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Julietta Singh. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Duke UP, 2018.

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**Julietta Singh. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*.
Duke UP, 2018.**

Abstract

Review of Julietta Singh. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Duke UP, 2018. xi + 216pp.

Keywords

Unthinking Mastery, Singh

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In *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*, Julietta Singh seeks to reinvigorate postcolonial theory for leftist activists and intellectuals. Singh argues that a vibrant postcolonial theory depends on teasing out how colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial discourses are affected by the politics of “mastery,” a term the author refuses to define because doing so would imply authority and power. Instead, Singh identifies mastery’s three qualities: mastery mutilates, mastery subordinates, and mastery requires hierarchized relations. Singh’s ambition is that critical awareness of mastery will liberate future activists and scholars to enact “utopian desires” (27-28). The author advocates “dehumanism,” a critical practice useful for deconstructing colonial power structures that value some human beings over others. *Unthinking Mastery* is simultaneously a personal text filled with autobiographical elements. The text consists of two distinct halves: first, chapters engaging the writings of anticolonial activists who resisted colonial mastery while entangled with anticolonial masterful practices; and, second, chapters illustrating how postcolonial literatures gesture towards dehumanist subjectivities, practices, and policies transcending mastery.

In chapter 1, Singh focuses on the gendered politics of decolonization and the discourse of mastery with a focus on Gandhian and Fanonian thought. For Singh, Mohandas Gandhi, and Frantz Fanon, despite their inclusive aims, shared a belief that decolonization hinged on an anti-colonial self-mastery that excluded “colonized women, indigenous peoples, the ‘uncivilized’ groups of the emergent nation state, the animal, the cripple, and nature itself” (31). Fanon’s political masculinism and universal male subject rendered feminine subjectivity both crucial and absent from his decolonization narratives. Singh thus argues that Fanon’s embodiment of an emergent decolonized subjectivity eschewed gendered and sexualized figures. Likewise, Gandhi perpetuated gendered oppression through the inclusive narrative of home rule. A new masterful governing Indian required a rearticulating of masculine gender; however, women—mothers and wives—emerged as static keepers of practices without agency. In chapter 2, Singh shifts attention to intellectual mastery and language with the aim of presenting new possibilities for a postcolonial “dehumanist education” (69). Jacques Derrida, Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Abdel-fattah Kilito, Fanon, and Gandhi flesh out the chapter’s exploration of colonized writers’ struggle for language mastery as a tool of anticolonial liberation and postcolonial writers’ struggle for unmasterful ways of using language.

In the remaining chapters, Singh transitions from the paradox of resistance reproducing discourses of mastery to uncovering dehumanist subjectivities and practices in postcolonial literature. In chapter 3, Singh reflects on J.M. Coetzee’s

Life and Times of Michael K (1983) and Mahasweta Devi's short story "Little Ones" (1998) as texts illustrating humanitarian characters engaged in benevolent acts that nevertheless reproduce human inequalities. She terms these works "posthumanitarian fictions" that uncover the paradoxical tension between humanitarians who desire to work in the service of others but reproduce the unequal relations they seek to address. Posthumanitarian fiction, Singh argues, demonstrates how humanitarian action becomes masterful through the process of a "humanitarian fetishism" that places the humanitarian's ego before dehumanized aid recipients (103).

The following chapter explores the human as animal in postcolonial literature. Singh traces the genealogy of this literature to an anticolonial discourse that recuperated the humanity of the colonized, and she discovers its postcolonial reverberations in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). Singh's concern is with affirming animality as a hopeful, postcolonial politics of becoming. In short, humanimalities might constitute a counternarrative to man's sovereignty and the search for a restored humanity. Thinking humanimalities through literature, Singh contends, offers the potential to recognize the animals "we" are. The unifying theme that bridges these two final chapters is dispossessing the sovereign human subject from any masterful reign. The final chapter centers on Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden* (1999) and *Among Flowers* (2005) in order to examine dehumanist ecology. Singh is adept at exploring Kincaid's many paradoxes that reveal her to be a critic of neocolonialism who at the same time travels the globe as a bourgeois postcolonial Orientalist hunting obscure seeds and seeking mastery over her Vermont garden. Yet back in her garden, Kincaid confesses her mastery over nature is a fantasy.

Singh ends with Kincaid in her garden, thereby evoking (intentionally or otherwise) the conclusion of Voltaire's *Candide* (1789) without referencing it: "but we must cultivate our garden." Voltaire did not intend to cultivate selfishness, but to seek knowledgeable answers to questions that have none. And he was able to call for an abandonment of mastery, according to Roland Barthes, only because he wrote before Georg W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx redefined history (*Roland Barthes: Critical Essays*, 1972). *Unthinking Mastery*, therefore, advocates abandoning Hegelian Marxism and its historical narrative of mastering mastery through dialectical domination. It asks readers to return to a pre-materialist epoch and cultivate gardens by planting seeds of dehumanist practice. Yet Singh's surprise at the paradox of humanitarians, their insensitivity to excluded groups, and their tendency to reject alliances that do not conform to their political goals, harkens the Hegelian observation that the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk (63). Singh writes that globalization and neoliberalism have superseded the battle against decolonization with dehumanism, the privileged means to hear obscured voices (176). Is the dialectic discourse of mastery capable of explaining all contradictory

human practices? Contemporary Marxist theory of history makes a similar argument that western scientific capitalism rooted in rational mastery has outstripped rationalization of shared goals through communicative action. To conclude, *Unthinking Mastery* proposes dehumanism—a labor of language—as a pathway to social change and makes a contribution to the project of postcolonial theory as a theory of imaginative possibility. *Unthinking Mastery's* intended audience is humanities scholars and political activists, but the text would spark discussion in an advanced undergraduate or graduate seminar after readings of anticolonial theory and postcolonial literature.

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