

Transfiguring Psychoanalysis and Culture: Review of “Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir: Emerging Themes in Culture, Family, and Childhood” (Edited by Manasi Kumar, Anup Dhar, and Anurag Mishra; Foreword by Erica Burman)

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“What happens when psychoanalysis – born in Western Europe, having Franco-German and Anglo-American moorings, and in a largely Judeo-Christian milieu (i.e., with paradigms *stemming from its own cultural tradition*) – travels eastwards and meets a somewhat *different cultural tradition*” (Kumar, Dhar, and Mishra 2018, xiii-xiv)? How do Indian psychoanalysts in the past and the present, mobilize the Western European/Anglo-American tradition? What kinds of changes occur in the (im)plants and the places and practices where the other (psychoanalysis) has now grown roots? These questions drive the recently published volume entitled, “Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir: Emerging Themes in Culture, Family, and Childhood,” edited by Manasi Kumar, Anup Dhar, and Anurag Mishra, with a foreword written by the British critical psychologist Erica Burman, and thirteen contributions from the practitioners and scholars of Indian psychoanalysis.

“Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir” *transfigures*[\[1\]](#) the history, theory, and practice of psychoanalysis as a tool for self and social transformation in contemporary India. The volume discusses how culture and psychoanalytical theory/practice intersect. The *Indian terroir* is an ecological metaphor that operates in its specified geopolitical space, the complex biopolitical environment and the milieu of material and socio-historical conditions assembled as *culture* in the nation-state. The contributions articulate psychoanalytical responses to the “cultural questions in clinical contexts” and “clinical questions in cultural contexts” (ibid., xiv).

In the *Foreword*, Erica Burman extends the metaphor of *terroir* to refer to a terrain/turf that provides the conditions of possibility for cultivation. She considers the British, French, and Indian engagements coeval, arguing how psychoanalysis is a product of its Judeo-Christian society as much as what it has become in another geopolitical space. Burman attends to the ambiguity of the “Indian-ness” of this venture to explain how the authors use this as a diagnosis of the nation-state of India, not as a claim of territorial ownership.

The editors, Manasi Kumar, Anup Dhar, and Anurag Mishra, declare from the beginning how a discussion of the interface of psychoanalysis and culture requires critical reflexivity about both terms. “Bose’s work could only have evolved in India, from the *Yoga Sutra*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Purana Pravesa* [ancient texts that circulate within and inform the contemporary],” the editors (ibid., xiii) reconfigure the psychoanalytical tradition with an alternate genealogy as the Indians’ (Girindrasekhar Bose and Sudhir Kakar) attempt to complete an outline left

unfinished by the founder of psychoanalysis.

The editors, however, are quick in disavowing a commitment to the nationalist Hindutva project. They reconstruct the “Indian-ness” in terms of the fractured history of partition and the Hindu-Muslim relations in comparison to the Holocaust in the European terroir; the gendered identities of the Indian subjects entangled in the absented perspectives of the woman; the presence of a Mother-Infant dyad *different* from the predominantly Oedipal mythos of the Judaic-Christian-Hellenic milieu of European psychoanalysis; as well as the polytheistic and syncretistic history of faith compared to the Judeo-Christian monotheism (and its absent other, Islam, as Benslama [2009] argued). The editors retain the term “Indian” without compromising the enormous diversity of the *Indian terroir*, debunking the myth of a Hindu nationalist unity erasing all others.

