

Review of *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India: Approaches in a Global World*. Edited by Carmen Escobedo de Tapia and Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, 221 pp. ISBN 978-1-5275-5780-2).

In an often mystifying, and orientalisering vein, it has been (and still is) unfortunately common to imagine India as the locus of a radically distinct, even *purier* form of spirituality than that of the presumably more materialistic, secularised West. It is in countering such discourses that the volume *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India* finds its primary justification and its critical impetus. Although heterogeneous and transdisciplinary, this collection of essays is clearly structured around the deceptively simple but urgently necessary argument that the spiritual and the corporeal are inseparable and intertwined, and that, despite ideological mystifications, this applies to Indian cultures as much as to any other culture. Escobedo de Tapia and Moreno-Álvarez's edition indeed makes a strong case against the dualism and dichotomies of much Western thought. As they argue, what one could call a *corporealised spirituality* or a *spiritual corporeality* is an intrinsic part of every aspect of culture in its broadest possible definition, from religious practices to socioeconomic theory, going through sculpture, literature, and film.

From the contributors' different perspectives, the volume also makes clear that both the spiritual and the corporeal elements of Indian cultures are to be understood as profoundly overdetermined by the multiple processes and hierarchies of post/neocolonial global capitalism, a world-system that continues to subordinate India as a country, as well perpetuating structures of oppression within the country. In other words, the book illustrates how the *Indian spirits* and the *Indian bodies* are full of traces and wounds of the country's history and present. Moreover, the book also illustrates how postcolonial and transnational bodies and souls, far from being objectified or victimised *others*, are potential agents for resistance and emancipation from entrenched systems of domination along the axes of race, nation, caste, gender, or class.

In a much more evocative manner than the usual collection of academic essays, the first contribution is a short story, "The Landing," by Rohini Bannerjee, which stands as the corporealisation of the book's spirit. The creative piece is a first-person narration of an Indo-Canadian character's arrival in India for a temporary retreat in an ashram. The story offers a set of symbols, characters and situations which, with a suggestively poetic sensuality, foreshadow and complement the remaining contributors' academic pieces. The story showcases, among other things, the liminal subjective experience of a diasporic-global individual, the coexistence of the (post)colonial with the precolonial in its descriptions of the Indian cityscape, as well as the profound entanglement of spirituality and embodiment. This last trend is provocatively illustrated by associating *spiritual symbols* (a butterfly or an ashram) with the more corporeal connotations of sexual desire. As shall be now noted throughout this review, the remainder of the volume makes the work of theoretically elaborating and/or concretely analysing many of these themes.

The second chapter by Murali Sivaramakrishnan elaborates upon Neo-Vedanta philosophy, particularly as developed by the mystic Sri Aurobindo (1872-1952). Countering the orientalist preconception of Indian culture as spiritual rather than rational, Sivaramakrishnan illustrates how both the spiritual and the rational were an integral part of both Vedanta and Neo-Vedanta, contending that such holistic philosophies may provide a healthier form of self-awareness, as opposed to the materialistic and one-dimensional worldview of neoliberal globalisation.

Javier Gil re-examines the capabilities approach to socio-economic inequalities, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, in the next chapter. Specifically, Gil argues that Sen's and Nussbaum's theoretical frameworks for understanding human development and living conditions are deeply indebted to said authors' personal experiences in India, where the experiences of low-class and female bodies allowed them to nuance and to flesh out their liberal critiques of socio-economic injustice.



The representation of bodies in Indian sculpture articulates Eva Fernández del Campo-Barbadillo's piece, where she draws on a wide range of examples, accompanied by visual illustrations. Fernández's main line of argument again resonates with the whole volume, since she proposes to theorise Indian sculpture as both mundanely sensuous, linked to our sense of touch over and above sight, as well as profoundly spiritual, an art in which "the fluidity of the universe turns out to be stone" (56).

Guillermo Rodríguez-Martín's contribution follows, engaging in a close reading of A.K. Ramanujan's poetic opus and personal diaries. Among other themes, Rodríguez-Martín observes and assesses Ramanujan's concern with the difficulty of connecting spiritually with the here-and-now material reality—a preoccupation with what may be referred to as the elusive spectrality of the corporeal and the material, a seeming paradox that poetically illustrates the book's main concern with the underlying unity of spirit and matter.

