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Review

Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata, edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. 326 pp., £95.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-415-415408-8.

This volume is a welcome contribution to the available secondary literature on the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is made up of a broad cross-section of early, mid and late career researchers that demonstrate that the field is in an excellent state of health. Secondly, the topic of gender allows for a wide-ranging and rich discussion of both the primary Sanskrit text and, crucially, a range of contemporary theoretical orientations to this philosophically and politically charged issue. This allows the contributions to have a cumulative impact greater than the sum of their parts by showing, very clearly, what the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* can contribute to inter-disciplinary, and perhaps even everyday, discussion of the role of narrative in the transmission and adaptation of significant social knowledge in general and of gender in particular. Thirdly, and finally, the volume is perfect for undergraduate courses that take up both religion and society in South Asia and broader comparative surveys of world literatures or mythologies.

Beginning with the form rather than the content of the volume, it is worth noting the presence of an extensive, and student friendly, index and glossary. The cumulative bibliography is also very useful. It would have been useful to have had a separation of Sanskrit texts and their translations (where available) as a final concession to the student audience. The price of the book is high, but one hopes that a paperback edition is being considered.

Taking up the content of the volume, the introduction capably sets the scene and provides theoretical ballast for the volume as a whole. Brodbeck and Black sketch out the contours of both a very difficult primary text and perhaps, for once, an even more challenging and abstruse range of secondary sources on gender theory. They achieve this by always braiding the two sets of material such that the standard listing of successive theoretical perspectives on theme 'a' followed by a dry overview of source 'x' is avoided. Their central contention seems to be, although it is never explicitly stated in quite this way, that the complexity of the theoretical field is matched by the complexity of the form and content of the primary data, that is to say the *Mahābhārata*, and that this reflects a convergence of the scope of the two sets of material. This rests on a sense that new developments in the theory of gender, post-Judith Butler, are seeking to engage with the full complexity of the relation between human social life and the ongoing constitution of intentional agents, gendered and otherwise, and that this is also a central concern of the *Mahābhārata*. The mode of operation, target audience, institutional framework and categories of theorization are different, of course, but the scope of the enterprise is not. The idea that gender, and other forms of identity, are fragile and conditional, that is to say ineluctably cultural, permeates, by and large, the range of subsequent analyses by the contributors to the volume, who take up the

fragility of key character and concepts in the *Mahābhārata* itself. This gives the volume a sense of cohesion that is rare in an edited collection of this type.

Emily Hudson opens the volume with a wonderfully evocative analysis of the laments of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Not since Karve has there been, I think, such a sensitive analysis of characters in the *Mahābhārata*. This commences a sequence of broadly narratological and literary-theoretical analyses: Black provides a stimulating, even programmatic, analysis of the potential audiences, and the particular role of female listeners, in the narrative progression of the *Mahābhārata*. Angelika Malinar then provides a very well-wrought close analysis of Draupadī's discourse on kingship. This is followed by Laurie Patton's suggestive investigation of the necessity for a more dynamic sense of both selfhood and gender in the *Mahābhārata* (and of course beyond it). Alf Hiltebeitel's paper marks a turning point in the volume (and evidence of the wisdom of its editorial construction) in that he moves from analysis of the narrative structure of the *Mahābhārata*, and in particular its subordinate narratives, to a broader form of philosophical exegesis. He does so with characteristic range and depth. In particular, the consideration of Kṛṣṇa's acknowledgement of Draupadī as *sakhi,* or friend, and its theological resonances is instructive. This 'shift' in the volume is then extended and developed by Simon Brodbeck who provides a first sketch of what amounts to a new hermeneutic in relation to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* that hovers tantalizingly between indigenous South Asian philosophical exegesis and a broader, potentially multi-applicable, orientation to the reading of the *Mahābhārata* as 'narrative interpretation' of currents in early South Asian religious philosophy. One hopes that this paper will be taken up and addressed by those specialists in Indian Philosophy who rarely trouble themselves with mere 'stories'. Nick Allen initiates a further shift in the volume by moving the focus from philosophical exegesis to a more macro-mythological theorization of the significance of Bhīṣma's role as matchmaker in relation to Indo-European proto-mythology. This macro-theoretical shift is picked up in the penultimate contribution to the volume in the context of nature, and in particular solar and lunar, mythology by Georg von Simson in his analysis of Kṛṣṇa's son Sāmba. In between the very solid contributions of Allen and von Simson come two psycho-analytic papers. In the first of these, James Fitzgerald calls for a post-Freudian extension of the pioneering work of Goldman in initiating psychoanalytic analysis of the Sanskrit epics in the late seventies. In the paper that follows, Andrea Custodi takes the provision of such a nuanced psychoanalytic orientation to the *Mahābhārata* considerably further by offering a Lacanian reading of the 'gender-bending' antics of Arjuna and Ambā.

