

Future Entanglements: Beauty, *Fashion*, and (Anti-)Black Aesthetics in India

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In the days following George Floyd's murder, Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra-Jonas was one of many celebrities to tweet #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd. In response, South Asian Twitter came after her for her hypocrisy for not talking about atrocities against Dalits and Muslims in India as well as her endorsement of skin-whitening creams. Amid the furor levied at Chopra-Jonas's blind spots to violence in the subcontinent, was a subtler elision: no one was talking about her deeply racist work in Bollywood, namely her role in the 2008 film *Fashion*.¹ The film, one of Bollywood filmmaker Madhur Bhandarkar's most celebrated and successful (winning multiple National Film Awards),² was his fourth to center on a realistic and gritty depiction of a strong female protagonist climbing the ranks of a tough industry. *Fashion* stars Chopra-Jonas as Meghna, a small-town girl who moves to Mumbai to make it as a model in the cutthroat fashion industry. The film traces Meghna's rise, fall, and return to the ranks of fashion's most coveted position of top model. The title also hints at the film's critical object: fashion—here not merely an industry for garments, but also a mode of future aspiration that enables various forms of social mobility in India, or an "entrée into flexible global citizenship."³ Both *Fashion* and "fashion" entangle mobility and the future as anchored in the idea of beauty as a pathway to future success. In thinking with *Fashion* as a cinematic text and "fashion" as ordinary, aspirational technologies of self-cultivation, I consider how both link beauty, social mobility, and aspirational futures together through refusals of Blackness. Reading between *Fashion*'s racist climax and the ongoing violence against African migrants in India, I suggest that Blackness often emerges as an aesthetic

problem in India, one that threatens to derail the future aspirations of ingenues like Meghna and the larger projects of the nation and its logics of moral and cultural ascendancy.⁴

Fashion's object lessons about race and aesthetics are made apparent in its troubling climax. In an especially maudlin moment, Meghna ends up at a packed nightclub full of sexy, young patrons. She slinks across the dance floor, moving with the music, knocking back glasses of vodka, and taking bumps of cocaine with her friend. The camera paces between closeup shots of Meghna's mascara caked eyes—now sunken in the intoxications of drugs, alcohol, and music—and blurry shots of the club's dance floor, which come to stand in for Meghna's gaze. Stumbling through the crowds of people, she makes her way over to a random man and begins to dance with him. Caressing his face, kissing him, and grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, her dance becomes intimate, passionate, and sexual.

The camera cuts to a hotel room littered with lingerie, bottles of alcohol, and cigarette butts. Meghna rises from the bedsheets with the pangs of a hangover. As she clutches her head in the aches of coming to consciousness, she looks over. Subtle violin music in the background score intensifies as the camera fixes upon the back of a Black man lying face down asleep, next to a distraught Meghna clutching the white bedsheet over her body in panic. The camera cuts back and forth between Meghna's horrified face and the sinews of her fast-asleep lover from the club. She hastily gathers her things and stumbles out of the hotel, barefoot. The music crescendos in its intensity, cuing the viewer to Meghna's steady unravelling. Another cut and we are back at her apartment, where she studies herself in the mirror in disgust. The intensity of her gaze makes it seem as if she no longer recognizes herself. Finally, she fully breaks down, crying to her mirrored self, while vigorously scrubbing the makeup off of her face as if she is tearing away at a false exterior. Meghna has hit rock bottom and *Fashion* has reached its dramatic climax.

Fashion, although frequently praised for its "realistic" portrayals of women's struggles in a brutal and heteropatriarchal industry, is often overlooked for this troubling scene of erotic, racial encounter.⁵ Meghna's eventual meltdown comes after a whirlwind of dramatic events including Meghna being kicked out of her family home, a tumultuous love affair with her married boss, an abortion, being fired by her boss for revealing her affair with him to his wife, and persistent alcohol abuse. And yet, her tryst in a hotel, with an unnamed Black man is the final straw in the list of calamities that befall her. In the dozens of times that I have watched this moment play out on screen, I am left to wonder what viewers are supposed to make of a sexual encounter that we do not witness but can only infer happened, through Meghna's disheveled appearance and her lover's dormant



Figure 1. Meghna wakes up the next morning (*Fashion*, Dir. M. Bhandarkar, 2008).

body beside her. And what kind of race talk does this sexual encounter enunciate through mere presence of an unconscious Black body in the throes of postcoital bliss, and not through dialogue or nuanced character development? What is transmitted in this racial encounter between an upper-caste Hindu woman and a nameless Black man on a crowded dance floor and between the sheets?