The next essay is authored by Ángela Mena-González, who studies Anita Desai's *Feasting, Feasting* from a theoretical combination of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. This chapter strives to make the case that the combination of said theories, with their respective reassessments of our relation to the land, would allow for a greater spiritual self-awareness, especially in female postcolonial subjects such as Desai's novel's protagonist.

Literary subjectivities often illustrate and foster processes of self-awareness. In the following piece, Jorge Diego-Sánchez focuses on the representation of misogynistic-patriarchal violence in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* and on how the main character of the novel comes to terms with her history and her own stories. In a very socially oriented, critical reading, Diego-Sánchez reads the novel as an index of what Arundhati Roy calls "the flawed democracy of India" (qtd. in 107), a patriarchally and racially hierarchised status quo which perpetuates itself through the systematic infliction of spiritual and corporeal violence against women, especially against those of lower castes and minority religious groups.

Subsequently, Elena Avanzas-Álvarez continues and complements this critique of misogynistic violence by focusing upon the media discourses surrounding a real case, the 2012 New Delhi Gang Rape. Avanzas-Álvarez's first point is that such crime is not an isolated incident, symptomatic of "Third World" issues, but rather part of a global "epidemic of feminicides" (133), which should be (although they are often not) discursively approached without reproducing the patriarchal, victim-blaming, and sexually objectifying biases of traditional crime narratives.

Turning the focus towards cinema, Francesca Rosso's examines and theorises the symbolism of dance in Bollywood. Echoing the chapter on Indian sculpture, Rosso begins by suggesting that dance is also "a harmonious fusion of sensuality and transcendence" (138). Subsequently, the essay elaborates a series of theoretical notions by which to apprehend Bollywood dance in its whole complexity, specifically approaching it as an example of haptic (rather than optic) cinema, and of affective (rather than cognitive) realism.

Returning to the epitome of a *corporeal-spiritual practice*, Rocío Riestra-Camacho's contribution focuses on yoga's recent commodification in the media as a weight-loss method. More specifically, the chapter re-traces the introduction of yoga into the West, to then critically analyse how it was gradually commodified, feminised and presented as merely a fitness activity. Hence, holistic yoga, part of "the unmarketable Hindi world" (154), was invisibilized by an emphasis on its more instrumental and *functional* use-value.

María Tausiet's subsequent chapter is concerned with the cultural history of chakras, the key symbols of a tradition of allegorical anatomy in which the body is regarded as inseparable from its spiritual life force (prana). Besides noting how this discourse (despite the stereotype) is not exclusive to India, Tausiet is particularly interested in examining how, upon arriving in the West, the complex idea of the chakra became increasingly literalised and related to medical discourses, often with mystifying and/or simplifying effects.

The volume concludes with Antonio Ballesteros-González's contribution, which touches



upon the interrelation of Victorian and Indian spectral narratives (examining not originals, but their English translations). Elaborating upon the socio-economic, the geographic and the psychological connotations of ghosts, Ballesteros-González explores, through a series of short stories, the “spectral dialectic between the colonizers and the colonized” (187), taking ghosts as spectral embodiments of underlying historical (and present) (post/neo)colonial tensions.

It is with such an interdisciplinary variety of approaches that the volume *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India* provides a thought-provoking, prism-like approach to the deeply problematic and perennial human concern with the interrelation of body and soul. In so doing, the volume in its entirety not only debunks the simplistic reductionism of dualistic, Cartesian thought: it also opens up, to the non-specialist academic reader, a world of cultural nuances, bodily diversity and social conflicts in India that may otherwise remain hidden under the inescap-

able veil of orientalist ideologies. As Escobedo de Tapia and Moreno-Álvarez’s introduction puts it, *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India* “illustrates the two dimensions of the Indian self as a result of the contact between two cultures [the colonized and the colonizer] with an evident and reciprocal influence on each other” (3). Moreover, the book achieves all this without falling into a re-mystification or idealisation of Indian culture. Instead, it confronts the reader with a problematic and provocative picture of the multidimensional, on-going processes that conform the country and its cultures, not shying away from a critique of social injustices when it is (as it always is) necessary.

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