



Bhamburkar, T. (2023). Review: Textile Orientalisms: Cashmere and Paisley Shawls in British Literature and Culture. *Fashion Theory*, 27(5), 753-757. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2023.2233813>

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Textile Orientalisms: Cashmere and Paisley Shawls in British Literature and Culture (2023)

by Suchitra Choudhury

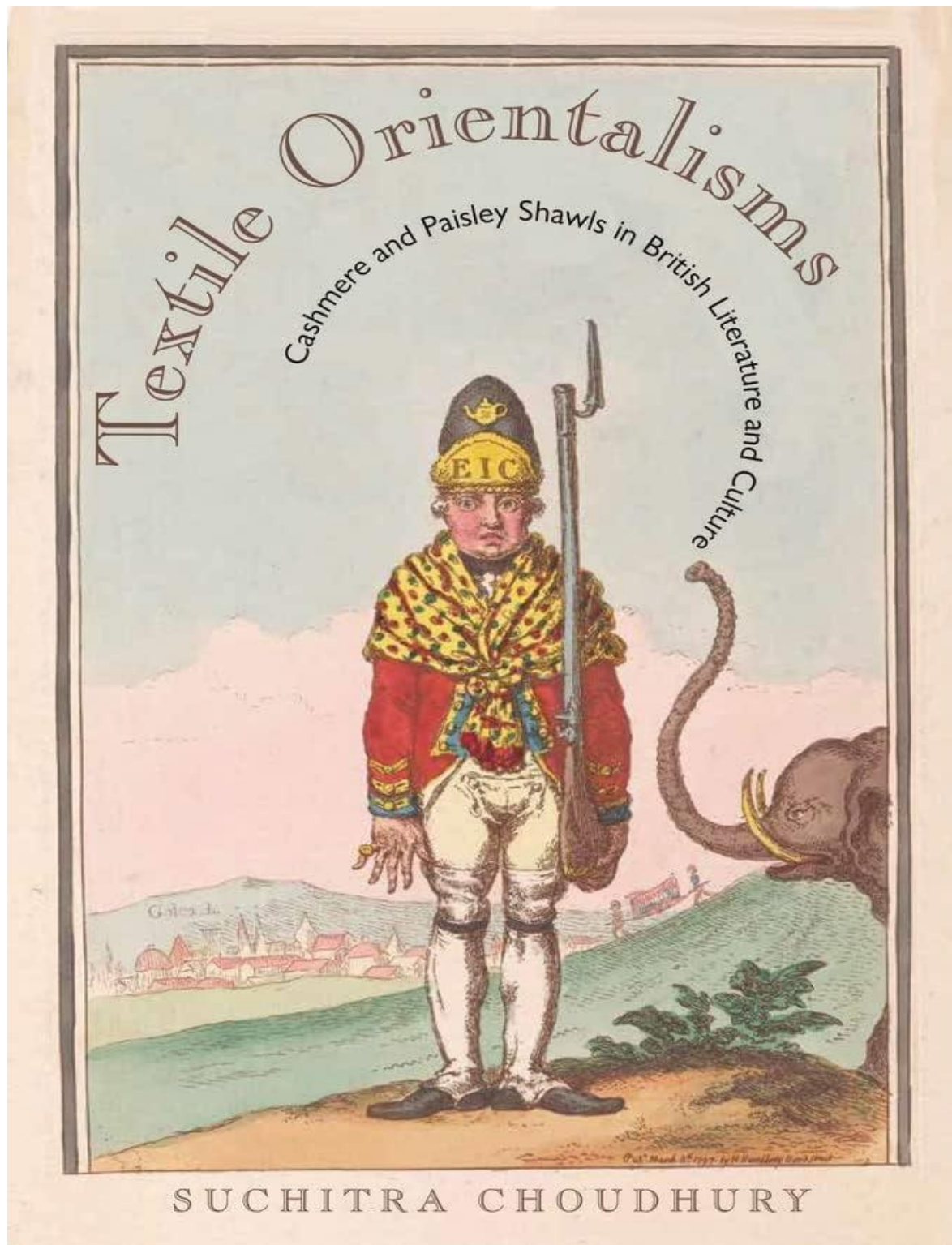


Figure 1: Book Cover

In his seminal work on commodities, Arjun Appadurai determines that objects enjoyed a social and cultural 'life', as they were traded and absorbed from and into varying cultures and

traditions transnationally.¹ In *Textile Orientalisms*, Suchitra Choudhury unravels the multivalent and polymorphic ‘life’ of one such fashionable, imperial object – the Cashmere shawl and its Scottish imitation, the Paisley. Her project comes at a time of heightened interest in imperial material connections and the objects and artefacts that crowded literature and culture – the ‘material turn’ as it has been termed. She unearths the embedded presence of the shawl in British literature to investigate its deeper, metaphorical interpretation in the wider discourses of gender and empire. Unpacking its implications in British literary history, Choudhury highlights the shawl’s infrangible connections to India as she moves chronologically through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the early twentieth, mapping the life of this colonial object through its textual and visual display. In a scrutiny of the changing metonymy of the shawl in British culture, she grounds it in prevalent gender and imperial discourse and aesthetics, which inadvertently shaped and were reciprocally influenced by the shawl’s social and cultural meaning and use value. The metaphorical significance of the shawls in Britain shifted with the shifting histories and discourses of empire in light of debates about authenticity after the rise in production of imitations in Paisley and Norwich. Foregrounding the altering nature of its use and symbolism, Choudhury takes the shawl beyond its recesses as a fashionable object to evaluate its socio-cultural purport through an analysis of its literary manifestations.

