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### **fashioning diaspora: beauty, femininity, and South Asian American culture**

Vanita Reddy, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2016, 280pp., ISBN: 978-1-4399-1154-9, \$84.50 (Hbk)/ ISBN: 978-1-4399-1155-6, \$32.95 (Pbk)

Vanita Reddy assembles and analyses a multi-format archive in *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*. Employing examples from South Asian, especially Indian, and South Asian diasporic literary texts, movies and live performances, Reddy provides insights on how beauty and fashion make space for new racialised subject formations, feminist and queer femininities in particular. Resonating with queer South Asian diaspora studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath's work, these racialised subject formations are embodied subjectivities that create diasporic non-hegemonic sensibilities, desires, pleasures and affects. Reddy deploys beauty and fashion as analytics, showing how discourses of beauty and its meanings operate as technologies of governance and animate and perform social relations. The author deploys affect as a tool to speak about epistemologies of beauty and what they do rather than referring us to what beauty is— aesthetic or sexual capital, commodities, style, aesthetic judgment or pleasure, etc.—as is often the case in sociological studies of beauty. And what beauty does, as affect, as discourse and as epistemology, Reddy argues, is to recall material histories and ontologies of migration.

Reddy explains that both beauty and fashion often seem to be ideal technologies of the neo-liberal market, where individualism, self-care and fitness, and consumer citizenship reign. However, one of her major moves in *Fashioning Diaspora* is to reveal the power of the beauty and fashion economies, that is, economies naturalised as feminine and too often rendered apolitical or, at best, in her words, 'juxtapolitical'. Beauty and fashion, although marked as frivolous by normative, hegemonic discourses, in fact have strong and enduring consequences. In Chapter 1, for example, Reddy uses the novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee as a case study to show how beauty functions as an assemblage, 'an aggregation marked by the radical difference, and even seeming incommensurability, of its components' (p. 19). Beauty in this case is seen as both a promise and a limit for the protagonist, who aims at self-fashioning a notion of belonging in the diaspora as an undocumented immigrant in the United States; beauty serves as an agent and tool for recognition and inclusion in a manner that state-sanctioned citizenry does not grant undocumented people. Jasmine's interactions with the underground Indian hair market in New York provide the novel's reader a glimpse into a global market of Indian female beauty. It becomes clear that in order for beauty to operate effectively, that is, in order for it to be legible and eligible for trade, it has to remain plain, as unmarked as possible, far from the fetish that commonly accompanies feminine, racialised beauty. If the processes of racialisation, gender exploitation, labour and migration become transparent for consumers, then beauty ceases to be profitable, and the immigrant's access to belonging in the diaspora likewise evanesces. Similarly,

the protagonist's Indianness and brown skin in the United States function as signifiers of *lack* of beauty. It is this 'ugliness' or plainness that nonetheless may give her access to citizenry. In this way, according to Reddy, beauty becomes the instrument of territorialisation and deterritorialisation that diasporic subject formations necessitate to exist in the movement within, from and to 'their' nation.

Chapter 2 of *Fashioning Diaspora* continues the book's ode (as a recuperative text) to femininity by questioning dichotomous divides between cosmopolitanism and provincialism—as understood with regard to transnational mobility—and, by extension, between the public and the private. Perceptions of 'authentic' femininity and 'authentic' nationality are troubled in Reddy's engagement with Jhumpa Lahiri's feminist fiction writing, where beauty is commonly the attribute of non-Indian and non-female bodies. These prosthetic femininities (p. 72), as she calls them, referencing Lauren Berlant (2008), challenge the hegemonic mass-mediated notions of Indian beauty that circulate within transnational market economies. Incidentally, the author highlights, similar discourses have placed Lahiri in the spotlight as an author in the first place. In this way, Reddy nuances both the content of the short stories with which she engages, and the professional success and politics of the writer.

In the later chapters of her book, Reddy tackles other embodiments of beauty beyond the bodies and demeanors of characters, by examining the materiality and commodification of the bindi and the sari. Following the author's address on their fashionability and orientalist appropriations, the reader can trail the trope of 'authenticity' and its political deployments. In Chapter 4, for example, the reader learns that in South Asia the use of the bindi, whether made of powder or felt, usually signals the marital status of mostly Hindu women; however, it has been appropriated in the West in events such as Coachella and worn by artists like Selena Gomez in her music videos and performances. The artists whom Reddy showcases, Prema Murthy, Swati Khurana and Shailja Patel, fight against these appropriations, enacting an awareness that the political problematic of the commodification of the bindi and the sari includes these products being better received on non-South Asian, white bodies than on racialised ones.

Finally, *Fashioning Diaspora's* reflections on the sari illustrate alternate modes of being. Reddy analyses *Migritude*, a live performance wherein queer poet and performance artist Shailja Patel asks the audience to bear witness to the affective costs we pay for the aesthetic pleasure of the sari, as it hangs from female bodies or from walls as Indo-chic décor. Patel uses the sari to invoke and represent histories of state violence. The artist thus deploys beauty to complicate identity-based politics such that attachments across difference become possible (i.e. between South Asian and black African populations). Following Stuart Hall (1996 [1980]), Reddy narrates diaspora as a practice: diaspora is not a collection of individuals in a fixed or reified abroad, away from an also naturalised home nation, but a process where meanings are fabricated and connections and collaborations emerge (p. 13). Through the audience's participation in the performance, and through the deployment of the sari as a *relational* object of beauty—different drappings of the sari call attention to alternate femininities, especially those varying by class (labour) or sexuality—new forms of non-heteronormative sociality, intimacies and belonging become possible.

I look forward to further investigations on the intersections of masculinity and beauty in a future project or as a response from other scholars. Likewise, incorporation of discourses of monstrosity, disability and humanity more broadly could add to Reddy's discussions of plainness and ugliness in their framing of

beauty and fashion. Nevertheless, *Fashioning Diaspora* is already a wonderful contribution to the scholarship within transnational feminisms. Most importantly, beauty's operations across borders—as a practice rather than an object or property—become an instrument to interrogate globalism, empire and the nation-state, as well as the gendered, racialised and sexualised processes these entail. Placing scholars like Gayatri Gopinath, Jasbir Puar, Lauren Berlant and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu in conversation with one another, Reddy's book intervenes in the fields of diaspora and postcolonial studies, critical fashion studies, South Asian and Asian American studies, gender studies (through queer of colour critique), and cultural studies.

## references

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