

## Review

*Rethinking the Body in South Asian Traditions*, edited by Diana Dimitrova. New York: Routledge, 2021. vii + 138 pp., £104 (hb), £29.59 (ebook). ISBN 9780367536183 (hb), 9781003089582 (ebook).

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Much required scholarly attention has been given recently, both worldwide and in South Asia, to the ‘hermeneutically powerful’ (p. 9) and complex processes of the body and its placement in varied contexts and practices. From the later nineteenth century onwards, hysteria and psychosomatic symptoms were all understood as rooted in memories that show up or speak for themselves through symptoms of the body. Thus, the body informs of both the physical and the metaphysical components simultaneously. The first question that comes to mind is why rethink the body? The body is so complex as a topic and so pervasive as it alludes to and informs all the aspects of our lives, not just in terms of South Asian studies but in everything we do. *Rethinking the Body in South Asian Traditions* succeeds in its attempt to let the tradition speak for itself, even though numerous works have been written on the subject.

The book looks at how the body is represented in South Asian traditions through cultural questions, how the body is located in religious and cultural contexts, and interpretations of the body in religious and literary texts. The notion of the body is approached through multifarious angles including the approach of embodiment, the othering of the human body, and the mythologization of the divine body through South Asian cultures and literature. The volume gives space to insider and outsider perspectives and is made of seven chapters that follow an interdisciplinary route to investigate the question of the body. Recently, there has been a drive to go past the colonial shadows to understand the ‘pre-colonial’. The book pushes towards it as one needs to study the community and being by learning the South Asian languages. The book successfully breaks disciplinary silos as it offers textual and ideological analysis, phenomenological analysis, anthropological analysis, and understanding from the standpoint of the philosophy of religion. The timeline is

such that the issue of the body is seen from the second century CE to contemporary times.

Chapter 1 by Christopher Austin focuses on the *Harivaṃśa* or ‘Lineage of the Lord’ written in the second or third century CE, which talks about Kṛṣṇa’s life. By using the notion of the body as a tool for interpretation, he has traced the ritual and mythological anxieties over patriline and the male body to the early Vedic period. Contrarily, Anne Monius in Chapter 2 examines the role of bodies in the work of Tirunavukkaracar, a Tamil Śaiva poet-saint of the seventh century who was affectionately referred to as ‘Appar’ or ‘Father’ (p. 4). The writings pay attention to the gross elements of the body such as sensory distractions, filth and decay. Interestingly, his works give a tremendous insight into human and divine bodies as it is not suggested that the body be rejected, but that it should be accepted in multifarious ways for liberation. The drama *Vijñānagīta* by Keshavdas (1555–1617) is studied by Stefania Cavaliere in Chapter 3 where, through a Vedāntic perspective, the body is understood as being between Self and the world. The yogic practices of the body are indispensable for self-transformation. The work supplies a new way to look at body and mind concerning liberation, through secular requirements, yogic practices, and devotional methods, contextualized in seventeenth-century India.

The role of the subtle body is addressed by Diana Dimitrova in Chapter 4 through the Radhasoami tradition of bhakti and yoga from the nineteenth century onwards, involving meditations such as *surat śabda yoga* (yoga of the sound of the inner current). It studies the links between yoga, bhakti and pilgrimage through meditations where the guru-bhakti of devotees is fostered. The crux lies in surrendering to a ‘living guru’ (p. 70) who can actively perform guiding functions. Chapter 5 deciphers a novel named *Cracking India* (1992). According to Nandi Bhatia, the novel depicts the intersection of religious discourse and cultural nationalism during India’s 1947 partition. The scale of violence that took place, especially to women’s bodies, necessitates a place in fiction where analysis of violence can be looked at through the lenses of community, state and nation. Chapter 6 by Mathieu Boisvert goes beyond the symbolic meaning of rituals to the shaping of the *hijra* body through performance and ritual. This crucial paper gives an insight into a community which has not been much studied and argues that rituals and performance constitute the bodies of *hijras* (auspicious third-gender figures) both socially and culturally. Chapter 7, by Gita Pai, reflects on the iconography of Śiva and representations of dancing divinity using human figures as Hindu gods, and asserts that those who protest are vested more in their proclaimed rights than in their concerns over the actual preservation of religious purity.

The *sūtra* (thread) which binds all the chapters together is made up of the multifarious processes involved with the body: the processual nature of embodiment, the divine body and its mythologizing, and the ‘othering’ of the human body. Relating to one’s body, the body of the divine gods, and

making sense of embodiment in giving meaning to human and divine bodies are understood as cultural phenomena for which the book develops its foundations by deciphering South Asian literature and cultures. The issue of body-mind dichotomy—also known as ‘Cartesian dualism’—is discussed (p. 4), where it is explained how contributions from Hinduism and Buddhism can help one overcome this. Seemingly, perhaps Merleau Ponty was influenced by ‘the Hindu concept of embodiment’ (p. 4) as Ponty’s concept of ‘chiasm’ can be linked with Brahman and Ātman where Brahman becomes embodied in Ātman. The concept of *īśvara* can also be interpreted in this way. This way of looking at the body has been possible due to Hindu and Buddhist thought that allows for overcoming the dualism that Western philosophy has always struggled with.

On page 48, the ebook incorrectly refers to Foucault as ‘Faucault’, which could be corrected. We can say that the authors have attempted to render not only the body through text but also the body as a text which can be deciphered and thus becomes a ground for multiple meanings. Examining the relationship between the body and emotion through the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni would have enabled the reader to decipher the body through the vision of performance studies. The book could have looked at the representation of disabled bodies in the epics, such as the characters of Śakuni and Dhṛtarāṣṭra from the *Mahābhārata* and the possible themes which could have emerged out of this. I hope we keep on contemplating the importance of being embodied. The current book has begun a dialogue but we need to go beyond the book to explore these issues in greater detail. The book would be an invaluable source to scholars and students interested in body studies, South Asia, gender studies, South Asian cultures, philosophy and comparative literature.