

would seem to be the impossible gamble of giving the lower-class bodies of al-Maḥalla a voice. Her comprehensive history of al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā allows us to (re)think class and gender violence and inequalities at a time of massive urbanisation and intense industrialisation during a key moment in modern Egyptian and global history, and it presents a brilliant example of what micro-history, based on local sources, voices, and sexualities, can bring to the field, whilst unveiling lower-class bodies and queering labour history.

The Struggle over Women's Bodies in the Global Beauty Industry

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Looking for a nuanced analysis of beauty among gender studies literature? *The Global Beauty Industry: Racism, Colorism and the National Body*, published by Routledge in 2016, is a perfect introduction to the ways in which beauty standards are used to regulate women's bodies and lives. The author, Meeta Rani Jha, is a Black, British, Asian scholar, who entered academia after a decade of feminist and antiracist activism in the UK and is currently teaching at UC Berkeley. In her book, she introduces the reader to a subtle analysis of beauty starting with US culture and then taking a global and transnational perspective. The goal is to introduce beauty as an analytical category in order to examine how beauty cultures are formed in the political context of globalisation, highlighting here the role of mediated beauty pageants in three different countries: the United States, India, and China. Each chapter focuses on using beauty as an intersectional framework to think critically about beauty's imbrication in the structural power relations of gender.

The first chapter, 'Beauty as Structural Inequality', examines beauty as a structural inequality and deconstructs the myth of beauty pageants. The ultimate American dream for many young women and girls in the United States is to be crowned as the most beautiful woman in the country. Jha opens her book with an anecdote about Robin Morgan's 'No More Miss America' (Morgan 1970: 484), where she outlines ten reasons for boycotting the prestigious American beauty pageant. Morgan sparked

a debate on sexism and pointed out how the national beauty contest generates idealised versions of femininity. Through this anecdote the author is able to show how Miss America pageant contestants understand gendered inequality as an individual problem, thereby erasing its structural foundations. Resting on the Protestant work ethic, the idea is that if one works hard, one can rise above the structural inequalities of the social and education systems by winning a beauty contest. Jha, on the other hand, aims to point out that power and class positions are key constituents in the production of Miss America. Despite some major advances in beauty contests, they remain the site of a power struggle. To illustrate, only nine women of colour have become Miss America since its inception in 1921. The most recent 'un-American' winner, Nina Davuluri, was crowned in 2014, which generated a racial controversy in the United States. In fact, beauty intersects not only with the idea of gender and class but also with race. On the national level, every Miss America is a metaphor for the national and social body: a non-white body being rewarded as *the* American woman undermines the cultural hierarchy that is so deeply embedded in US society. While Davuluri's victory can be considered an indicator of progress in combating racial disparities, as the winner she was nonetheless regarded as a direct threat to the American ideal. Davuluri's performance of a Bollywood dance differed radically from the traditional spectacles performed by other contestants. On social media, her performance was judged as alien and strange, but she helped to increase the cultural visibility of South-Asian Americans, who are dramatically underrepresented in the mainstream US media. However, in order to win, Miss Davuluri had to demonstrate that she was able to conform to Anglo ideals and to abide by the demand for racial assimilation (Park 1939; Gordon 1981). The US beauty pageant sends out a clear message about who is excluded from the categories of beauty and femininity. Jha points out that Anglo-conformity is a necessary precondition for non-white women to experience upward class mobility. Therefore, beauty should be seen as a commodity that is exchanged for class mobility and considerably influences women's life chances and opportunities.

The next chapter, 'Black Is Beautiful', elaborates on the idea of gendered beauty, which generates unequal power relations among women and different ethnic communities. Jha walks the reader through the history of Black feminism and its contribution to the feminist movement. She considers Black feminism a direct anti-racist challenge to the dominant white beauty. The chapter explores the evolution and advances of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s examining beauty through the Black feminist framework. In American society, Black girls and women have often been considered less beautiful, less feminine, and less attractive because of their distinct hair, skin, and facial features. She traces the history of Black feminism and underscores how the beauty norms of a socially dominated group [socially

dominated groups] are underrepresented and promoted as 'ugly'. The beauty of the dominant group represents the norm and the universal standard of beauty. One of the main ideas is to point out that the beauty standards that are praised among non-white social groups are not the same as those of white communities. In the 1960s, Black communities honoured different beauty standards so that they could escape white disdain. Yet, the author highlights a paradox by pointing out that white beauty standards gradually affected Black people's evaluation of themselves. There was a time when there was a preference in Black communities for light-skinned people and straight hair, which were the beauty standards of the dominant class. The chapter also highlights that there is a close connection between beauty discourse, and racial politics (Craig 2002). When black women refused to accept white beauty standards, they were actually starting a political protest, because they were rejecting the norms of the dominant class: Common beauty practices among black women helped to build a sense of solidarity and empowered them to reject the ruling beauty standards. The references to African ancestry and black nationalism enabled Black feminists to change the values assigned to blackness. At the end of this section, Jha evokes black hip-hop and famous Black pop artists who, through their fame and influence, help to improve the image of the black community and their struggle to acquire a more important place in the public space. Hip-hop feminism inspires young generations and allows them to stay connected to their cultural origins. Black popular culture can facilitate a personal transformation, it is a source of political education, and it generates social awareness, all of which serve to strengthen links across differences of class, gender, and sexuality in the black community.