The thirteen chapters in the volume cover a wide range of themes distributed in three parts: (1) Mothers, therapists, and matricide (chapter one to five); (2) Faith, religion, and violence (chapter six to eight); and (3) Cultural identity and Indian imagination (chapter nine to thirteen). **Part I, Mother, Therapists, and Matricide**, begins with the chapter entitled “When the Enthralled Mother Dreams: A Clinical and Cultural Composition,” by Amrita Narayanan. She describes Agni and her struggle with the figure of a “watchful mother (and mother-in-law)” who prevent(ed) her from the pleasure of drawing. Extending Kakar’s concept of the “maternal enthrallment” of the Indian boy-child to the Indian girl-child, Narayanan articulates Agni’s struggles beyond limiting them to the sociological framing of fitting in the role of a new bride in her husband’s family, and beyond the universalist psychoanalytical explanation of regulating narcissistic states of consciousness. On the one hand, Agni lacks fulfilling female role models, and on the other, she articulates the wish to self-fulfillment as secondary, receding behind the expressed first wish to improve herself so her “husband can have a better life” (p. 8). *Culturally*, Narayanan argues, Agni is “mourning in the composition of the Indian daughter” (p. 13) who is hesitant in her psycho-socio-cultural composition of a “blank sense of nothingness” (p. 9). While the myth of goddess Parvati as the “erotic mother” circulates in the collective imaginary, Narayan “hears” Agni’s mourning in the absented figure of a powerful “erotic mother” and a cultural imagination resonating with such presence/absence.

In chapter two, “Devi Possession: At the Intersections of Religion, Culture, and Psychoanalysis,” Sabah Siddiqui and Bhargavi Davar contradict the Freudian, secularist doubt regarding the value of religion with a postcolonial critique of the problems of translation and representation in classical psychoanalysis. They discuss the narratives of two women belonging to a Scheduled Caste and residing in the low-income slums of Pune, Maharashtra. Both women had experienced possession by goddesses and now considered them as *Aradhi* articulating their experience as “*angamadhe devaaha* (the deity inhabiting the body)” (p. 24). Embodying a religion without the intrusion of a priestly caste, a foundational text or fixed canon, Siddiqui and Davar argue, the *Aradhi* women’s lives reconfigure the power relations between themselves and their husbands, between the Self and the Other as a “virtual society of one person” (p. 29) and yet situated in the new sisterhood of the *Aradhi* women.

The next three chapters continue with the intersections of gender and culture, around the central figure of the Mother. In chapter three, “Of Mothers and Therapists: Dreaming the Indian Infant,” Urvashi Agarwal discusses the difficulties of work with people suffering from psychotic

and borderline states and the observation of the Indian girl child. Juxtaposing her own “infantile feelings” in the counter-transference reaction, Agarwal argues for the centrality of the body and considers the therapist’s mind as a “maternal space” analogous to the engaged “maternal mind” that the infant requires for growth (p. 47). The centrality of the maternal figure is further stressed in chapter four, “Myth, Misogyny, Matricide” by Nilofer Kaul who engages with the Hindu mythical figure of *Putana*, whose poisoned breasts suckled baby Krishna but failed to kill him and who died in the process. Kaul connects this myth to the myth-laden dream of a patient as the “enigma of the mother” (p. 65) in masculine fantasy, an ambivalent “aesthetic of conflicts” to desire and to destroy.

Another, more predominant Hindu mythology around *Sita* (a figure of chastity, devotion, and sacrifice in the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*) is followed up in chapter five, “Sita through the Time Warp: On the Ticklish Relationship between Renunciation and Moral Narcissism in the Lives of Young Indian Women,” by Shifa Haq. Haq extends Kakar’s discussion of the ascetic Sita-ideal to accommodate an enamored Sita (seduced by a golden deer and falling prey to the desire of *Ravana*). Discussing the troubles of a patient experiencing maternal depression, Haq argues for the possibility of the Sita-ideal appearing differently in a mother-daughter dyad, corresponding to the shifts in contemporary cultural imagination.

Part II: Faith, Religion, and Violence, begins with chapter six entitled “Terrors to Expansions: A Journey Mediated through Faith” by Shalini Masih. Masih frames the local category of *samkat* (possessing spirit) as terror, the organization of unmet/abolized (*atripta*) states in Ruhi, a young woman she met at the *Balaji* temple, Rajasthan. The therapist collaborates with the temple healer to involve both of Ruhi’s parents in the healing process with success. Masih argues how it was necessary for her to let go of the habitual “omniscience and omnipotence” (p.100) of a therapist, and allow her intuitive sense to ensure that the *duta* (messenger) sent by the deities can do the work.

