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Review

Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma (eds), *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Ix + 243 pp. £55.00. ISBN 9780230113695 (hardback).

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This collection of essays is a welcome contribution to existing scholarship on gender studies and Hinduism. Divided in three parts (theological reflections; reclaiming alternative modalities of feminine power; the feminine principle in Hindu thought and practice: problems and possibilities), the book includes discussions on and around different female deities (from Satī to Sītā, Kālī, Chinnamastā) and the supreme Goddess (Devī), analyses of the role of women in devotional, tantric and Mīmāṃsā traditions, sociological explorations of gender in Hinduism, its relation to the indigenous concept of *jāti*, and the ways in which women engage with their being 'Hindu' in the world (from childbirth, to domestic chores, activism and spirituality).

Although to some the particle 're-' used in the subtitle may signal a form of trendism that should be avoided, this reviewer finds it a felicitous choice. The dialectical method used by the editors and the contributors is a form of exegesis based on a cross-examination of different views and texts (intellectual, political, ethical and artistic). As such the book locates itself in between Hermes' flight, where ideas meet in a continuous dialogue and shape new debates.

Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings adds to an established genre in the study of Hinduism. Gender studies have contributed to important methodological reflections in the way Hindu traditions are, and have been, discussed. (I wish to signal here that authors tend to use interchangeably 'Hindu' and 'Indian'. This should be avoided.) This collection of essays, however, is an exercise in hermeneutics. Even more, it is a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, a method pursued by means of dialexis. Rita Sherma, in her introduction (pp. 1–16), explains that: 'The "hermeneutics of intersubjecvity" is an approach that assumes that the "Other" is not just an object of study, but also a subject from whom I can learn' (p. 2), whereas 'dialexis' is the method that 'should allow us to penetrate...contextual lexical or communicative choices' (p. 2). In that the book follows a tradition of social scientists (C. Lévi-Strauss, Michel Taussig, Vincent Crapanzano, James Clifford, George

Marcus, Renato Rosaldo, to name a few) who emphasized the need to reflect in pedagogical terms on ethnographic work or, more generally, the study of the 'Other'. Learning from the 'Other' is also one of the favourite themes of influential philosophers such as E. Levinas, M. Bakhtin, E. Saïd, M. Foucault, J. Derrida, E. de Martino and most intellectuals of the Frankfurt school (Sherma aptly points at H. G. Gadamer). In so doing, the book sets an important premise.

Sherma's introduction on method, however, clashes with the rationale of the book: 'The academic examination of the Feminine [*sic*] in Hindu traditions has been, for the most part, rooted in efforts to describe and interpret, using variously scholarly methods, including ethnographic, historical, or literary research on Hindu women and Hindu goddess traditions. Important as these areas of study are, they are necessarily circumscribed by the methods of inquiry they employ and hence are, generally speaking, not concerned with exploring the relevance of Hindu understandings of the Feminine to theological concerns or contemporary forms of gender activism' (p. 1).

On the one hand, it is unclear how, and if, 'gender activism' applies to the early and pre-modern Hindu traditional teachings, ritual practices and views discussed by some contributors. On the other, a contextual hermeneutics of themes related to 'theological' concerns is hard to find within Hinduism since theology—just like the Freudian and Marxist schemes that Sherma circumscribes to 'Western ethos' (p. 3)—is not an indigenous category. 'Theology' and 'religion' are both Christian inventions, or perhaps 'reinterpretations' and 're-envisionings' of Greek and Roman concepts. I find therefore problematic to learn that: 'this [book] is essentially a collective work of constructive Hindu thealogy' (p. 1). Sherma's argument is supported by her reference to the 'deeply corrosive tensions' resulting from the application of Western ideas 'to Hindu materials in ways that some individuals have perceived to be inherently distorting and disjunctive' (p. 3) While I cannot but agree that some efforts in discussing the culture of the 'other' (from Germanic *ander* not *alter*, as wrongly stated by Sherma. The word *alter* is in fact Latin; p. 3) have resulted in forms of exploitation that parallel colonialism and Orientalist stances, I vigorously disagree with the stigma cast on reductionists, or those who favour methodological frames whose cradle is continental Europe. In other words, why is theology acceptable and readings such as Marxist, Freudian, and so on, 'corrosive'? The problem in not in the use of 'Western' approaches per se, rather in the ways they are used.

Very wisely, Karen Pechilis (p. 113) and Tracy Pintchman (p. 220) emphasize that the whole academic enterprise is to find points of connections and disagreements, and their location. I therefore commend the efforts of all contributors, who clearly indicate where they stand, what are their limits, sources (of knowledge as well as of inspiration) and hermeneutical project. It is precisely in this that I see the major contradiction of this volume. 'Constructive thealogism' is neither the method nor the view of the contributors,

who reach independent conclusions via alternative paths (e.g. personal experience and devotion, in Bhattacharya Saxena, pp. 61–75; etymology and psychology in Jarow, pp. 173–96) or by re-interpreting some of the premises of the 'Introduction' (e.g. Pechilis, p. 103; Biernacki, pp. 137–40).

Since the book is a hermeneutical work, it could have been wise to encourage contributors to retain, along with translations, the original text (Sanskrit or vernacular). This would have allowed a clearer insight into the material under examination. Unfortunately, only few contributors (Clooney, Biernacki, Patton) engage with an analysis of (parts of) the original text thus providing a wider perspective for a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity.

The book offers new material for furthering present discourses on gender in Hinduism. It is not a reading for everybody, as it requires a good deal of previous knowledge in a number of fields, from Indology to South Asian studies, gender studies, post-structuralism, the philosophy of religion, and so on. Scholars and students interested in gender dynamics in Hinduism will no doubt find several points of reflections in this volume.