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BOOK REVIEW

Subjects That Matter: Philosophy, Feminism, and Postcolonial Theory

Namita Goswami. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019 (ISBN: 978-1438475660)

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Namita Goswami's *Subjects That Matter: Philosophy, Feminism, and Postcolonial Theory* begins by identifying a common "nonidentitarian value" that feminist and postcolonial theoretical approaches share with philosophy, understood as an open-ended pursuit of wisdom: a deep sense of respect for the "heterogeneity" of our subject matter and for the complexity of existing beings (2). This heterogeneity overflows our human capacity to categorize in any kind of timeless way. As a tenet and a tool for our historical moment, this respect for heterogeneity is more urgent considering our planetary context and "the extraordinary collapse of species-life and the destruction of the physical environment" (2). As Goswami observes, "climate change puts the lie to Eurocentrism as heterogeneity is the very basis upon which terrestrial life, human civilization, and human thought depend" (3). In other words, Eurocentrism shows its homogenizing limits as the system that continues to prevent the historical (as well as conceptual) achievements of postcoloniality, while it also destroys the diversity of species-life for a short-term accumulation of resources in the so-called advanced West. Goswami suggests that we might productively thwart Eurocentric frames when we work to uphold our "subject matter" without clinging to inherited frames of reference, such as what "properly" counts as "philosophy" and other forms of disciplinary legitimacy in the Euro-US academy.

Goswami's book will be of interest to decolonial feminist researchers, scholars, graduate and advanced undergraduate students, especially those engaging Spivak's question of subaltern speech, and/or those drawing insights from Frankfurt School critical theory to more recent feminist and/or postcolonial conversations, and/or those exploring critical animal studies, environmental philosophy, and other inquiries attuned to an ecological, more-than-human frame, without forgetting the differential distribution of harms in the ongoing history of Western imperialism and globalization. This book will be generative for scholars and students looking to make connections between and among these critical concerns, and to explore underlying concerns of "difference" and the possibility of a nonantagonistic understanding of difference.

Goswami's inquiry begins from the question that animated her dissertation, in response to Gayatri Spivak's 1988 essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" This question was: "Who was Roop Kanwar?" The answer, at least on paper: a nineteen-year-old Indian widow who was immolated on the funeral pyre of her husband, as a *sati*, before 5,000 spectators in 1987. As Goswami writes, "No matter what scholarly tradition I used

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to understand her experience," from philosophers to postcolonial and feminist theorists, "I battled contradiction and unknowability. Consequently, I stated in the introduction that the project was about a specific person whose experience evokes horror. But also, the project did not seem to be about her" (6). Along these lines, Goswami interprets Spivak's conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak" as a matter of intelligibility, a product of a contradiction in the theoretical horizon of 1980s Euro-American academia and its values of authenticity and transparency. The "subject" was said to be fragmented and unknowable while historically marginalized groups were expected to speak their needs in a unified voice, for example, the workers' struggle (7). When "subaltern" women speak to researchers, Western observers presume to hear them in an unmediated way; yet this is possible only insofar as we "rehabilitate the subject's hegemony by ceding the intellectual as a transparent vehicle of the other's transparent voice" (7). Claims to represent the "underrepresented" evade the complicity of the representer in the existing structures that make this marginalization so. With Spivak, Goswami emphasizes the heterogeneity of subaltern speech under an imperial gaze, as a "structurally produced silence" (8). How, then, do we stay close to the heterogeneity of our subject matter, especially when that subject matter has been historically buried and sedimented under colonial projections? Part I, "Heterogeneity," suggests that we do this through staying close to texts; as Goswami writes, heterogeneity is "at once utterly omnipresent and out of reach," but the possibility for this encounter is exegetical (5). To this end, Goswami takes interest in "small moments of affinity and disappointment," which release the heterogeneity that "confounds our habitual disciplinary lexicons" (28). Goswami cultivates glimpses of heterogeneity in and through "lovingly orchestrated moments of exegetical exchange" between philosophers such as Adorno, intersectional feminists such as Barbara Christian, and postcolonial theorists such as Spivak (36).

Goswami's first two chapters engage the Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor Adorno's claim that an "intellectual experience" must remain "grounded in the subject matter" (6), particularly his nonantagonistic understanding of difference and his intellectual humility concerning inherited (Western) concepts and categories. She acknowledges the Eurocentrism of Adorno's frame of reference, as she also finds that Adorno's "negative dialectic" can be taken to postcolonial aims not envisioned by the author. This negativity of a "negative dialectic" differs "from a systematically derived logical and/or categorical negation" because it upends rather than supports the explanatory power of identity at work in the latter, and thus renounces any claim to a totalizing account (38). Through Adorno, Goswami finds it possible to imagine postcoloniality anew in a philosopher from the past, as a "space-clearing gesture" (38). She writes, "Adorno's postcoloniality breaches the shock and awe of identity by naming nonidentity: how do conceptual systems make their own ghosts?" (42). In other words, how might the nonidentical remainders that overflow our existing terms and categories offer critical insights, and perhaps even enable the grip of our dominant operative schemas to loosen? To renounce our inherited certainties is uncomfortable, but Goswami insists that it is part of the spirit of "philosophical inquiry" itself to give up security for new insights (43–44).

