

**Farooqui, Javaria. *Romance Fandom in 21st-Century Pakistan: Reading the Regency*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. Pp.144. US \$17.95 (paperback). ISBN 9798765110393.**

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Javaria Farooqui's *Romance Fandom in 21st-Century Pakistan* is the first drop of rain in the generally dry and arid research-scapes of Popular Romance Studies in Pakistan. When I came across this book, I was pleasantly surprised to see formal scholarly debate on a genre which is usually looked down upon in Pakistan's high brow culture and considered to be an immature reality-escape plan for female teenagers which has got nothing to do with intellectual probe.

Drawing on fieldwork, focus group discussions, and digital ethnography, it foregrounds how Regency romance is consumed, distributed, and reconfigured by Pakistani women (chiefly elite and educated women, who locate their fandom within intricate intersections of class, gender, religion, and postcolonial modernity). Despite the fact that most of the research on romance readers is deeply situated in the Anglosphere, Farooqui highlights that romance readership in Pakistan is not an imitation of the West but is a unique tradition deeply rooted in active, creative process of local appropriation and cultural negotiation.

Farooqui indicates that the main motivation behind this research was to find out the answers to why Pakistani reader-fans are enamoured by the depiction of 'Englishness' in Regency historical popular romance novels which posits reading of this specific genre in the praxis of postcolonial context. However, what I love the most about this book is that it goes beyond this clichéd and sometimes overused lens and postulates that elemental, social, and architectural elements play a significant role in determining Pakistani readers' attraction to this genre. Another major contribution of the book is its focus on specifically Pakistani readers' fandom and how it is different from Euro-American and Indian contexts.

It is definitely a groundbreaking addition to the discussion on Reading Cultures and cultures of reading and establishes a niche for female Regency romance fandom Pakistani reading culture. Another valuable aspect of this book is its genre related approach which foregrounds a much neglected field and its specific focus and relevance to female spaces.

Farooqui has been very thoughtful and I appreciate her addition of the retail landscape which usually remains unexplored in scholarly debates related to this genre. In addition to introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into three main sections and discusses works of Jane Austen, Judith McNaught, Julia Quinn, Georgette Heyer, Barbara Cartland, Gaelen Foley, and E.L. James.

The introductory chapter highlights Pakistan's unique romance genre reading landscape and reveals that the fans in Pakistan, consciously or unconsciously, capitalise on the cultural appropriation of the Regency romance fiction. One of the most significant findings of this book is that 'reader-fans' "claim that representations of Regency England mirror their contemporary social realities and are inextricably linked with their socio-economic class and culture" (2). The fictional setting of this subgenre corresponds with the matchmaking processes that the upper- and middle-class reader fans are familiar with, the courtship rituals they must go through, and their mandatory participation in events of lavish displays of wealth, such as extravagant tea parties and grand wedding functions. The second part of the introduction elaborates upon the relationship of book reading with 'Englishness' and old book shops. Over the course of the book Farooqui builds the central argument that "popular romance reading in Pakistan is best understood as a middlebrow practice" and that "in this middlebrow culture of reading Anglophone romance novels the highbrow evokes a national colonial past" (38, 32). Furthermore, Farooqui argues, "the romance-habitus of the reader-fans is rooted in the schism created by the socio-cultural, and linguistic stratification in Pakistani vis-à-vis the different structures of Urdu and English mediums of schooling" (112).

Farooqui has smartly titled the main chapters of her monograph which intrigue readers' curiosity as well as present the main contention of each section. Chapter one of the book is titled "And if I am escaping, it should better be a higher form of romance': Middlebrow reading in Pakistan". It has two further subsections; one of them elaborates upon the local appropriation of the Regency in Pakistan and how it is an escape route for the readers (41), while the other subsection discusses E. L. James' *The Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy as the "cipher of excess" (51).

The title of the second chapter of the book is "'... the scarf on the table' and the 'dimly lit' stove: Developing a close reading model for setting". This section of the book mainly develops the close reading model for Pakistani readers. I loved the use of tables throughout the book and I just can't help sharing one below (given on p. 68 of the book) which is the most significant and valuable for comprehending the key characteristics of the innovative close reading model developed by Farooqui.