As a cinematic text, *Fashion's* reliance on exploitative Black representation could be glossed as cheap and narrow-minded. But as an immensely popular text that has not been unpacked, problematized, or even called out for this scene, it speaks about a larger cultural subtext regarding the work that Black bodies do as the foils not just for Meghna's personal downfall, but larger conversations around social ill and moral decline in India. I continue to be haunted by the climax of this film because it so blatantly rehearses the racialized forms of sexual disgust that Black people are regularly subjected to in India. Far from shying away from a racist sexual politics, the film relies on racist tropes to express the protagonist's desolation and to offer her a position from which to rebound and reclaim "her self-recognition."⁶ The unnamed African man's body marks both a racial limit and sexual constraint that ultimately pushes Meghna to question her own moral substance and fiber. It is also a turning point for her. She eventually leaves modeling for a year and returns home to her family to recover from her so-called immoral ways. *Fashion* is at its core, a warning for single women that the "loss of self-recognition is a peril of aspiration."⁷ But, given that this narrative peril is built on the literal back of a Black man, what might it also be saying about Black people and (anti-)Blackness in India?

I remember watching the climax scene and wondering who the nameless Black character might have been and, more important, what his story was beyond being the foil for a plot's crescendo, the Black hurdle along Meghna's journey to stardom. What brought him to India? How did he manage to enter

the nightclub, when so many Africans are barred from nightlife spaces in India because of bouncers who racially profile?⁸ What were his own aspirations? In response to this edited volume's provocation on Black life and death in its global registers, *Fashion* offers not only a disturbing instance of the representations of Black life in South Asia, but moreover demonstrates that the consistent use of a Black body to signal a threat works because it picks up on and reinforces ingrained and circulating notions of Black people in India as social dangers. The film suggests that to be Black and unnamed is perhaps also to be Black and in "the position of the unthought."⁹ The unthought here signals not simply absence or diminished value but a Black body that comes into social view only in its capacities for trouble, disruption, and the diminishing of another subject's value (here Meghna's sense of self-worth and progression towards a successful future career). Unthought perhaps also names the fluid, unquestioned slippage between Blackness and its perceived social threat. Meghna's horror at awakening to a sleeping Black lover beside her and her concomitant waves of regret work precisely because the scene relies on unspoken and undeveloped tropes about Black sexual promiscuity and about the kinds of threats that Black people pose to larger conceptions of society and social order in South Asia. Her horror did not need to be kindled by a monster who thinks, feels, or articulates his monstrosity in any novel way, but rather whose mere presence performs the work of making monstrosity manifest. Through Black presence *as* monstrosity, the film is not just a cautionary tale about the aspirations of single women eking out space in a growing, neoliberal economy. Although *Fashion* depicts a middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu woman's self-fashioning and future aspiration through labor, it is also imbricated in race relations in India that surround the film and relies on those relations to tell the story. It articulates an aesthetics of (anti)Blackness while rendering the only Black figure in the film silent: seen but never heard. And it is that silence, the reliance on the mere presence of Black skin to do the work of talking, that demonstrates the kinds of trouble that Blackness poses even when it is represented without context, motivation, voice.