Chapter seven, “Only Hindu, Also the Patient; Only Muslim, Also the Therapist: Recovering the Historical Other” by Zehra Mahdi focuses on the intimate encounter between a Hindu patient and a Muslim therapist in the fractured landscape of faith and the troubled history of the 1947 partition of British colonial India into “Hindu” majority India and “Muslim” majority Pakistan. Mahdi demonstrates an instance of the failure of therapy when the current “psychotic” Hindu state avenging the historical past of Muslim persecution is enacted in furthering the delusions of a Hindu, psychotic patient who implicated the Muslim-ness of her therapist in her sense of suffering loss.

The following chapter extends the discussion of Hindu-Muslim relations with the *critical event* of the 2002 Gujarat riot and the plight of children in its aftermath. In chapter eight, “Disaster Diaries: Riot-Affected Children in Ahmedabad and Hyderabad,” Atrayee Sen and Manasi Kumar situate child violence and vulnerability within the long history of communal violence. Analyzing the narratives of riot-affected boys, they discuss how their decisions to “fight violence with violence” related to the experiences of “facing their own mortality” (*maut ke mooh dekhne ke baad*, after seeing the face of death) (p. 134). The riot-affected children cannot return to an imagined social and familial normality in the continued aftermath of their “social disability” (p. 137) and the impending possibility of future riots.

Part III: Cultural Identity and Indian Imagination, consists of five contributions. In chapter nine, “Two Cultures? Frontiers of Faith in Yoga and Psychoanalysis,” Ajeet N. Mathur draws parallels between the apparently incommensurable traditions of Yoga and Psychoanalysis focusing on their correspondences and differences. Both traditions share the aims of holistic well-being, experiential learning through teacher-student relationship, and have divergent histories of marginalization and revival in India. Mathur argues for the (post-secular) possibility of blending the body awareness and mindfulness of yoga with the reflexive techniques of psychoanalysis to move past their “untouchable” relations (p.145).

The next three chapters together comprise of an elaborate dialogue with Sudhir Kakar and his interlocutors. In chapter ten, “Psychoanalysis, Culture, and the Cultural Consciousness,” Kakar gives an autobiographical account of the emergence of his interest in the role of culture as a trainee of his German analyst in Frankfurt, reflecting on their “cultural differences” around the couch (p. 166). Kakar emphasizes how his inheritance of *guru-chela* (teacher-student) relationship ideals clashed with the doctor-patient relation embodied by the German analyst, and how the primary focus on *speech* in Freudian psychoanalysis ran counter to the significance of silence in Hindu and Buddhist ways of learning. Kakar argues that the similarity in *cultural orientations* within a society is what makes psychoanalysis possible in non-Western societies. When the analyst encounters *difference*, Kakar suggests that “reflective openness to, and interrogation of his or her [therapist’s] own cultural origins,” the *cultural unconscious* so to speak, is required (p. 174). In the following chapter, “Imagining the Real: An Essay on Sudhir Kakar’s ‘Culture and Psyche: A Personal Journey,’” Alfred Margulies comments on Kakar’s contribution. He adds an analyzed dream to argue how it might be possible to “dream into other’s cultures” (p. 186).

Chapter twelve, “As Psychoanalysis Travels: Manasi Kumar, Anup Dhar, and Anurag Mishra in Conversation with Sudhir Kakar,” is a short response by Kakar to the question “whether psychoanalysis is at all possible in a non-Western society such as India” (p. 189). In spite of Indian alterities to the psychoanalytical vision, Kakar argues for theoretical and practical “adjustments” keeping in mind the shared “cultural unconscious” among patients and therapists, and its entanglement with the individual, dynamic unconscious. *Translation* has to happen to make any kind of psychoanalysis possible in the Indian terroir.

