



Besharam: On Love and Other Bad Behaviors

Priya-Alika Elias

Chicago Review Press (Apr 20, 2021)

Softcover \$16.99 (208pp)

978-1-64160-507-6

Feminist lawyer Priya-Alika Elias's excellent essay collection *Besharam* explores modern womanhood in two nations.

Elias grew up in India, came to the US for college and law school, and returned to India. Her strong, engaging voice unites the book's disparate essays, which are variously personal, cultural, and news related, though also topically divided into chapters titled Sex, Ugliness, Hurt, and Independence.

Elias discusses dating and hookups in frank, sex-positive terms. She also sensitively recounts the pressures that led to her disordered eating. Family stories of "the tyranny of aunties" from her hometown, who poked and pried to know why she was gaining weight, how she lost it, and when she was going to settle down, occur, as do analyses of pop lyrics and stereotypes from Hollywood to Bollywood. There are also takes on literature, including why Charlotte Brontë is more satisfying than Jane Austen, and of the horrifying ways that girls are described in the Sweet Valley High series.

Elias's lively essays also experiment with forms, employing lists, folk tales, poetic and lyrical language, and even a section appendix, "Some Types of Desi Fuckboys," that's scathing and funny as it forwards its critiques in the form of a field guide. The book's personal essays are sometimes vulnerable, sometimes gleeful and coarse, and sometimes laugh-out-loud funny; its most serious material is less personal, including its analyses of news stories about celebrity sexual abuses and gang violence against women. The book's final two pieces, "Story of an Air Conditioner" and "Closing Prayer: For My Strong Brown Women," are its stars.

The bold feminist essays of *Besharam* are smart, critical, and entertaining as they explore what womanhood entails in Desi and US cultures.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (March / April 2021)

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