

# Book Review: Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity and South Asian American Culture by Vanita Reddy

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2017-3-24

*In Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity and South Asian American Culture*, Vanita Reddy examines how beauty is a mobilising and socialising force implicated in the shaping of South Asian American identities, focusing on a range of cultural and literary texts drawn from the 1990s to the present. In showing beauty to be an active force in constructions of the social, this is a nuanced and timely analysis of the experiences of South Asian American women that bridges the gaps between fashion, racialisation, aesthetics and politics, finds Rajat Singh.

*Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity and South Asian American Culture*. Vanita Reddy. Temple University Press. 2016.

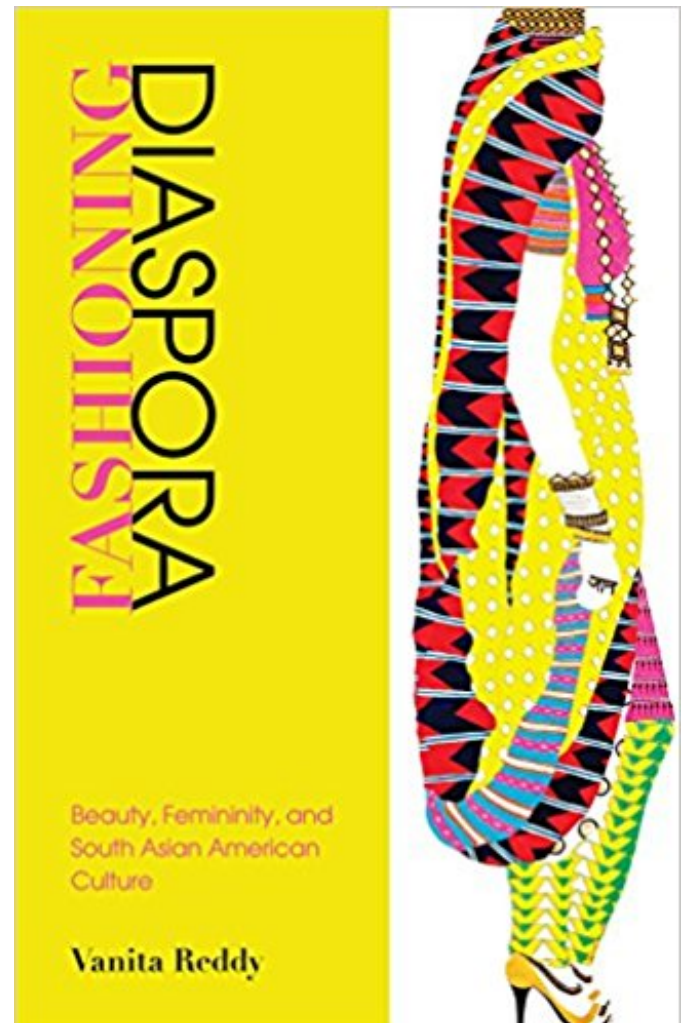
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How, in 2014, did Nina Davuluri become the first Indian American to win the title of Miss America? Is it fair to claim that the award-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri's cosmopolitan beauty has constructed her into a public figure? And in what key ways is Swati Khurana and Prema Murthy's visual art, *Bindigirl* and *Dothead*, imbued with parodying and subversive energy?

Beauty brings us pleasure when we look at it, or even consider it deeply. But it is an inherently slippery thing to apprehend. It blinds us, making it hard to escape its allure. Or it is ephemeral or seemingly frivolous. And if it does not seduce us, it eludes and disappoints, over and over, because it is unattainable. Beauty has its own logic. And our efforts to find language to capture it are an endlessly hopeless endeavour.

Making beauty the object of examination, then, seems like a fraught task. But Vanita Reddy, through a remarkable sleight of hand, shifts our optics away from looking at beauty directly. Instead of asking what beauty *is*, her new book, *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity and South Asian American Culture*, asks what beauty *does*. The strength of her approach removes beauty from the abstract realm, instead positioning it as an agent, activator and animator of the social.

Reddy pulls from an archive of cultural and aesthetic references in order to demonstrate specifically how beauty is a mobilising and socialising force for South Asian American women. But rather than rehashing familiar conversations about unachievable standards of beauty within racialised and non-white contexts, Reddy intervenes by asking how beauty enacts a whole social realm. This is a world filled with models, designers, garments,



cosmetics and magazines. Beauty is not just an intangible concept, but rather a material force that gathers together and organises all these human and non-human actors. Crucially, the picture that emerges is an understanding of how affects collect and coalesce, and according to what scale, duration and size. Beauty does things in the world. Beauty as a constellation, or what the theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might refer to as an 'assemblage', animates a whole field of relationships, experiences and emotions among South Asian American women.



**Image Credit: Miss America 2014, Nina Davuluri, stands for photo in front of the USO sign. Photo: Nate Pesce (Fort George G. Meade Public Affairs Office CC BY 2.0)**

Reddy makes it clear that she isn't focused on ethnographic modes of analysis, but instead chooses to draw from cultural and literary texts including fiction, art and performance to depict how beauty travels, and what it does, across transnational shores. Through these media, Reddy shows how Indian ideals and standards, as they arrive in the US, function as tools for South Asian women to realise, negotiate, resist or adapt their cultural identities and senses of belonging. In racialised spaces like the US, beauty becomes the motivating force or the lens through which we can understand how women negotiate their claims as Indians, females or members of other communities. Citizenship within these domains, along with the question of how to belong within new spaces, is key for Reddy's analysis. The real and fictional women she examines experience a global flow of beauty and therefore perform their subjectivity as women on mobile, shifting terrains. Beauty—as a thing that is everywhere and nowhere—either enables or constrains certain realisations of diasporic femininity, according to varying degrees of success or duress.

Owing to her training in English and critical feminist theory, Reddy's analysis of how beauty activates the social is at its most nuanced and pointed when she is tracking the transformations of actual and literary young women's diasporic experiences. Reddy attends carefully to processes of self-fashioning through real figures—like Shailja Patel, who debuted *Migritude* as a performance about her own diasporic identity, told through a suitcase of saris—and fictional characters, like Indie Konkippuddi, the protagonist of Kavita Daswani's chick lit novel *Indie Girl*. She is particularly attuned to the complicated ways in which beauty is also deeply imbricated with notions of cultural capital—it enables some of us to move through the world but closes doors for others. It is also tied to conditions of labour—struggling at a fashion magazine is distinct from being displaced from India to work on a colonial plantation in Kenya. And beauty is also inextricable from notions of value and exchange—intergenerational transmission of knowledge and the sari *trousseau* bear notable differences from the violent transactions between families at the time of a bride's marriage.

One of the crucial ways that an assemblage like this is held together is through a strong relationship between matter and feeling. Everyday objects like saris, bindis and cosmetics—not to mention humans or even stories—are all tools toward achieving, as well as subverting, beauty. But these materialities come up against various affects like longing, rage, pride and happiness. The distribution of these states of feeling is sedimented within material artifacts, namely the body, and scattered across the physical flesh and bones of the South Asian diaspora. Feelings endure at a material level because they're concentrated and embodied within us. This is precisely why beauty cannot be said to be fleeting or inconsequential.

Reddy's scholarly, timely and attentive analysis of how beauty shapes the experiences of South Asian Americans is a necessary text for bridging the gaps between embodied practices and cultural signifiers, between fashion and race and between aesthetics and politics.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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