

[Rizzo on Mukherjee, 'Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks'](#)

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The following book review from H-Empire may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

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Tracey Rizzo

Sumita Mukherjee. *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xvi + 292 pages. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-948421-8.

Reviewed by Tracey Rizzo (UNC Asheville) **Published on** H-Empire (March, 2019) **Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

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When Ijeoma Oluo described her reluctance in *The Stranger* to review the 2015 film *Suffragette*, she pointed to its relentless whiteness: “[T]here are no people of color in this movie. Not in the streets, not in the factories, not in the crowds. Nowhere. They don’t exist. The creators of this film took creative license to generate a whole new main character for the film, but they couldn’t come up with a single brown face in a crowd?”[1] Perpetuating an erroneous, if not pernicious, narrative that the suffrage movement, and early twentieth-century Britain, was monolithically white, the film does a disservice to world history in general and to Indian suffragettes in particular. Sumita Mukherjee’s 2018 book, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* illustrates exactly how erroneous such representations are. But adding color to the British movement is not her objective. Rather, she reconstructs the transnational suffrage movement of the early twentieth century by placing Indian suffragettes at the center.

Based on research in nearly a dozen archives on three continents, Mukherjee describes two generations of Indian women whose activism pivoted around the vote. Declining to call these women “feminists”—many of them explicitly eschewed the label for its divisive and Western connotations—she prefer to describe them as “suffragettes” because the centrality of the issue offers a specificity that “feminist” does not, and because “their actions and purpose were radical for the time” (p. 4). Always noting their intersectional identities and positions, even when they did not, she acknowledges that these activists were elites imbued with class-, caste-, and race-based prejudices. They nonetheless often claimed to speak for all Indian or even all Eastern women, sometimes deploying self-orientalizing rhetoric in the process. As well, Indian suffragettes often positioned themselves atop an Asian hierarchy, despite the fact that women in Burma and Ceylon obtained national suffrage before Indian women did. Even one of the book’s—and history’s—heroines, Sarjini

Naidu, referred to the “Mongolian faces” and “slanted eyes” of the Burmese delegates to the Second Round Table Conference in 1931 (p. 169).

Thus Mukherjee is in no way constructing a feminist hagiography or some golden age of Indian activism. Neither is she seeking to destroy the favorable reputations of Indian history’s “women worthies.” She concludes: “These women were not saints, but they exhibited huge bravery in times of fierce imperial repression” (p. 252). Indeed, the greatest strength of the book is its nonpartisanship. *Indian Suffragettes* is good old-fashioned narrative history—engagingly written, balanced in its assessment, and based on stellar archival research. The appendices, including a time line and short biographies, make it accessible to students and general readers as well as scholars. “Old-fashioned” does not imply Mukherjee’s approach is stale. Quite the contrary, she situates her narrative in the context of current theory concepts such as spatiality and networks, with chapters organized around the various imagined or actual configurations of space in which suffragettes operated: British, Commonwealth, international, and Asian. Mobility is at the center of the story and we can feel the exhilaration of transcontinental travel undertaken by someone like Naidu who was regularly in Britain, the United States, or South Africa—when she was not in jail in India.

Spanning the first four critical decades of the twentieth century, Mukherjee’s narrative moves at a swift clip as she interweaves local, regional, and national initiatives over several decades and across the subcontinent—in addition to at least mentions of suffrage activity on other continents. Throughout, she notes the diverse identities of Indian suffragettes but she does not dwell on them, in part because it would congest an already crowded narrative, in part because emphasizing caste and religious differences risks further provincialization or even exoticization of their movement. Although I found myself searching for a Muslim-Hindu divide, it is not prominent. Indeed, the only overarching narrative is that of Indian nationalism. By the 1930s, evocations of universal sisterhood gave way to overt rejection of British support. In 1936, for example, members of the All India Women’s Conference dissociated themselves from Margaret Cousins because she was not “racially Indian” (p. 164). In a 1933 article for the *Modern Review*, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur wrote, “We have come to tell you what we want and not hear from a committee or even friendly English women what they want” (p. 227). Thus *Indian Suffragettes* provides a side-door entry into the story of Indian nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

The evolution of suffrage movements in India has been documented elsewhere of course, but few have placed Indian women—in all their complexity—at the center. On the one hand, there are the celebratory biographies, most recently Anita Anand’s *Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary* (2014), which recounts the life and politics of Sophia Duleep Singh, who figures prominently in *Indian Suffragettes* as well. On the other are mega histories of the evolution of democracy like *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise* by Ornit Shani (2018), which focuses on the transition to nation (1947-50), by which time there was no question that “universal” suffrage included women. This is in large part thanks to the decades-long and transnational efforts of Indian suffragettes. These two books have garnered popular as well as scholarly acclaim, suggesting widespread interest in the subject. I hope that *Indian Suffragettes* gains similar recognition.

“And, in the end, it is the flashes of individual stories that really catch the eye,” wrote Martyn Housden in his review of Mukherjee’s first book, *Nationalism, Education and Migrant Identities: The*

England-returned (2010). Praising her ability to interweave the many stories of elite Indian men and women who obtained educations in Britain, his review concluded with the hope that she might “produce at least one or two extended personal studies.”[2] I am tempted to offer up the same conclusion. Indeed, the sheer breadth of actors and issues in *Indian Suffragettes* leaves the reader convinced of the extent of the multiple suffrage movements in which Indians were crucially involved. But each one is necessarily treated in brief because Mukherjee’s aim is to tell the story of a movement with world-historical implications, a movement whose whole was necessarily greater than the sum of its parts.

Notes

[1]. Ijeoma Oluo, “Why I Won’t Write a Review of Suffragette,” *The Stranger*, Nov. 4, 2015, available at <https://www.thestranger.com/film/feature/2015/11/04/23117815/why-our-reviewer-refuses-to-w...>

[2]. Martyn Housden, review of *Nationalism, Education and Migrant Identities: The England-returned* by Sumita Mukherjee, *International History Review* 33, no. 2 (2011): 376-78; 378.

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