

***Book Review: Female Body Image and Beauty Politics in
Contemporary Indian Literature and Culture,
by Srirupa Chatterjee and Shweta Rao Garg (eds.)***

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Srirupa Chatterjee and Shweta Rao Garg (eds.), *Female Body Image and Beauty Politics in Contemporary Indian Literature and Culture* (Temple University Press, 2024), 276 pp., \$110.50 (Hardcover), ISBN 9781439922514

In the postmillennial era, Indian academia has produced several books, anthologies and scholarly articles on women, highlighting their discrimination in various spheres of life, providing possible solutions for their empowerment, and emphasizing the contemporary complexities with regard to body, gender and sexuality. However, when it comes to female body and the body image/beauty standards, there is barely sufficient academic material available on the issue. The book *Female Body Image and Beauty Politics in Contemporary Indian Literature and Culture* (2024), edited by Srirupa Chatterjee and Shweta Rao Garg and published by Temple University Press is the recent addition that deals with the politics of beauty in contemporary Indian literature and culture, with a particular emphasis on female body image.



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The book significantly contributes to the domain of Body Studies, Body Shaming, and Women's Studies in India. It vividly highlights the diverse aspects of female body image/beauty standards and their accompanying cultural and social nuances. The chapters written on diverse aspects of female body image and its politics become very helpful for academics and researchers, in order to have a broader and comprehensive understanding of body politics in India.

The book contains twelve chapters, divided into five parts along with a separate introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, Srirupa Chatterjee provides an in-depth understanding of the politics of female body, gender, physical appearance and body shaming. In other words, this section foregrounds the essence and central themes of this edited volume while explaining the necessity of its conception. Chatterjee argues that several "ethnographers, empiricists, and scientists have already addressed the reality of Indian women's struggles with body image," but this edited volume becomes different in its contextualization of this issue as "it attempts an analysis of body image as a cultural discourse and takes into account literary and popular culture representations of women across age groups, sexual identities, classes, castes, and bodily abilities, among others" (5). Further, the author points out that in contemporary India, the standards of beauty have largely been influenced by the Western notion of body image that refers to "having an ideal body image...being young and able bodied, having a fair, tall, and curvaceous but slim and athletic form with sharp facial features and thick, lustrous hair" (2).

The first part of the book, entitled "Bodies on the Margins: 'Othering,' Hegemonic Beauty Norms, and Female Bodies" consists of two specific chapters on female body. The chapter "Imag(in)ing the Dalit Woman: Body Image and Identity in Bama's *Sangati*" deals with the struggles and problems experienced by Tamil Dalit women within the context of body image. Tanupriya and Aratrika Bose's "Bodies at Surveillance: Appearance, Social Control, and Female Body Image in India's Postmillennial Lesbian and Trans Narratives" explores the difficulties of lesbian and transgender people while analyzing Manju Kapoor's *A Married Woman* (2002) and Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* (2005).

In the second part of the book, entitled "Reflections on Beauty Politics: Gender and Body Image in the Works of Contemporary Indian Women Writers," there are three chapters: "Writing Woman / Woman Writing: Shashi Deshpande and the Aesthetics of the Female Body" by Swatie; "Manjula Padmanabhan and the Question of Problematizing Embodied Gender Identity: A Reading of *Getting There*" by Shubhra Ray; and "Future Forms: Female Body Image in Indian Dystopian Fiction" by Annika Taneja. This section examines the works of different women writers from India and highlights the way their narratives critique the notion of normativity.

The next section, entitled "Alternate Beauties? Disabled and Disfigured Female Bodies in Contemporary Indian Literature and Culture" discusses the discrimination of disabled women in terms of body image and culturally constructed beauty standards. It shows how differences in corporeal identity and appearances negatively affect the lives of "women with special abilities" (13), also talking about how these bodies have been marginalized and stigmatized in society. This section has two chapters: "Fitting In When Your Body Does Not: Young Girl Characters with Disabilities in Contemporary Indian English Fiction for Children" by Anurima Chanda and "Pathologies of 'Body Fictions':

A Comparative Study of *Margarita with a Straw* and *Kuch Bheege Alfaaz*” by Samrita Sinha.

The fourth part, namely “Scopophilic Cultures: Female Body Image in Contemporary Indian Cinema” consists of two chapters, authored by Shailendra Kumar Singh. The chapter “Unjust Gradations of Fairness: Gender, Looks, and Colourism in Postmillennial Hindi Cinema” navigates the fascination of Indian people with light skin, along with the difficulties encountered by women just for having darker skin tones. His exploration delves deeper into the realm of Indian cinema, reflecting the challenges women encounter and the way they are represented in films. Singh’s chapter “Fetishism, Scopophilia, and the Fat Actresses of Bhojpuri Cinema,” highlights how Bhojpuri cinema, rather than critiquing weight biases, “end[s] up pathologically eroticizing fat female corporeality” (15).

The final part of the volume, entitled “Neoliberal Cultures and Female Body Image in Indian Advertisements and Popular Media,” exposes the superficiality of visual platforms while showcasing the obstacles and complications women encounter. This section contains chapters entitled “Gender, Body Image, and the Aspirational Middle-Class Imaginary of Indian Advertising” by Sukshma Vedere and Turni Chakrabarti; “Unpacking Compliances and Resistances in the Indian Yummy Mummy” by Sucharita Sarkar; and “Hey! She’s a Bro!”: Tomboys, Body Image, and Desire in India” by Ketaki Chowkhani.

The book concludes with Shweta Rao Garg’s remarks regarding body image, body shaming and female bodies. She draws the trajectory of body image/ beauty standards in India, highlighting the post-liberalization phase, the development of internet, popular cultures and beauty pageants, and how these advancements create an impact. Further, she advocates for a society that should not harbour any kind of discrimination based on body shape, size, and colour. In a nutshell, this book is commendable as it significantly contributes to the current debate on beauty standards/ body image. While discussing literature, culture, media, films, fictions and other texts, this book provides an altogether unique perspective on the issue of body politics, which makes it a must-read for those who are working in the area of Body Studies and Gender Studies, especially in India.

