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### Article

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Review of "Intimate Class Acts. Friendship and Desire in  
Indian and Pakistani Women's Fiction"

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MIRZA MARYAM. *Intimate Class Acts. Friendship and Desire in Indian and Pakistani Women's Fiction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016. 224 pp. ISBN: 9780199466740. £ 25.99 Hardback.

The literary representation of love, friendship and intimacy should not be seen as an escape from contemporary politics. Rather, scenes of intimacy can be charged with pressing social antagonisms, narrate allegorically the troubled history of postcolonial nations, and express symptomatically the dynamics at the heart of global modernity. In her timely and ambitious book, Maryam Mirza offers a compelling analysis of the wider historical, political and economic logics underlying stories of intimacy in twentieth-century South Asian women's writing. Instead of seeing the personal as a retreat from political engagement, Mirza's excellent study indicates how South Asian women writers have explored the multifarious zones of contact articulating intimate relationships between middle classes and subaltern in modern South Asia.

*Intimate Class Acts* investigates a wide array of middle-class and subaltern subjects depicted in modern South Asian novels, including the ayah, the playmate, the female employee, and lovers belonging to different social groups. Mirza's research into space of intimacy offers a stimulating reading of the intersections between gender and class, patriarchy and capitalism, modernity and the vernacular. One of the most important concepts proposed by Mirza is the idea of a cross-class intimacy: this concept does not overlook the asymmetrical relationships formed in middle-class households between masters and servants, but rather reframes the very concept of social class as a terrain of struggle traversed by multiple economies of desire. Mirza's work, hence, offers a re-reading of major postcolonial novels from the point of view of cross-class intimacy, including Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

The interest of Mirza's work emerges, for example, from her analysis of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Mirza's engages with the role of desire and the erotic in the novel, famously celebrated by Brinda Bose (1998) as a form of transgression and resistance, and incisively critiqued by Aijaz Ahmad (1997) for being a retreat from politics and a foreclosure of real social oppressions. In contrast with Ahmad's perspective, Mirza shows "the political significance of desire" (84). However, Mirza's analysis does not end up celebrating the role of desire as a site of rebellion and political resistance *per se*. Instead, Mirza convincingly shows that sexual intercourse "is certainly constructed as an act of resistance against social oppression in Roy's text, but it is also ultimately an inadequate form of rebellion . . . Despite the lyricism of the closing passages, the reader is never lulled into forgetting the tragic destiny of the lovers" (84-85). This point reveals Mirza's thoughtful approach to South Asian fiction: on the one hand, her research reconsiders the representation of desire and love as an important literary aspect endowed with pressing political issues. On the other hand, she does not reduce the political to the personal, but rather assesses the constant overlap, disjuncture and intersection between desire and politics, the personal and the social, intimacy and community.

While recognising the limitations of fictional writing in English to capture the complex structures of feeling of subaltern classes in the subcontinent, her analysis aptly tackles the "linguistic and literary techniques" that writers "employ to narrate conversations between the elite and the subaltern characters which could not have taken place in English, especially in the context of profoundly unequal relationships" (136-137). The South Asian novel emerges, through the prism of Mirza's analysis of class and desire, as a reconsideration of the powers of the literary representation to address political issues through the intimate lives of fictional characters. Mirza's study leads, in the end, to re-open the discussion about postcolonial fiction as a critique of inequality marked by complex class, gender and cultural positions.

#### Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aijaz, "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically," *Frontline* 8 (1997): 103-8.  
 Bose, Brinda, "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *ARIEL: A review of International English literature* 29.2 (1998): 59-72.