Black characters in Indian cinema are rarely present, and when they do show up, they are "bouncers, thugs, mammies, and regrettable hookups."¹⁰ They are given neither speech nor character development but often are used as a comic device, a site of revulsion, or a placeholder of backwardness to juxtapose against India's economic and cultural ascendancy. Likewise, Blackness in everyday life in South Asia is menacing in its dormant existence. Alongside troubling cinematic representations of Black people are ordinary and circulating anxieties about the so-called encroachments of waves of African migrants into urban centers across India. These anxieties translate into taunts like *kallu* ("blackie"), discrimination in housing, racial profiling, widespread beliefs that Africans are drug peddlers

and prostitutes, and vigilante mob violence against African nationals. African nationals even report being taunted openly in the streets, with shopkeepers and passersby holding their noses when Africans move through public spaces. This aligns with gossip and rumors that some queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people would trade during my field work with sexual minority communities in Mumbai. In one memorable conversation, a Kothi connected to an NGO I was shadowing exclaimed, “I could never sleep with a Nigerian man; they smell. It’s probably from eating too much meat.” As this moment suggests, Blackness rarely enters the already marginal spaces of queer and trans organizing in India. And when it does, it is as a metonym for other social positions (e.g., Dalit and Muslim) whose substitution is secured through anxieties about meat eating and concomitant notions of disrespectability that might derail queer and transgender activist demands for social recognition and dream of future. Thus, far from just the cinematic registers in which Blackness is imagined as primitive, hypersexual, and dangerous, rumors also permeate ordinary encounters with Blackness, displacing Black people for monstrous fabrications.

Quotidian gossip about Africans as cannibals, drug dealers, meat eaters, and prostitutes is not merely benign chatter but also translates into physical violence and riots. In 2014, Aam Aadmi Party cabinet minister Somnath Bharti led a vigilante raid against Africans living in Khirki Extension, South Delhi. The raid was conducted under the belief that a group of Nigerian and Ugandan women were involved in prostitution and drug trafficking. The women were removed from their homes, assaulted by mobs, and forced to provide urine samples in public. Bharti and the mob alleged that “black people break laws”¹¹ and that “yeh hum aur aap jaise nahin hain” (They are not like you or me).¹² In a separate incident in 2018, mobs surrounded a house shared by Tanzanians and Nigerians in the Dwarka neighborhood of Delhi because rumors had spread that a missing local boy had been kidnaped by the African occupants of the house who were also rumored to be cannibals.¹³ Though heavily recruited to India for education, employment, and medical tourism, the growing presence of African nationals has coincided with their bearing the brunt of social responsibility for crimes like prostitution and drug trafficking. By connecting African nationals to social ills, Blackness is vilified within larger social milieus and social ill is displaced from larger structural inequalities to African immigrant communities. Whether in Bharti’s proclamation that Black people are somehow not like Indians or in the widespread perception that they are trouble, “South Asians read and understand Africanity through corporeal characteristics”¹⁴ that I argue also ossify hegemonic aesthetic regimes by constructing Black bodies as impediments to desires for beauty and as agents of moral and social decay. In other words, Blackness is

“unfashionable” insofar as it can be tethered to ideas of social decay and the derailment of progress.

Between *Fashion* and fashion as a form of ordinary aspiration that legitimates policing and vigilante violence in the service of aligning selves and communities with ideas of beauty, Blackness poses more than just a racial problem, or one rooted in uneven and unequal distributions of rights, political recognition, or socioeconomic opportunity. Blackness is also an aesthetic problem. By aesthetics, I reference something “more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty” but also a “way of inhabiting a space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming.”¹⁵ As anthropologist Lawrence Cohen suggests in his writings on fashion (dress as a form of social mobility that links rural youth to urban elite), “Beauty as a project and demand is one way for thinking about the differential stakes in futurity.”¹⁶ These differential stakes emerge at the same sites where Black bodies come into social view. Their disruptive entries into the narratives of films or the lanes of places like Khirki can produce not simply reactions of revulsion and horror but also expose aesthetic regimes that color future aspirations of development, modernity, and progress, to which Blackness is seen as neither in alignment with nor desirable in and of itself. Just as Meghna’s journey towards professional success is undone by her sexual encounters with a Black man in *Fashion*, so too is society imagined as being undone by daily encounters with Black people. These anxieties expressed over individual, communal, and social undoing do not simply speak the language of law or politics. They speak in the language of beauty: the imagined forms of self-fashioning and social transformation that hope, aspiration, and dreams of the future are made of but also in desired modes of taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight. Thus, an exploration of race and anti-Blackness in India, must be posed through aesthetics as well. To turn to beauty as a form of encountering anti-Blackness is to confront the kinds of aesthetics—as vision or modes of seeing—that underscore imagined forms of self and collective transformation. Doing so is crucial to the work of discovering the anti-Black monstrosities, masquerading as models of beauty, that lay beside us and haunt us while we dream.

