

## BOOK REVIEW

**Dangerous designs: Asian women fashion the Diaspora economies**, by Parminder Bhachu, NY and London: Routledge, 2004, 196 pp., (hardback), £70.00, ISBN 0-415-07220-4, (paperback), £23.99, ISBN 0-415-07221-2.

Salwaar-kameez (or ‘Punjabi’) suits typically consist of the following: a salwaar, or baggy trousers; a kameez, or tunic, which is usually knee-length with close-fitted sleeves; and a chuni, or scarf or stole. In the mid 1990s, this ethnically coded garment began to be consumed by the British super-elite. Princess Diana, herself, wore a modified version of the traditional suit in 1996 on her trip to Pakistan and British Prime Minister’s wife Cherie Booth wore a suit designed by the London-based Bubby Mahil in 1999.

Parminder Bhachu begins to track this curious phenomenon in her book through the narratives of British Asian designers/entrepreneurs like the aforementioned Mahil, and in the process provides a cogent analysis of how a racialized and gendered positionality can act as a strength in a market that is increasingly local and global simultaneously.

Bhachu first tracks the history of the suit from the 1960s to its ethnicized consumption in the 1990s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the suit was a signifier of the ‘Other’ for many British. Many women, though, continued to wear the traditional suit, which was sewn at home only sometimes altering it by wearing pants instead of the salwaar. By the mid-late 1970s, a bustling ready-made market began to emerge, but Bhachu is quick to point out that this all happened in parallel with the ongoing transmission from mother to daughter of the skills of sewing one’s own salwaar-kameez, as well. By the mid-to-late 1980s, the ‘suit as defiance’ began to give way to a more fashionable garment among second-generation British Asians who were wearing the suits to parties featuring bhangra music.

In the second section of the book, Bhachu presents the design narratives of two British Asian designers, Geeta Sarin and Bubby Mahil, who she contrasts with three sub-continental fashion entrepreneurs. Bhachu contends that the sub-continentals are reintroducing the past into the present in an interest in preserving a ‘classical world.’ Alternatively, Sarin and Mahil have interests in the present and future and, thereby, forming the nation as they go along through their hybridizing style – a strategy which approximates the market better than the sub-continentals.

She goes on to discuss the retail of ready-made suits first through the chain store, Daminis, through Koman Singh’s catalogue and wholesale enterprise, Bombay Connections, and in Mala Rastogi’s boutique, Creations. By monitoring the pulse of the city and utilizing their connections within the subcontinent, these women are forging new (and successful) markets and effectively feminizing the business landscape.

In the final section, she examines sewing cultures of home-based seamstresses, describing *sina-prona* (‘generationally transmitted cultures of domesticity’) and then presents four biographies of domestic seamstresses. Bhachu argues here that these

women are hybridizing the *sina-prona* tradition, as well, often through a process of creating sketches in collaboration with customers on a less commercial, smaller scale.

Bhachu's ethnographic work is delightful to read and her analyses flow freely from the narratives. Indeed, as a producer and consumer of the *salwaar-kameez* herself, Bhachu includes her own story as a 'multiple migrant' which helps to place the privileged reader squarely into a world that few have access.

Bhachu does not explore how 9/11 affected these micro-markets and one wonders specifically what effects *7/7* (the book was published before in 2004) has had with its concomitant rise in racism. She focuses on the UK in this book, but a further analysis of cities, such as Los Angeles and New York City, might be useful to create a more nuanced mapping through these narratives. For that matter, tracking more clearly the influences of the Diaspora itself, on the evolution of the *salwaar-kameez* design and on how the suit travels locally within the subcontinent would be similarly instructive. Bhachu also leaves largely untouched how the feminist, racialized, diasporic micro-markets affect woman, labor, and the suit in the subcontinent in which the suit is being produced for Western consumption.

The title of the book says the designs are 'dangerous,' but this adjective is too strong. Maybe the right word might be (albeit admittedly less market-friendly) 'potent' – 'Potent Patterning'? – reflecting both the political and economic power the garment itself generates for and through woman.

I am quibbling, though. Bhachu opens up a number of different avenues of research for scholars through this inventive and novel method of mapping 'Diaspora economies.' The *salwaar-kameez* proves to be an intrepid, but ever changing piece of clothing. The book will be useful for academics interested in new ways of looking at global capitalism and its easy-breezy style will surely be a hit in the classroom, as well.

### Notes on contributor

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