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A Review of Aisha Sharif's *To Keep from Undressing*

What is the connotation of the word “performance?” Our primary association with “performance” is the theatrical; our understanding of performance has become inextricably linked to the idea of something pretended, something acted out but not done. We think of performance as dishonest. To perform humility or joy is not understood to be the same as to be humble or joyous.

That may be why people dismiss the idea that identity is a type of performance. To say that identity is what you *do* and not simply what you *are* is often an uncomfortable proposition. Many people find comfort in labels—for good reason. Labels like “woman” or “man,” “gay” or “trans,” “Chinese” or “Jewish,” unite individuals with shared experiences and allow for societal comprehension of complex concepts. Aisha Sharif’s collection of poetry, *To Keep from Undressing*, resonates with a truth seldom expressed so thoroughly: that identity *is* a performance. A complicated, contradictory performance, clearly, but a sincere one, nonetheless. Throughout her collection, Sharif’s speakers wrestle with their lived experiences. They are Black, Muslim-American women; daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and poets. The way these identities interact is at the very heart of Sharif’s work, it informs the structure of her poetry and her understanding that each identity is its own intricate performance.

To Keep from Undressing is divided into five sections. Each includes a part of the poem “If my Parents Hadn’t Converted: Questions and Answers,” which straddles the line between humorous and sincere hypothetical scenarios. The poem explores how the speaker’s entire life was shaped by one decision. Christian Aisha, or “Marian Elizabeth” would have had a prom dress “just short enough / to reveal / [her] knees.” When asked how many Muslims the Christian version of herself would “actually befriend,” she leaves no response at all. The poem serves as a pillar to the collection, always returning it to the key questions of who we are and how our experiences shape us. Sharif suggests that her Christian self is still her in a way, but that despite the fact that we all have various versions of ourselves contained within us, the Christian Aisha is missing certain key experiences that are an important part of her current identity.

The experimentation with structure in Sharif’s poems establishes her poetic identity. Sharif manipulates the formal aspects of poetry to build upon new ideas. Her poems’ experimental structures further emphasize the importance of performance. In the poem “A Mathematical Expression of Faith,” the relationship between the speaker’s family’s old Christian ways and the new Muslim ways they practice is presented as an equation to balance. Many poems have a call-and-response structure or a song-like quality to them. “After School on the City Bus, Memphis, TN,” for example, is performed as a school yard chant. At a live reading of the poem, Sharif’s voice echoed out the words of a juvenile bully, a taunt which she wishes she had responded to with a song of her own, by singing “Muslims know god.” Poetry’s very roots lie in performance, and these poems emphasize that relationship. Sharif has a firm understanding of her poems’ sonic qualities and the way they play with language and vernacular, for example in “Hijab Be,” where Sharif discusses the versatility and freedom of her fellow hajabis, how “Hijab be prayin’ still. / Hijab be raisin’ hell.” She combines and shapes her different identities and different schools of thought—scientific, schoolyard, Black, Muslim—to establish the identity of her work.

The collection’s philosophy on identity culminates in “The Fitting Room,” where Sharif’s speaker explains to a non-Muslim saleswoman why she wears the hijab. The speaker questions her own choice to cover, though she doesn’t reveal this to the saleswoman. Despite the way she questions her faith, she chooses to put her hijab back on, “pinning the performance in place.” This action is her way of performing faith through her doubt, which shows the complexity of her relationship to covering. Sharif’s hijab reifies her belief in a concrete way. In the simple act of putting on a headscarf, a mere performance, she creates her identity.

In contrast to the act of dressing, the creation of poetry serves as a symbolic undressing. Sharif’s work is the dissolution of identity markers to reach at

the undefined internal experience. The collection takes its name from a line found in “Iddah: Part II,” which explores the time after the speaker’s sister got divorced. The sister lies stagnant in yesterday’s clothes, she does “anything to keep from undressing.” When considering the way in which putting on a hijab cemented her external identity in “The Fitting Room,” the act of dressing becomes synonymous with performing identity. In this way, her sister’s fear of undressing signifies an unwillingness to lose her identity of “wife.”

To Keep from Undressing balances the creation and deconstruction of identity. The collection constructs identities, as contradictory and complex as they may be, but it also deconstructs the actions we take to create our identities. It dresses and undresses the poet. *To Keep from Undressing* is itself a performance that created something real.