NOTES

1. Madhur Bhandarkar (Dir.), *Fashion*. UTV Motion Pictures (2008).
2. National Film Awards are the highest awards for Indian cinema.
3. Lawrence Cohen, “Song for Pushkin,” *Daedalus* 136, no. 2 (2007): 112.
4. I use Black and Blackness throughout this essay to refer to Afro-descended peoples living in South Asia. Though primarily referencing recent waves of African migrants moving to India, my use of Black/Blackness is inclusive of Black

- diasporic peoples from elsewhere making their way to India as well as the historic Siddi community, an Afro-diasporic community that has been in South Asia since the 7th century.
5. In popular culture, Bhandarkar's cinematic works are lauded for their realistic portrayals of the challenges women face in industries such as sex work (see Madhur Bhandarkar (Dir.), *Chandni Bar*. Eros (2001)), journalism (see Madhur Bhandarkar (Dir.), *Page 3*. Lighthouse Films (2005)), and the corporate world (see Madhur Bhandarkar (Dir.), *Corporate*. Sahara One (2006)).
 6. Sarah Pinto, "Drugs and the Single Woman: Pharmacy, Fashion, Desire, and Desstitution in India," *Culture, Medicine, Psychiatry* 38 (2014): 247.
 7. Pinto, "Drugs and the Single Woman," 247.
 8. Ravinder Vasudeva, Riddhi Joshi, Sudipto Mondal, and Namita Kohli, "Their Indian Horror: Africans Recount Everyday Racism," *Hindustan Times*, October 12, 2014, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/their-indian-horror-africans-recount-everyday-racism/story-GqdcKRlfEcpdQG3I2JTJdO.html>.
 9. Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought: An Interview with Saidiya V. Hartman Conducted by Frank Wilderson III," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 185.
 10. Kareem Khubchandani, "Vogueing in Bangalore: Desire, Blackness, and Femininity in Globalized India," *Scholar and Feminist Online* 14, no. 3 (2018): n.p. <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-and-queer-afro-asian-formations/vogueing-in-bangalore-desire-blackness-and-femininity-in-globalized-india/> Last Accessed August 15th, 2020.
 11. Ananya Bhardwaj, "AAP Vigilantism: 'They held us in taxi for 3 hrs, took urine samples, said black people break laws,'" *Indian Express*, January 17, 2014, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/aap-vigilantism-they-held-us-in-taxi-for-3-hrs-took-urine-samples-said-black-people-break-laws/1218789/>.
 12. Kavita Krishnan, "Protest against Delhi Law Minister Somnath Bharti's Racist Vigilantism in Delhi," *Kafila*, January 18, 2014, <https://kafila.online/2014/01/18/protest-against-delhi-law-minister-somnath-bhartis-racist-vigilantism-in-delhi-kavita-krishnan/>.
 13. Shiv Sunny, "Mob Surrounds Houses of 6 Africans over 'Cannibal' Rumours, Cops Intervene," *Hindustan Times*, November 23, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/6-africans-attacked-in-delhi-over-child-kidnapping-cannibalism-rumours-rescued/story-kkbiFDn3JXHdb09jZjZeP.html>.
 14. Sureshi Jayawardene, "Racialized Casteism: Exposing the Relationship between Race, Caste, and Colorism through the Experiences of Africana People in India and Sri Lanka," *Journal of African American Studies* 20 (2016): 323–45.
 15. bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 65.
 16. Cohen, "Song for Pushkin," 112.

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