Goswami's third chapter turns to a close reading of the "History" section of Spivak's 1999 book, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, which engages the Rani of Sirmur and the "peculiar domestic arrangement" that led her to claim the traditional immolation of widows as a *sati*. In the early nineteenth century, an agreement between the governments of Britain and Nepal exiled the Rani's husband from his territory in the

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Himalayan foothills, replacing him with his young son and establishing the Rani as his guardian until the child was old enough to rule (50). For the maintenance of their sovereign line, the Rani and her son were made to express gratitude to their colonizers, as a "civilizing mission" (58). A transitional figure between Hindu and British law (62), the Rani's claim to patriarchal honor and sacrifice (tradition) disrupts the East India Company's progress, and this led to a British imperial banning of *sati* in 1829 as a matter of "protection" for women (65). This 1829 banning by Lord William Bentinck, Goswami writes, was so significant because, with this policy of banning the self-immolation of widows, colonial power could fashion itself as "civilizing mission." Goswami returns to this history in her eighth and ninth chapters, to the imperial logic of a "civilizing mission" according to which British men must rescue Indian women from the traditions of Indian men: "European forms of patriarchy thereby remain invisible. Framing colonial occupation in terms of the chivalrous defense of Indian womanhood enables colonizers to attribute a natural, rational, and universal basis for their occupation of power over indigenous communities" (141). To avoid the "ventriloquism" of the Euro-US academy when engaging with non-Western subjects, Spivak is careful to distinguish her speculative figure as "my Rani" (50), a figure about whom so little was recorded, although comparatively so much more of her remains "than the most detailed record of women's names in colonial India" (61). How might we glimpse the Rani's heterogeneity from this record without thereby attempting to capture her in the Western terms she sought to refuse?

Toward this possibility of a nonidentical glimpse, Goswami's fourth and fifth chapters take up work by Black feminists, particularly the pushback that surrounded Barbara Christian's 1987 article, "The Race for Theory," staying with this moment "to retrieve the critical force of Christian's cautionary tale" (72). At the time of this article's publication, as Goswami puts it, "Eurocentrism pitted postcolonial theorists against older minorities," particularly African Americans, by taking "the former's knowledge production as a model minority discourse" (11). Against this antagonistic framing by the "major discourse," Goswami draws on Spivak to develop the provocative claim that "black women's works are paradigmatically postcolonial" in the US and, at the same time, "exemplarily western," an understanding of difference that disrupts our inherited binaries and "brings Eurocentric identity politics to crisis" (89). With Hortense Spillers as well as Christian, Goswami proposes that postcolonial feminist philosophers engage the heterogeneity of these lives "not as the law of theory's limit but for an apocryphal genealogy of lost mothers who shelter significance" (101). It is worth pausing on this last part of Goswami's sentence: "for an apocryphal genealogy of lost mothers who shelter significance." The postcolonial feminist philosopher cannot access that significance in full, but there is still so much to find, and more to wonder about.

Part II, "The Resurrection of the Flesh," brings these concerns of avoiding the subject matter and traditionally sanctioned ignorance to bear on climate change, especially with respect to colonial distinctions of nature and culture, and to the "aporetic juncture" that arises in the gap between lived experience and our concepts. Goswami writes, "At this moment of exegesis, we witness how nature's heterogeneity is cut (out) from our sacred texts *for* the functional concept

of nature, which keeps nature itself in the penumbra of an exceptional species" (13). The sixth chapter challenges Adorno's own humanism and raises new questions of animality, and the seventh engages Paul Gilroy's Wellek Lectures and his call, via Adorno, for a vital planetary humanism. The eighth and ninth chapters return to Spivak and subaltern speech; the tenth reads Spillers's 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe:

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An American Grammar Book," alongside Spivak to consider the place of animals in these accounts of historical violence, including the Middle Passage, slavery, and imperial rule (166).

The eighth and ninth chapters of *Subjects That Matter* resonate most, for this reader, living in the United States in early July 2022. Goswami writes about how practices involving women's bodies and their "protection" have so often, in colonial history, been "the ground upon which the imperial and nationalist battles are waged" (141). This cultural logic of "woman *as* good wifehood . . . obfuscates utter contingency as ontology" (152). Women appear in the archive by virtue of their derived difference from and relation to men, figured as in need of benign protection, but this nonnecessary (contingent) situation gets sedimented into everyday life as though it were ontologically necessary. Disputing the "universal" subject of liberal humanism, Goswami follows Spivak in turning to historical categories that situate the subject, such as race, gender, class, and other "knotted dynamics at hand" that shape and subconsciously filter knowledge-production (136). Such a particularized account not only gets closer to its subject matter (for example, the nineteenth-century Indian widow under British colonial rule) but also underscores the contingency of our social order, which means that it could be organized and lived out differently. As we unravel and work through this inheritance, Goswami insists that we can come to set up a more adaptive, more nurturing order of things by striving for a nonantagonistic understanding of difference.

Lauren Guilmette is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Elon University in North Carolina. Her work explores questions of "affect" in the context of power and oppression, inspired by decolonial feminism, Foucault, and critical phenomenology. Her work has been published in journals such as *differences*, *philoSOPHIA*, and the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*.

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