“Romanticism, Desire or Fetish Fashion: ‘Sindoor Feminism’ as a way to emancipation”

Thursday, April 16, 2015
206 Ingraham Hall
Noon - 1pm

In her paper, Das will first trace the cult of vermillion in Hinduism (its representation in festivals, cultural and religious practice) and examine how this spiritual-passionate-emotional-sexual sign has been related to the paradigmatic Sati, the virtuous good wife of the ascetic god Shiva, and the practice of “sati,” or bride burning. Crucially, she will argue that the application of red vermilion in India may be interpreted as the objectification of the female body as both sexualized and de-sexualized, and that the practice of sindoor is exploited by epistemic authorities to marginalize unmarried women and widows as the “other.” After scrutinizing the ritualized practice of sindoor, Das will then address how Indian cinema’s use of sindoor as a romantic sign language reveals not merely its obsession with ‘sindoor seduction’ and sexual allure, but also its preoccupation with sindoor as a symbol of fertility, sexist iconography, and feminine essence. In modern India, the practice of sindoor sexism does not escape the grasp of class and gender politics. Das asks, how might we imagine the deconstruction of this patriarchal “magic formula” which for centuries has represented a woman’s only quest in life? Analyzing power-resistance theory, Das proposes an alternative, Sindoor Feminism, that reconfigures sindoor as a new tool that conveys a sense of undermining the sexist implication.

Devaleena Das is an Assistant Professor of English and Gender Studies at Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi. She received her Ph.D from University of Calcutta in 2012 and her area of specialisation is Women and Gender Studies, Postcolonial Literature and Australian Literature. Currently, she is an Honorary Fellow (2014-16) at Institute of Research in the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison where she is pursuing her research titled "Female Body: The Cartography of Desire and Transnational Feminism". She has written extensively on race, gender and sexuality in various international journals. Her recently published book Critical Study of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter by Atlantic Press is a comprehensive critical study of Hawthorne’s magnum opus from interdisciplinary perspectives. In 2015, her next book on nineteenth and twentieth century American women poets will be published by Oxford University Press.

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