“Bose was [...] not offering Freud Indian case material. He was offering Freud ‘a new theory of mental life.’ Bose was thus inverting the *Order of Things*” (Dhar in this volume, p. 202). In the early part of the twentieth century, Girindrasekhar Bose (1887-1953), a Bengali psychiatrist from colonial India, began a correspondence with the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), better known as the founder of psychoanalysis. More than two decades of the Bose-Freud correspondence contributed to the history of psychonalysis concerning both the situated practices and the production of theories from/in (post-)colonial India (ibid.). A post-Orientalist epistemic reflection on this encounter triggers Anup Dhar’s contribution, “Genealogies of Aboriginalization,” the thirteenth and final entry of the volume. The book ends with the beginning of *correspondence* and *difference* between Bose and Freud with the continuity of interventions *from* India, addressing not only what “Indian” psychoanalysis is but *what it can become*.

Contributions and Critique

“Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir” contributes to the existing literature on psychoanalysis and culture in Asia (Gerlach, Hooke, and Varvin 2013). Readers interested in psychoanalysis, mental health, and postcolonial theory, have much to digest and absorb from these contributions. For practicing psychoanalysts, the book provides ample examples of mobilizing the psychological and the socio-cultural dimensions in the therapeutic encounters. For ethnographers who do not often have the privilege of experiencing these intimate encounters, the challenge is to move beyond offering empirical descriptions and feeding established critiques of psychoanalysis and to pay attention to other ways of knowing and practicing psychoanalysis. For anthropologists situated in the North, another lesson is how to document the *transfigured* theories/practices of cultures intersecting with that of self and social transformation from/in the South (India and elsewhere).

The book has some minor shortcomings. For one, it leaves open the question of how “Indian” psychoanalysis is embedded in the wider history of mental illness and treatment in India (Fabrega Jr. 2009). The intersection of culture and psyche is a shared concern for psychoanalytical anthropology that deals with similar topics that are discussed in this volume (Obeyesekere 1990). Except for chapter eight (Sen and Kumar) and chapter thirteen (Dhar), engagement with the contemporary debates in this field was absent. The edited volume would have also benefited from the various critiques of psychoanalysis in the past and recent ethnographic findings in India and elsewhere (Das 2015; Basu and Sax 2015; Basu 2014; Pinto 2014; Pandolfo 2018; Mittermaier 2010).

Furthermore, anthropologists have provided many critiques and alternatives for the notion of *culture* for several decades (Wagner 2016; Abu-Lughod 2008; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Except for Kakar’s contribution (chapter ten), *culture* remains unpacked in this volume. Since the *affective transformation* is a core psychoanalytical trope/aim, contemporary affect theories and local theories of emotion (McDonald 1995) would have enhanced this book. Finally, a more rigorous analysis of the multiple vernaculars (for example, Bengali, Marathi, Urdu) in the therapeutic encounters could help shift the dominant image of Hindi-speaking “Indian-ness.”

Finally, the edited volume offers not only theoretical/empirical contributions but also visual evocation. Eight images by Katharina Poggendorf-Kakar appear between the sixth and seventh chapters, entitled, “Woman with birds, Erotik; Man and Woman with Birds; Woman with Birds 2; Mother and Child; Erotik 2; Man and Woman with Flower; Bath Subar; and Women and Mirror.” The readers would have benefited from a brief discussion of these images relating to the relevant texts. In this regard, these images would have been better placed in the first part of the book.

However, these were only some minor missed opportunities in the otherwise excellent volume that not only contributes to the psychoanalytical theory/practice but also to the medical and psychological anthropology of South Asia.

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[1] In contrast to the concepts of ‘assemblage’ and ‘transformation,’ *transfiguration* refers to the processes of fluid contingency and dynamic change that are never complete (Schnepf 2017). The concept of transfiguration provided the framework for the tri-national medical anthropology conference held at the University of Basel on 17-18 February 2017.