

Kamblé, Jayashree. *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023. Pp 222. UK £57.38, US \$85.00 (hardcover). ISBN 9780253065704 (paperback).

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Published online: July 2025

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

<https://doi.org/10.70138/TXEZ1524>

Jayashree Kamblé's monograph not only adds significant dimensions to the intersecting fields of popular romance studies, gender studies, and cultural studies by exploring the question of a heroine's identity in genre fiction, but it does so with such scholarly finesse that one is tempted to read the book again and to liberally incorporate its insights into one's own academic discourse. Kamblé begins her book by proposing strongly that "a romance heroine is one who seeks the truth of her own unknown, suppressed, fragmented, or embattled self within a universe that privileges pair bonding and other configurations involving intimacy" (2). The ways in which the characters of heroines in romance genre novels are written have evolved over the years and this evolution can be seen through the ways in which their complex identities are presented in contemporary situations. The narrative lives of the romance heroines have become more flexible and now there is more space to showcase their "self-actualization" (8). The bulk of most cited pieces of popular romance studies usually takes up a defensive position against the genre stigmatization and/or rely upon reader-response approaches and feminist analyses. Against this scholarly backdrop, *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation* comes along as a much-needed intervention. By examining the evolution of the romance heroine's characterization and the increasingly complex identities presented in contemporary romantic narratives, Kamblé goes beyond the predominantly reactive tendencies within the discipline of popular romance studies to offer a neat framework that beautifully shows how romance fiction reflects and shapes cultural attitudes.

The book consists of five meticulously crafted chapters, each bearing the powerful one-word titles of Sexuality, Gender, Work, Citizenship, and Intersections. Kamblé makes a compelling case for how romance heroines serve as embodiments of the romance genre's

inherently self-determinist nature. The first chapter, “Sexuality,” provides a thorough narrative analysis of the ways in which romance heroines’ bodies become transformative spaces that challenge and reimagine conventional narratives of heterosexual desire. This exploration unfolds through a very interesting analysis of two novels: Susan Napier’s evocative *Love in the Valley* and Kresley Cole’s *Dark Desires After Dusk*. Utilizing these two novels, Kamblé demonstrates the romance writers’ purposeful modifications in the levels of explicitness in descriptions of scenes of sexual intimacy, thus challenging earlier critics who tend to dismiss the genre as purely sensational amusement. I find her analysis particularly significant as it provides scholars with fresh and unconventional feminist underpinnings of romance fiction by revealing the genre’s radical potential for reimagining female agency.

The “Gender” chapter examines the idea of gender performance and its complex role in either reinforcing or disrupting normative gender hierarchies. Here, Kamblé analyzes Karen Marie Moning’s urban fantasy *Fever* series and Linda Howard’s contemporary romance *To Die For*. What emerges is a revealing pattern across both narratives—the heroines face antagonists who problematically conflate their bodies, appearances, and actions, using these as justification for punishment or control. Kamblé maintains that both heroines resist external criticism, maintaining their autonomy despite intense social pressure. In their narrative journeys, both heroines “fuse seemingly opposing elements of their bodily presentation and personality in defiance of gender stereotypes about women and engage in physical battles that end with their victories, making room for romantic HEAs” (83).

The chapter titled “Work” demonstrates Kamblé’s ability to analyze how romance heroines’ professional lives, paid and unpaid, reflect the romance authors’ nuanced understanding of labor demands in contemporary society. Through J.D. Robb’s expansive *In Death* series, she unpacks complex issues of class identity, sex typing, and prescribed gender roles in professional settings, alongside the often-invisible burden of emotional labor. Equally interesting is her examination of Lisa Kleypas’s *Dreaming of You*, which challenges traditional work/home divisions and societal judgments about appropriate female occupations. Kamblé’s analysis here, and throughout the book, provides an essential connection between close textual readings and broader contexts, within romance genre scholarship and real-world implications. The central argument of the “Work” chapter is a useful example of the overall approach of the book: “Whether in novels that show women trying to earn a living in a hostile society that wants to bar them from the labor market, or novels that show them in a male-dominated field, or novels that elevate the worth of the activities, jobs, and industries associated with women (arts, education, human services, food, fashion, etc.), the genre normalizes the idea that only a woman has the right to determine how and when she does physical, mental, and creative work. Just as crucially, it models how the heroine can choose to do or decline emotional labor” (116). So, that’s how Kamblé reveals how romance fiction serves as a powerful tool/lens for feminist labor theory and challenges the readers to reconsider the genre’s social significance.

In “Citizenship,” the analysis focuses on historical romance heroines who reject the false dilemma between love and loyalty to their homeland, even though such defiance carries severe consequences. Kamblé explains how the heroines in *Spymaster’s Lady* and *My Beautiful Enemy* challenge imposed political identities, reconsider their national allegiances, and construct new self-definitions that resist reductive patriotic narratives. The concluding chapter, “Intersections,” synthesizes earlier discussions on sexuality, gender, work, and

citizenship through the lens of race and ethnicity, focusing on Black protagonists and characters of African descent. By analyzing Beverly Jenkins's heroine in *Indigo* and Alyssa Cole's heroine in *A Princess in Theory*, Kamblé presents a model of the revolutionary heroine—one who defies expectations across class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and racial identity. These heroines navigate complex challenges, resisting the constraints of anti-Black racism, sexism, anti-science ideology, and class divisions. She emphasizes how these narratives affirm Black women's power and intrinsic value while confronting intersecting systems of oppression.

Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation's most important contribution to extant scholarship on popular romance is its advocacy of dialectical progression as romance genre fiction's natural narrative framework, showing how the genre consistently defies simplistic categorization. This work presents the continual evolution of the romance genre and its ability to shed outdated courtship conventions while embracing contemporary relationship dynamics. Through a core argument that is uniquely feminist in nature—about heroines who assert autonomous identities within societies that force women to choose between artificially limited options across all life domains—Kamblé persuasively reframes romance fiction as a vibrant, evolving space where love stories transcend simple entertainment to become powerful acts of self-determination and cultural resistance.