**TABLE 4** Close reading model for literary analysis

Category of Interest	Components
Social	Mannerism (etiquette of the ton), arranged marriages, food, dresses, carriages, horses, servants (butlers), letters, invitation cards.
Elemental	Moonlight, sunshine, darkness, fog, haze, mist, winds, breeze, seasonal changes, sea, sky, caves.
Architectural	Mansions, castles, brothels, tea-rooms, parlours, ball rooms, bed chambers.

Table from page 68 of *Romance Fandom in 21st-Century Pakistan*.

One section of the chapter claims that Pakistani society “relates more to Regency” because of its homogeneity with the social category of interest (69) and the other identifies the recurrent references to ‘Nature’ as an “elemental category of interest” (80), and “Brothels, parlours, and mansions” as “architectural category of interest” (83). This chapter effectively establishes and applies the close reading model on the selected texts.

The last chapter of the book continues discussion on the social, elemental and architectural points of readers’ interest in Regency fiction and is labeled as “‘How desi, how very Regency’: Applying the model to the Regency setting”. It is further divided into four subsections. The first part of this chapter discusses the ‘Intricate folds’ of silk and ‘tepid tea’: Representational spaces in *Until You* (92). The setting of McNaught’s *Until You* mostly falls in the social category of interest with its detailed descriptions of dresses, carriages, horses, social manners, and carefully drawn portraits of butlers. The second subsection analyses the fringes of ballrooms and social spaces in *The Duke and I* (96). The third subsection explores architectural spaces in *Impetuous Innocent* (102) and the fourth subdivision of the third chapter identifies metaphorical spaces in *The Pirate Prince* (106). The last chapter is very rich and diverse in its selection of texts and the variety of elements which it discusses.

This monograph identifies and explores the factors that attract Pakistani reader-fans to Popular Romance. Its approach to process “the readerly interest to develop a literary approach” (114) is innovative and unique. The book raises pertinent questions and unravels thought-provoking discoveries about the middle-brow reading culture. Farooqui’s main inquiry was based around this one very powerful question: why are English medium educated readers interested in regency romances? Her findings unravel and list the diverse answers ranging from colonial “nostalgia” (25), “it’s a ‘postcolonial thing,’ ‘colonial hangover,’ or ‘Stockholm syndrome’” (46) to fashion, escapism and romance itself. Her development of a close reading model which focuses on spatial, elemental, and architectural components is really useful to systematically study the primary aspects of regency romance which charm Pakistani readers. So she paints on a broad canvass to draw trajectories of middle-brow, low-brow, and high brow to establish that the “Pakistani romance fandom is constituted by women who learn to read the Regency romance novels in a way that empowers them to critique the customs and traditions in their contemporary, patriarchal society and establishes the superiority of their taste” (4) and the “readers were keen to dismiss the ideas of love expressed in their national language” (14). Farooqui reports one participant who recalls, “I always imagine the British accent when I’m reading” (20), while another contrasts the genre with local fiction: “Otherwise, it’s the same story of every Shabana and Farzana here” (15). Such comments underscore how Englishness and class aspiration shape readerly taste.

Farooqui’s book successfully expands the geographical and cultural field of existing romance scholarship. It demonstrates how non-Western readers appropriate and reframe Regency romance according to their local cultures and history, and that alone marks a crucial intervention in the field. According to me, the second major achievement of her book is its methodological breadth and its innovation. Farooqui combines ethnography, focus groups, and reader-centered textual analysis, and her approach captures the unique locally lived practices of fandom while situating them in global circuits of their dissemination and consumption. Farooqui’s study advances the internationalization of the field by providing rare empirical data and a fresh theoretical lens. It demonstrates the genre’s transnational

adaptability—its ability to resonate with readers far beyond the Anglosphere. This insight underscores the book's significance for scholars of romance, postcolonial literature, and global fandoms alike. While its focus on elite, urban, English-educated female readership leaves the rich rural and vernacular contexts unexplored and its lack of deep engagement with Urdu or indigenous romance traditions (which could offer a more fertile comparative framework) may appear to be its limitations, these omissions reveal scope rather than oversight, and they point to directions for future research.

*Romance Fandom in 21st-Century Pakistan* is both empirically rich and theoretically provocative. By foregrounding Pakistani women's voices, it calls forth the scholarly field of Popular Romance Studies to rethink the global dynamics of genre, taste, and fandom. For scholars of romance, it is indispensable reading—an invitation to see how Regency England is re-imagined and re-appropriated in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, and to acknowledge that the future of Popular Romance Studies lies in such cross-cultural, transnational encounters.