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A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America

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This provocative study, along with Lucy Salyer's *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law* (1995), coupled with forthcoming work that examines exclusion from a Chinese perspective, gives us a much more nuanced understanding of the development and impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act on American politics and immigration policy and on this important period of Chinese American history.

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A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America. Edited by Shamita Das Dasgupta. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 1998. x + 239 pp. Illustration, notes, and index. \$49.00 (cloth); \$19.00 (paper).

Shamita Das Dasgupta has put together a collection of South Asian women's voices that speaks directly to controversial issues of identity, sexuality, domestic violence, and political representation. In the introduction she lays out the themes well, putting forward a less familiar ideal of Indian femininity, that of a *virangana*, or mythic warrior-woman figure (somewhat dubiously extended to include Benazir Bhutto and all woman organizers in South Asian countries). But the term is certainly appropriate for the activists writing here, and the book itself is a clear call to action.

The first section focuses on identity, and the first essay, by Grace Poore, sharply questions the usefulness of terms used in contemporary identity politics, most notably "women of color." She immediately launches us into the world of multicultural politics in the United States today, particularly Asian American and feminist politics. Naheed Hasnat then writes passionately as a Pakistani Muslim immigrant and an "Amreekan," arguing that Islam offers a feminist perspective and that Muslim women must distinguish between "women's role as defined by Islam versus the role created for them through cultural [South Asian patriarchal] practices" (p. 43). Lubna Chaudhry's theoretically sophisticated piece on the hybrid identities of Pakistani Muslim women gives us vivid portraits of resistance to both Pakistani and United States societal pressures. Surina Khan forcefully expresses the feelings of isolation experienced by Pakistani and other South Asian lesbians and gay people, and her essay is followed by Naheed Islam's more academic treatment of Indian lesbian experiences in the United States. Islam has interviewed several women but draws more heavily on the anthology *Lotus of Another Color* (ed. R. Ratti, 1993) for her material.

The next section, entitled "Me [sic] and We: Family and Community," opens with an essay by Manisha Roy on mother-daughter relationships in Indian

American families and then presents an intergenerational dialogue between the editor and her daughter, showing the selective imposition of Hindu and colonial stereotypes about South Asian women on Indian immigrants. The next two pieces are major contributions, with Rinita Mazumdar arguing persuasively that Hindu culture accords “ethical permissibility” to marital rape (p. 131) and a coauthored piece, by Satya Krishnan, Malahat Baig-Amin, Louisa Gilbert, Nabila El-Bassel, and Anne Waters, laying out the broader problem of domestic violence in South Asian American communities. Both pieces establish the incontrovertible need for action, for culturally sensitive and effective interventions.

A final section, “Nation and Immigration: Rethinking the ‘Model Minority,’” actually sets a broad historical context for the earlier sections; the editor tells us she had difficulty placing these three chapters. First comes a reprint of the path-breaking essay by Anannya Bhattacharjee (*Public Culture*, 1992) which places Indian women and domestic violence in the context of the “national” culture constructed by the Indian immigrant bourgeoisie. Sunita Mukhi’s essay analyzes the Indian Independence Day parades in the early 1990s in New York City, paying special attention to the young women cultural performers and the Federation of Indian Association’s exclusion from the parade of, first, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association and, then, Sakhi for South Asian Women. Her observations nicely illustrate Bhattacharjee’s points. The final piece, by Sonia Shah, tries to analyze the place of South Asian immigrants, particularly women, in the United States economy. While she is good on the new immigrants, Shah makes some misstatements about the earliest (pre-1965) Punjabi male immigrants. Most were not employed as railroad workers and/or as replacements for striking workers, and she gives wrong figures for the total population and proportion married in 1914 (p. 214). She also credits another author for materials on the Punjabi-Mexicans that actually came from my own research (perhaps he is responsible for the errors above). Opening the book with these background pieces might have worked better, since they seem out of place here.

The strengths of the book are many. It offers strong and explicit essays on subjects often omitted or played down in work on South Asian Americans. The essays are clearly written and by a range of women, many of them non-academics who are activists in the South Asian community. Attractively produced, *A Patchwork Shawl* is sure to prove a stimulating text for Asian American and Women Studies courses.

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