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# Review

*The Afterlives of the Bhagavad Gītā: Readings in Translation*, by Dorothy M. Figueira. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. vi + 378 pp., £75 (hb). ISBN 9780198873488 (hb).

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The framing of this book is potentially misleading: the subtitle implies that it is about *Bhagavad Gītā* translations. Three of the book's four parts contain the word 'translation' in their title, and Chapter 1 surveys theories of translation. But although Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the first European translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the enduring topic is the *Gītā*'s more general interpretation, and its role in the lives and thoughts of particular historical individuals, among them British imperialists; German romantics, anti-romantics and Nazis; Indian nationalists; and American poets.

The book thus resembles Eric Sharpe's *The Universal Gītā* (1985), Catherine Robinson's *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition* (2006) and Richard Davis's *The Bhagavad Gita: a Biography* (2015). Robinson showed how the solo *Gītā* came to represent Hinduism as a whole, and that analytical frame is evident here too. In its attitude the book resembles Figueira's earlier book *The Exotic: a Decadent Quest* (1994), from which it recycles the chapter on Humboldt, A. W. Schlegel, Hegel and Cousin.

Readers interested in the *Gītā*'s translation should refer to Gerald Larson's article in *Philosophy East and West* 31.4 (1981), and to Chapter 5 of Davis's book. The word 'translation' has tighter and looser senses, the latter including any type of recontextualization; and Figueira's use of the tools and terms of translation theory is insightful even when these are applied beyond their usual remit. But the book should not be taken for what it is not. Figueira did study some Sanskrit with D. H. H. Ingalls at Harvard, but the book only occasionally engages with the Sanskrit *Gītā*, and then with limited success (see pp. 236, 238).

The book only occasionally engages with the *Gītā* at all. The topic is what has been made of it, and this is so many different things that it seems odd for them all to proceed from the same set of verses (in which Saṃjaya narrates to Dhṛtarāṣṭra the conversation between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa on the Kurukṣetra battlefield). In this

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book the *Gītā*'s presence is rather an absence: the introduction does not really introduce the *Gītā*'s contents, perhaps so that the reviewed interpretations will be contextualized by their historical, cultural and biographical moments rather than their hermeneutical legitimacy. Yet Figueira sometimes indicates that she thinks an interpretation particularly errant. Indeed, in deciding which interpretations to include she deliberately overrepresents unusual or 'out of the way' ones (*insolites*, pp. 6, 342). The book's fascinating, irreverent and occasionally hilarious last part includes commentary on the Indologists who reconstructed various 'original *Gītā*s', and on Jakob Hauer, Heinrich Himmler, T. S. Eliot, Robert Oppenheimer, Simone Weil, Savitri Devi, Allen Ginsberg, Thomas Merton, Philip Glass, and several librettists.

Judging by Figueira's occasional comments about the *Gītā* itself, she views it in an Advaitic light, as a text less about the theology of Kṛṣṇa than about the equation of *brahman* and *ātman* (p. 61), and as containing a theory of illusion (pp. 95, 261). Some readers will baulk at such a view. The book unfortunately downplays a significant phase of the *Gītā*'s early interpretation, during which it was removed from the *Mahābhārata* (the context within which it had its own meaning) and manhandled by medieval philosophers, each of whom made Kṛṣṇa expound whatever philosophy they antecedently favoured. The earliest such interpretation—Śaṅkara's—is arguably as egregious as any of those Figueira criticizes (see T. G. Mainkar, *A Comparative Study of the Commentaries on the Bhagavadgītā*, 1969), but has perhaps informed her own interpretation more than any other. Figueira deals with the medieval philosophers only briefly and obliquely, by way of Lokmanya Tilak's commentary (pp. 121–27). She suggests that Tilak's criticism of his precursors 'is a particularly gendered discursive strategy' (p. 121 n. 7), but it was surely due to his educated Indian audience. Figueira tends to scoff at interpreters' privileged cultural locations and their narcissistic appropriations of the text, and it would have been interesting to see her do this for the medieval Indian interpreters, against whom the charge of exoticism is harder to level.

In Part III, the book's centrepiece, Figueira curates a bitter showdown between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the *Gītā*'s social implications. Ambedkar, advocating for the rights of so-called 'Untouchables', saw the affirmation of caste hierarchy as the text's main purpose, whereas Gandhi sought to distance the text's comments on class (*varṇa*; everyone must do their *varṇadharma*) from the degenerate caste system of his own time. Figueira calls Gandhi a racist, an antisemite, and an apologist for the caste system; and the issue of caste exercises her with other interpreters too. But if the *Gītā* thinks that family of birth depends on past karma, then this can undercut some issues of social justice, power and politics that might arise under a one-life model imported from the Abrahamic traditions. Arjuna asks what happens if a faithful follower of Kṛṣṇa dies before attaining perfection (*Gītā* 6.37–39), and Kṛṣṇa says they are reborn 'in a house of pure and prosperous people' to carry on trying (*śucīnāṃ śrīmatāṃ gehe*, 6.41c). When Europe and America look east, karma has often been a stumbling block, and it is in this book. Figueira denounces caste oppression, making Ambedkar the book's main hero in

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his denunciation of the *Gītā*: 'The *śūdra*s and the Untouchables simply could not improve their status in the Hindu world sanctioned by the *Gītā*' (p. 190). But when she says Gandhi 'claimed that inequality would be adjusted by reincarnation', this is just a footnote (p. 186 n. 14). Aghast at Gandhi's effrontery, she does not take the theory of karmic justice seriously. It is interesting, then, that she also dismisses Hegel, whose view imputing to the *Gītā* (and Indian philosophy in general) 'a vision of fatalism that implied moral failure' (p. 61) has its own afterlife, not least in the views of Christian apologists such as R. D. Griffith, Robert Caldwell and John Murdoch, who emphasized the human being as a judgable moral agent, but whom Figueira does not cover.

In the *Gītā*, when God tells the human being what to do, it is to slay his foes on the battlefield. Kṛṣṇa explains the mentality required for Arjuna's engagement in a prejustified violent struggle, and this martial setting invites practical interpretations in the context of other violent struggles (against e.g. colonial rulers, or the Third Reich's enemies or friends) or allegorical struggles. Kṛṣṇa's focus on doing one's duty without attachment to its fruits entails a basic activist interpretation that recurs in diverse guises throughout this book. One might quibble with Figueira's choice of *dramatis personae* or with some of her analyses, but she provides an entertaining and erudite tour through the *Gītā*'s afterlife and a reminder of its role in world history, and her book will be useful to many teachers and students.

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