The third section of the book, titled 'Globalization, Indian Beauty Nationalism, and Colorism', focuses mainly on globalisation and the exportation of Western beauty standards to Asia and to India in particular. This chapter tackles issues connected with consumer capitalism and the influence of Euro-American beauty corporations seeking new, larger, middle-class markets around the world. At the beginning of the chapter, the author examines the social and gender impact of the skin-lightening and bleaching industry on women in India. This topic is linked to a much larger phenomenon – globalisation. Jha argues that globalisation can be both empowering and threatening. On a large scale, it seems that globalisation helps to reduce gender inequality in developing countries, but at the same time it drives apart different castes (or social classes in other part of the world). The heavy aggressiveness of various Euro-American beauty corporations pushes women in India to change their look and undergo drastic procedures. Expenditures on cosmetic products among middle-class Indian women has increased by \$160 billion since 2010. It seems that globalisation has exacerbated gendered colourism in India (Parameswaran 2005). In order to have

a decent social status and promising life perspectives, Indian women have to be 'fair', that is to say, they have to have a light skin tone. Gendered colourism has become very serious as it puts women under extra pressure to be beautiful. Their quality of life depends on their physical attributes – their light skin. Fairness equated with beauty is recognised as social capital and is used to advertise lightening creams with the promise of social mobility. Fair skin is a crucial instrument of exclusion in globalising India. Having a light skin tone actually enhances your chances of obtaining a better power position. Globalisation conveys the ideal of perfect white middle-class women and brings new form of discrimination. The popular culture, spread through global mass media, perpetuates the gender inequality. For example, beauty contests are seen as a part of the 'process of modernisation': In order to win, women from the developing countries have to abide by certain Western values. Beauty pageants create a new Indian feminine role model: women have to be both patriotic and cosmopolitan. Indeed, middle-class women are turned into global celebrities. However much the promotion of Western beauty standards harms Indian cultural diversity, it also generates solidarity. The India's movement 'Dark Is Beautiful' campaign advanced by the Women of Worth used the media and cyber activism to challenge colourism and gender discrimination by empowering women and their darkness. This organisation seeks to erase the dark-skin stigma created by the economic transformation of the Indian nation. Jha's analysis goes even further by exploring why the globalisation of beauty pageants and the expansion of middle-class results in increasingly oppressive beauty standards.

The fourth, and final, chapter, called 'Chinese Femininity, Beauty Economy, Cosmetic Surgery', explores Chinese femininity and the popularity of cosmetic surgery in China, which is deeply embedded in the nation's consumer culture. The drastic cultural transformations that were set in motion by the country's incorporation into globalising processes have restructured Chinese identity and gender relations. The author notes that China became the first country in the world to host the 'Miss Artificial Beauty Pageant', on 18 December 2004 in Beijing, where the contestants were required to have undergone plastic surgery. Indeed, the economic boom has allowed many women to access new forms of modern femininities that were constructed by the cosmetic-surgery industry. Her research shows that Chinese women view white skin as a symbol of beauty, and they tend to aspire to this ideal. Referring to Huiliang Li (2013), skin-whitening beauty practices have been a part of different local traditions since pre-colonial times and have now been exacerbated by consumer capitalism. Jha points out that white feminine bodies and their properties are considered a site of modernity and progress. Therefore, adapting one's body to Western beauty standards amounts to keeping up with modernity. The discrimination against women who look 'native'

stems from the admiration and imitation of whiteness. Light skin tone enables women to access a better social position, especially since it allows them to aspire to a more prestigious marriage. Plastic operations and the skin-lightening cosmetic products are inaccessible to many women in China who, because of their gender, class, and social position, cannot enjoy these privileges. Chinese women's feelings of devaluation go hand in hand with the complex challenges of racism and the structural and cultural inequalities that they face because of the growing presence of global hegemonic beauty standards. Jha draws on Eugenia Kaw (1993), who has described how Asian women undergo cosmetic surgery in the hope of improving their class and racial positions, which enables them to racially pass. In fact, Jha builds on this idea by explaining that women weigh cosmetic-surgery risks in the terms of an economic investment and their ability to compete in the labour and marriage markets. Aspiring to Western beauty standards creates a divide among Chinese women: women from minority rural communities are becoming even more disadvantaged, which pushes them to leave rural areas and migrate to larger cities where they can hope to obtain a better living standard. The female rural exodus is both a cultural and a demographic phenomenon. Women leave rural areas hoping to find a better-paid job, which, in return, will enable them to pay for the beauty products they need to shape their bodies according to the predominant Western beauty norms.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the book aims to examine beauty in its complexity: as a site of social control and as a site of resistance to gender oppression. Beauty is an aspect of identity-formation, desire, and sexuality. However, it is also an aspect of racial discrimination, social inequalities, and psychological damage. Indeed, beauty's emotional and affective force influences how women perceive their bodies and more largely their existence. It is a powerful tool which restricts women's aspirations and disciplines women's lives through their bodily properties. Beauty can be viewed as an uneven socialising force that influences the life chances and opportunities of individuals. Unfortunately, the author overlooks the fact that the leitmotif of her analysis is the fact that women, regardless of whether they live in the Global South or North, have to conform to beauty standards imposed on them by men. The book is easily accessible both to those who are passionate about gender studies and to those who are not familiar with this topic but who can use the rich glossary of important terms provided at the end of the book. It is a fascinating read filled with numerous examples that speak for themselves and that will definitely change the reader's perception of gendered power relations.

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