan's Well* (1823) represents Paisley shawls as inferior, *The Surgeon's Daughter* (1827) offers a more positive view of the imitation shawl as an affordable and widely available alternative to the original. Choudhury briefly references recent scholarship in ecocritical studies in this chapter, a promising line of inquiry that suggests interesting possibilities for future studies of textile production. Chapters 4 and 5 cover somewhat more familiar terrain in their readings of emotions and irony in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), and "colonial and class insurgencies" (125) in Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866). Indian shawls are associated with both feminine domesticity and masculine imperialism in the former, framing "a contrast between romance and reality on the one hand and domestic ideology and imperial conflict on the other" (104), while in the latter, the red Paisley shawl associated with the criminal heroine Lydia Gwilt becomes a symbol of class-based discrimination as well as a reminder of the Indian Mutiny (or Sepoy Rebellion) of 1857. This is a particularly insightful reading of *Armadale* as a "condition of England" novel in which, as Choudhury insightfully observes (citing Homi Bhabha's theories of colonial mimicry in *The Location of Culture*), "the materiality of Lydia's 'imitation' shawl (almost the real Cashmere 'but not quite,' as Homi Bhabha might have put it) forms part of a rhetoric of rebellion against the existing social order" (127). The final chapter, on the Scottish-Canadian novelist Frederick Niven's 1931 little known novel *The Paisley Shawl*, offers an enlightening reading of the various meanings of an old Paisley shawl, read against the backdrop of Scottish nationalist politics in the early twentieth century, in which conceptions of home and homeland are complicated by the symbolic resonances of this textile with the thorny operations of empire.

<5>All in all, *Textile Orientalisms* is a well written, thoroughly researched and engaging monograph that will surely be useful to a wide range of audiences, particularly to scholars working on nineteenth-century Britain and British India. For the purposes of this journal, the connection to gender studies is somewhat less explicitly articulated, given the complexity of the shawl's significations and the fact that these textiles were historically worn by both men and women, but as Choudhury underscores, over the course of the nineteenth century the shawl came to be

irrevocably associated with changing trends in fashions for women. Future studies might delve further into the role of shawls outside the bounds of Britain, as I have done in a recent article on Emily Dickinson's "India" shawl, and beyond the long nineteenth century. As Choudhury rightly notes, there are important conclusions to be drawn from the shawl's relevance to intersecting discourses of fashion, gender, imperialism, technology, art and design, as well as from its literary and cultural significance. *Textile Orientalisms* deserves to be widely read and will serve as an indispensable resource for scholars interested in the intricate history of this fascinating piece of material culture.