Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion

Piyali Bhattacharya, ed.
San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2016. 196 pages.

From the publisher that brought us Gloria Anzaldua's classic work *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), now comes *Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion*. Aunt Lute Books gives us this 2016 anthology of short stories edited by Piyali Bhattacharya that, I envision, will strike a similar chord of deep resonance with those who are living in the liminal spaces of mixed consciousness, mixed cultures, mixed religions – the South Asian American diasporic community and beyond. The striking cover of the book shows a graphic illustration of a brown girl decked in traditional South Asian gold jewelry and a red *sarhi*, her hand slipping underneath the fabric below her waist, leaving the viewer to imagine that she is feelin' herself.

The style of writing and the range of themes allow this book to speak to a multitude of audiences. The book can easily be included in syllabi ranging from South Asian American studies, American studies, and Islamic studies to women/gender/sexuality studies, cultural studies, and affect theory. What Bhattacharya set out to do over a span of eight years in bringing this collection to fruition is to create for herself and the women she knew a network, a community, a support system (p. v) – "we had to find our tribe" (p. viii). What I find interesting and useful in this collection is that it can be used as an illustration of how gender and sexuality frame affective knowledge production and world-making in diasporic communities.

The anthology's overarching themes are the lived experience of South Asian women growing up in the United States and how we both oblige and challenge familial and cultural expectations. (I use "we" here instead of "they" as many of the stories in this collection spoke to me on various levels.) One of the salient subthemes running through the stories is the struggle with relationships – the doing and undoing of relationships with self, parents, biological and chosen families, and communities. For example, in Swati Khurana's "Becoming a Reluctant Breadwinner," the author describes her struggles with the relationship to the self – "physical, psychological, emotional" (p. 97) – due to having the psychosomatic condition of vaginismus that causes painful intercourse. She then goes on in the same piece to express struggles with the relationship to her family, such as the feelings of guilt that consumed her as a

working mother who could not be there for her children as much as she would have liked.

One of the strengths of this anthology is that it complicates the notion of agency, particularly as it pertains to Muslim women-of-color. The stories illustrate how South Asian American daughters' experiences are a source of power, radical honesty, and self-reflexivity – but never a simple victim vs. agent binary. Fawzia Mirza's powerful story "The Day I Found Out I Was a Witch" will make readers laugh out loud as she shares her story of heartache in coming out to her mom.

> My body didn't conform to the limiting standards of beauty that the white, male, hetero-normative gaze projects onto fashion magazines and television: I was a size 14 with long, jet black hair that fell down to my butt…and also went across my cheeks, my forehead, my upper lip and well, everywhere. I looked like a brown Ewok. (p. 119)

Owning a hairy body, not dating, having girl best friends grow into girlfriends, and then eventually coming out to her mother regarding her lesbian sexuality leads to an "unprecedented emotional distance" (p. 120) between her and her mom. This is one of the many stories in which the author is both the victim and the agent, and more – i.e.: victim to losing community and risking a painful relationship with her mother; agent in owing her body and her sexuality to the point of owning the title of "witch" and finding her own chosen community. When her mother accuses her of being possessed by the devil, Fawzia's friend Alia turns the idea on its head and reminds her that "You're coming into your power. You're a witch" (p. 120). Fawzia decides to own the power that comes with being possessed.

> Witches are powerful. Witches are magical. Witches have a strong community … Witches are women who refuse to be controlled by others … I am powerful in sharing my truths. I am powerful in being me. Power scares people. Power scares my mother's idea of me. Power scares tradition. (p. 121)

Stories such as this one illustrate another strength of this anthology: seamlessly weaving together humor and heartache in order to bring forth the complicated relationship between agency and victimization, between power and the lack thereof.

Yet the work of "making myself legible" (p. 135) is never easy or straightforward. While the majority of stories present a portrayal of South Asian American women's subjectivities that embodies complexity and interrelated-

ness, a few of them oversimplify the false dichotomy of East versus West, sometimes equating "west" with sexual liberation. Aysha Hidyatullah and Taymiya Zaman's 2013 article "Speaking for Ourselves: American Muslim Women's Confessional Writings and the Problem of Alterity" calls for a deeper critical examination of post-9/11 Muslim women's autobiographical works, "truth-telling" narratives written primarily for a non-Muslim audience – a genre they call "Muslim media chic" – including books such as *The Muslim Next Door* (2008); *I Speak for Myself* (2011); *Love, InshaAllah* (2012); and *Red, White, and Muslim* (2009). Many of the authors in *Good Girls Marry Doctors* are also contributors to *Love, InshaAllah*. And while this anthology is not limited to stories of Muslims, nor is it (thankfully!) seeking to present a "truer" version of Islam, many of the critiques that Hidayatullah and Zaman lay out also apply to this collection. American cultural supremacy, depoliticized individualism, and issues of gender are some of the key problematics that need a closer critical examination.

Shortcomings in regards to the lack of critical thinking regarding larger hegemonic structures and systems of oppression are not a reason to put the book down. Rather, all the more reason why these stories need to be read *and* critically examined. The stories are powerful, and the authors have placed themselves in a position of severe vulnerability in sharing their personal struggles. In the context of religious studies, stories such as Surya Kundu's "Modern Mythologies" and SJ Sindu's "Drupadi Walks Alone at Night" weave together the mythical and the everyday. In the context of Islamic studies, the stories by Muslim South Asian American women serve as a source of experiential and affective knowledge. Islamic thought beyond Qur'an and Hadith – especially Islamic thought stemming from Sufi philosophy – has historically incorporated storytelling.

Tanzila Ahmed's confession at her mother's funeral, when being asked by the community's aunties to wash her mother's body: "I am scared that I'm not Muslim enough" (p. 3) is the story of many Muslim girls who struggle to find solace with both one's family and a sense of a religious self. Ayesha Mattu's piece "Without Shame" will also resonate with many Muslim American women who struggle with being raised as someone who is neither allowed to express desire, nor to find themselves or anyone else desirable until post-marriage. Struggles with issues around the body, self-acceptance, and shame are running themes that will find multiple audiences enthusiastically nodding in agreement.

If Islamic studies is to take affective knowledge – women's lived experience – as a serious source of knowledge and world-making, then such an-

thologies need to be taken seriously by both religious studies scholars and gender studies scholars. Moreover, if Islamic studies and American studies are to take intersectional feminism seriously, such anthologies need to be added to the syllabi across disciplines. Lastly, Bhattacharya reminds us that "to transgress is one thing, to talk about the transgression is another" (p. ix). This, to me, is the spirit of both Sufi and feminist thought. It is through these transgressions and their various iterations that those of us who are rejected by or choose to reject dominant communities spiral back to finding our tribes.

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