It is interesting that these two sets of articles both have recourse to a sense of what lies beneath or behind the explicit dimensions of the text and look to underlying principles, psychological tensions or cultural or seasonal patterns. The contributions of Fitzgerald and Custodi elicit the most questions in this regard. I should add that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Fitzgerald provides an extended critique of the work of William Sax on Himalayan *Mahābhārata* performance traditions and focuses, in particular, on Sax's strong rejection of psychoanalytic readings of *Mahābhārata* narratives. Fitzgerald points to those elements of the Himalayan performances that Sax does not account for in his ethnography and the apparent paradox of the transmission of culturally discomforting materials, that is to say of the persistence of the grotesque. While I do not uphold the notion that the persuasion of one's informants can stand as an adequate test of an academic argument, and I do not think that Sax was ever seriously suggesting this, I am not sure that the 'unexplained' or the 'inexplicable' neces-

sitates psychoanalytic orders of explanation in and of itself. That Sax's explanations, and his focus on the conscious concerns and interpretations of his informants do not always explain everything, is by no means to say that we must infer 'cathected objects or family relations' or 'timeless logical statements of some kind of relation'. Equally, however, it does not mean that we cannot do this. It is the logic and rhetoric of necessitation that is faulty here. In addition, the model of 'particularist' psychoanalytic analysis, which Fitzgerald advocates, following Obeyesekere, might shade into a variety of post-structuralist and post-psychoanalytic orientations to cultural data. There are also a large number of interesting, and rather more Marxian than Freudian, ways of accounting for both the constitution of consciousness and the persistence of the grotesque and culturally problematic (in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin in particular).

Custodi, by seeking to apply the Lacanian concept of a particularly feminine *jouissance*, 'beyond the phallus' as Lacan puts it, seems to offer a rather more useful supplement to Goldman's reading and to open up some interesting new ways of construing inter-sexual and trans-sexual relations in the *Mahābhārata*. The use of Lacan is also more generally instructive in that he offers precisely a synthesis of structuralist and contemporary linguistic perspectives which is of course something that Fitzgerald's paper advocates. Indeed, the earlier contribution of Patton on dialogical selves in the *Mahābhārata* might have been synthesized with that of Custodi if the latter paper had taken further the suggestion of Kristevan readings of the *Mahābhārata*. It is Kristeva, of course, who blends Bakhtinian and Lacanian thought with her own strong emphasis on the theory of gender. All in all, this sequence of papers throws up the most in the way of interpretive difficulties, but also some of the more stimulating questions.

It is left to Arti Dhand to close the volume with an ethical turn in the accumulating analyses of the *Mahābhārata*'s discourse on gender. On one level, I find this to be a stimulating and suggestive paper, full of a determination to read the text as having value and authority in the here and now. It is also well anchored in the details of the *Mahābhārata* and wider early South Asian source materials. However, its recurrent tendency to hypostasis (of religion, text, tradition, culture, historical period) and its strangely naive orientation to reception history (showing no inclination to acknowledge either *rezeptions- or wirkungs-geschichte*, the history of reception and effects) are disturbing, as are the questions of agency and anachronism that are prompted by formulations such as 'Hinduism' and 'Hindu thought'. So too are some of its conclusions: whilst upbraiding the *Mahābhārata* for its moments of moral laxity and ethical cowardice, Dhand seems to re-read *ātmatuṣṭi,* moral consciousness in her glossing of the term, as a species of enlightened late-capitalistic liberalism: the sovereign intellect 'testing' ideal-typical constructions of social and moral norms. This reliance on 'conscience' begs as many ethical questions as it resolves. However, my difficulty here is not really with the reading but the homiletic stance; the qualification of *karmayoga* offered in Dhand's paper opens up issues of the nature of the social role of the academic. These are debates that are worth having, but I am unconvinced that we should adopt uncritically Dhand's brand of 'scriptural reasoning' as it is presented here.

Despite these misgivings, I feel that this paper actually constitutes an ideal close to the volume. Dhand achieves something which all good conclusions should; she opens up the debate and strikes at questions which move us beyond both the *Mahābhārata* and gender to issues of social and personal as well as collective and traditional relevance (not to mention, implicitly, understandings of the nature and function of academic contributions to the wider 'knowledge economy'). The editorial agenda throughout

seems to have been one of inclusion on the basis of the quality of engagement with the primary text. This is in itself refreshing, and not one contribution lets us down in this regard. Indeed, it is the passion and rigour of the successive readings of the *Mahābhārata* that constitute this volumes very great strength. This is a stimulating work from start to finish and it should find a place on the shelves of a wide cross-section of academics and students in a variety of fields of study.

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