

Book review: Lipi Begum, Rohit K. Dasgupta, Reina Lewis (eds): Styling South Asian Youth Cultures - Fashion, Media and Society

Chatterjee, Deepsikha

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Chatterjee, D. (2022). Book review: Lipi Begum, Rohit K. Dasgupta, Reina Lewis (eds): Styling South Asian Youth Cultures - Fashion, Media and Society. [Review of the book *Styling South Asian Youth Cultures: Fashion, Media and Society*, ed. by L. Begum, R. K. Dasgupta, & R. Lewis]. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 53(1), 143-145. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2022.1.19007>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Book Reviews

LIPI BEGUM / ROHIT K. DASGUPTA / REINA LEWIS (EDS), *Styling South Asian Youth Cultures. Fashion, Media and Society*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. 248 pages, £29.99. ISBN 978-1-3501-5407-0 (pb)

This book is a much-needed addition to the shelves of anyone interested in South Asia, fashion and/or youth culture. A methodology that builds from ethnology and focuses on South Asia, rather than simply on India, is a welcome change, given how easily the smaller countries and cultures on the margins are excluded from such discussion. The editors, Lipi Begum, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Reina Lewis, all build on their robust background on dress scholarship in this volume. Part of the *Dress Cultures* series edited by Reina Lewis, the book brings essential contributions from various parts of South Asia and includes cosmopolitan cities, queer culture and “less well-documented” parts of eastern and southern India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, Sri Lanka and even the diaspora in the West (p. 2). Several high-profile contributors, such as Arti Sandhu, Teresa Kuldova and Reina Lewis, render this volume instantly noteworthy.

Although the volume covers the countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, the editors acknowledge that they were unable to include content from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Maldives (p. 25). Yet what they do include is such an important addition to the conversation on fashion and youth culture that this gap is not an issue, and only builds anticipation for the future. A discussion on Bhutan, for example, and a focus on “intra-South Asian transmissions” brings readers to a better understanding of “local, national, international and transnational convergences” (p. 2), since, as the editors suggest, South Asia stands as at the unique intersection of traditionalism and neoliberalism. The editors have worked hard to weed out a homogenising lens on the study of South Asia. By anchoring the investigation on important South Asia-centric theoreticians such as Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Gopinath, they lay a strong critical and historical foundation for the region and its culture.

Arti Sandhu opens the book with the important question of street style and how it is different in the South Asian context, centring the discussion on comfort, convenience and consumption within personal expression. By highlighting the work of street style photographers, designers and brands, Sandhu illustrates how all are vying for cultural space in India’s fashionscapes. As she points out, the orientalisising gaze here is notable.

Discussing queer styling, Sunil Gupta and Charan Singh, as well as Lipi Begum, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kautav Bakshi, offer important perspectives on visibility, invisibility and subversion in popular culture and film. The interview format

adopted by Lipi Begum and Rohit K. Dasgupta in asking questions of Raisa Kabir on the topic of South Asian LGBTQ youth in Britain and sharing knowledge through a primary evidence process is a welcome change. The discussion essay between Sunil Gupta and Charan Singh employs the same technique. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kaustav Bakshi's observation of Bengali film director Rituparno Ghosh and Ghosh's use of queer self-styling in film and media is a valuable addition.

Zooming in on the fashion fantasies of young women in Chennai, Sneha Krishnan shows us an insider view of the negotiations that young, college-going middle class women go through in domestic spaces to find visibility and perform style within fashionable spaces such as malls and public thoroughfares. In the process of roaming about the city, they do style and define style. Krishnan brings in the very important question of class in this, by contrasting the viewpoints of upper middle class students and lower middle class students.

Teresa Kuldova investigates the nexus between nationalism and commercialism. Reminiscent of Kuldova's prior scholarship on luxury Indian fashion, the author explores the work of designer Nitin Bal Chauhan's brand *Bhootsavaar*. Chauhan's designs operate within an ecosystem of Indian designers who display nostalgia for a glorious past. Simultaneously the designs cater to young consumer citizens, known as "zippies". Sandya Hewamanne reflects on trouser-wearing in Sri Lanka. This chapter invokes a view of the Global South and its class distinctions against the backdrop of Free Trade Zone garment manufacturing and the experiences of its working class female employees. The documentary style of ethnographic writing adds to primary evidence-based epistemology.

Another analysis, by Paul Strickland, is of Bhutanese youth fashion, filling a much-needed gap in the South Asian dialogue. Strickland paints a view of the complex fashion sensibility from which the youth have to choose. Their clothes straddle an Asian and Western aesthetic centring on a government-imposed look of national dress. Issues of royal culture, power, nationalism and allegiance to Buddhism all shape clothes, how they are worn, and how they are understood. Sarah Shepherd-Manandhar enhances the volume with an exploration of clothes among couples who are arranged into marriage in urban Nepal. By challenging preconceived notions, Shepherd-Manandhar shows how the appropriate garments help women aim towards "desired futures through arranged marriages" (p. 166). With the right set of clothes, marriage-aged Nepali women are able to navigate their future lives and build agency. There remains a hierarchy in clothes, with party saris – the most modest and most expensive – at the top, followed by cheaper T-shirts and jeans, and finally the practical and inexpensive *kurta surewal* (tunic and loose pants), which also reinforces "modesty" or *ijat*. Interestingly, Priya Swamy renders a counterpoint by including young Hindustani diasporic women in Amsterdam. In the Dutch context, the term Hindustani refers to erstwhile Indian-heritage migrants in

Suriname. Swamy highlights how young women, heavily influenced by images in media, create a Hindu identity for themselves through dress.

As noted in the introduction, the study of the consumption and styling habits of South Asian youth – who are presently a significant portion of the world’s 26 per cent youth – not only has ramifications for the global fashion industry but for many other industries as well. A slight dissatisfaction with this otherwise excellent book was the collaged cover image. This is a lost opportunity in design, as the cover was not as evocative as the topic merited. As a researcher and designer, I felt this space was underutilised. We know strong cover images can lead to greater engagement with the content, as is demonstrated within the volume by the evocative figures and plates in the individual chapters. The writing in the book is as strong as the internal imagery, and I have already assigned the introduction as a reading for my students of Costume, Fashion and Cultural Studies at City University of New York. As fashion and culture scholars, we hope for more books built on such decolonial fashion studies methodologies.

Deepsikha Chatterjee

STEPHANIE COO, *Clothing the Colony: Nineteenth-Century Philippine Sartorial Culture, 1820–1896*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019. 550 pages, ₱1,500.00. ISBN 978-971-550-891-9

Dress is perhaps the most fundamental way that people share, without words, who they are, where they belong and what they want. In *Clothing the Colony*, Stephanie Coo highlights how evolving modes of fashion provide a critical lens to understanding nineteenth-century Philippine society, culture and politics. Utilising a vast array of sources, including colonial records, literature, artwork, photographs and historical pieces of clothing and fabric, Coo examines sartorial culture to reveal the politics of empire and nationalism, as well as evolving understandings of class, race and gender.

Coo argues that clothing served an important function in the colonial Philippines, revealing or concealing “status, affiliations, and values” (p. 1). In her book, she traces how clothing evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, highlighting a shift in colonial hierarchies from being primarily race-based to a multilayered definition of status influenced by race, wealth, education and social and political connections. By the late nineteenth century, Coo argues, sartorial culture stretched across lines of race and ethnicity, blurring lines between previously distinct classes. As men increasingly turned to Western dress for professional attire, women’s dress, and particularly the *baro’t saya* (blouse