As she sets up the focal argument in her introduction about ‘shawls as literary topics’, she locates her research amid previous scholarship on fashion and dress history and material studies (11). This proves useful to puzzle out the location of her own theoretical framework in the rich and varied body of critical writing on Victorian materialisms, thing theory, and colonial objects by scholars such as Asa Briggs, Andrew Miller, Bill Brown, Suzanne Daly, and Elaine Freedgood. She draws together the interrelated aspects of gender and colonialism, studying the fashionable object’s influence on feminine culture; with this, she also reinvents the reading of the cashmere shawl in literature as a medium for recognising domestic and imperial anxieties as expressed through the shawl’s inscription in works of art and literature.

The book is divided into six chapters. Choudhury brings to the fore different genres of literature after setting up a crucial historical context in chapter I to elucidate the shawl’s role and social connotations during the rule of the East India Company. Tracing the shawl’s history from the Mughal period and the etymology of the word itself, Choudhury trails the artefact to its recognition as a ‘khilat’ or a revered gift during the East India Company’s reign in the eighteenth century. Surveying its role in the social and administrative relations in eighteenth

century India and its status as 'khilat' also reveals its entrenched presence in the corruption and bribery of the East India Company. The shawl also grew in popularity as a fashionable object in feminine fashion during their reign.

A critique of women's fashionable consumption of it as well as of its role in colonial bribery forms the argument in the second chapter. In reading Elizabeth Inchbald's farce *Appearance is Against Them* (1785), Choudhury punctuates the play's critical undertones, connecting the shawl's incidence to both women's material consumption and men's colonial corruption. The shawl becomes a medium for conveying anxieties about women's consumption, commodity culture, and a criticism of men's greed and misconduct in the colony. She declares the cashmere as 'the Romantic period metonym for Company misrule' (78).

The Cashmere's homegrown imitation Paisley shawl which sparked great debate about authenticity, class, and taste is the focus of the next chapter, as Choudhury looks at Walter Scott's *St Ronan's Well* (1823) and *The Surgeon's Daughter* (1827). Puzzling out the contradictory motives of Scott's 'alternate disparagement and praise of the Paisley' across the two texts, she also argues for Scott's political consciousness of the empire in India as read in his depictions of the shawl (83). The chapter creates a sturdy argument for Scott's oscillating attitudes – from an initial preference for organic entities and the original Cashmere to his subsequent advocacy for the Paisley and through it for mass manufacture and industrial modernity.

The fourth chapter, with Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* at its epicentre, locates the Indian shawl within a contemporaneous narrative of love and romance. Choudhury analyses it as a symbol of seduction and romance – as the exotic Eastern object that hides secrets within its luxurious folds, adding an emotional context to human relationships. Whilst serving this affective purpose, the shawl also becomes a disruptor in disclosing the discrepancy between the people's economic and romantic value of it – disrupting romance to divulge reality just as it demarcates domestic ideology from imperial conflict.

The theme of imperial conflict, intertwined with discourse on class in mid Victorian Britain, is extended into discussions on the shawl's perception in Britain in relation to the Indian 'Mutiny' of 1857 in the next chapter. It looks at Wilkie Collins' sensation novel *Armadale* with respect to the character of Lydia Gwilt, a working-class woman who owns a red paisley shawl. As themes of mutinying oriental sepoys emerge from representations of the colonial conflict zone, they coincide and echo with the similar 'othering' of the socially poor and marginalised Lydia

Gwilt in the metropole – an interconnection established through Lydia’s ownership of a symbolically significant red Paisley shawl.

Choudhury then brings her argument into the early twentieth century, analysing the portrayal and metonymy of the shawl in Frederick Niven’s 1931 novel *The Paisley Shawl*. As themes of nostalgia and Scottish migration abound, political debates about Scottish home rule and Scotland’s role in the British empire are evoked through the protagonist’s symbolic paisley shawl. The Paisley shawl in the protagonist’s home now decorating his drawing room becomes a powerful symbol for home and homecoming for the diasporic man.

Suchitra Choudhury’s monograph is an impressive and extensive study on the cashmere shawl in British literature, anatomising it as both a valuable commodity and a rich metaphor in literature. Her work is unique in denoting the shawl’s significance in both feminine and masculine experiences, and the manifold interpretations it engendered, creating ‘a “grammar” of consumption’ across gender and imperial discourses (18). Though marred occasionally by some fine printing errors, the book, overall, reads quite lucidly. It would be very useful for students of fashion, Victorian, and material culture studies, as well as suitable for the general reading public.

¹ Appadurai, A. 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.