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## **the integral nature of things: critical reflections on the present**

Lata Mani, Routledge India, New Delhi, 2013, 252pp., ISBN: 978-0-4158-3138-3, £14.95 (Pbk)

*The Integral Nature of Things* goes to the heart of the interrelations between, and interdependence among, a range of things, be they words, places, events, species and/or concepts. The relationality between the seemingly disparate is at the centre of the book, and is revealed as Mani gently draws connecting threads between a wide range of things, literally *forming a whole*, with her writing. Thus, in this book the author applies the verb form of 'integral'—*integralis* in Medieval Latin—or 'forming a whole' by using a methodological thread to illustrate both the connectedness between things, and how neo-liberalism has severed these connections. She achieves this by deliberately writing across genres: poetry, analytic observation, descriptive prose and deeply insightful commentary on the politics of neo-liberalism. Through this mixed representational style the book itself demonstrates the integral nature of things, be it in how the author connects the spectacular with the quotidian, or in the observations about a wide array of topics/subjects as she moves between genres, or in the deliberate reliance on the everyday in producing a scathing critique of neo-liberalism.

Mani begins with a vivid description of what appears to be routine—a herd of goats grazing on the grassy field outside her apartment at noon—only to magically walk the reader into a mystical space of connections between everyday events, different life forms, spiritual beliefs and their material effects, as she describes the one dancing goat, moving almost devotionally in rhythm with the *sufi* chants playing in her apartment. This event echoes through the rest of the book, sometimes explicitly articulated in other examples of how the spectacular resides in the quotidian, and sometimes implicitly present in her critique of the contemporary version of a twentieth-century Taylorism in industry practices.

Repeatedly, the book demonstrates the schism between how the spectacular and the magical reside within the quotidian and the processes by which neo-liberalism has replaced and reversed this order, wherein a disenchantment with the quotidian now undergirds and defines the pursuit of the spectacular, an impossible fantasy, the ultimate neo-liberal promise. The book gets to the core of the failure of neo-liberalism's psyche. Mani provides a sharp critique of neo-liberalism, and demonstrates how it is marked by uncontrolled desire, always in pursuit of a surreal fantasy, cyclically creating disenchantment with the ordinary, while continually holding out on the promise of the fantastic. Walking the reader through different examples, she highlights the pursuit of the never-ending fantasy, which at once forms the crux of societal malaise and co-opts people into the neo-liberal project.

Another key aspect of Mani's method (of connecting threads) is her attention to words and concepts—situating them within their roots (etymologically) and by exploring the trajectory of their changing meanings. Through an engaging and accessible discussion, she discusses how words

are often almost lazily used to describe that which upon further reflection may not evoke the same meaning. Almost every chapter does this, through careful attention to specific words and concepts. Sometimes juxtaposed, and sometimes singularly explored, Mani peels layers of meanings from these words to reveal their etymological underpinnings, which bring to light their historical interrelations. She places sets of words together and carefully traces the shifting contours of meanings assigned to each, examining the differences between words that may seem similar, while still connecting them, to show how these words have a deep nature that has been lost over time. For example, in exploring the juxtaposition of the words 'artist' and 'artisan', she elaborates how the artist in western discourse is solely one who creates art, serving no quotidian purpose, and how the word artisan is imbued with utilitarianism. Another example she discusses is the relationship between street and road. 'Street' conjures up images of the globalised western street with symbols of urbanism such as pipes, cables and aesthetics. It represents a globalised architecture and, in turn, an architecture of control and erasure of the poor. This, she shows, is unlike the meaning of 'road', which is built towards facilitating a living breathing community, as she illustrates in her discussion of Avenue Road. Similarly, she weaves these etymological and symbolic threads through a range of words, such as 'Globalisation', 'Geographies', 'Dignity', 'Conscience' and 'Disaggregate', to name only a few. In tracing each word's history, she marks the moments of disjuncture, the loss of meanings and *real* relations between things, to challenge how misrecognition of these connections has become the norm.

In summary, the book demonstrates the ethereal connectedness, spectacular undergirding and material interdependence of quotidian things/objects. Mani examines how these natural connections are forced apart within a neo-liberal project, creating a false dissonance between things, greater disenchantment and schisms in the world, especially by rendering the ordinary obsolete. Throughout she shows the reader how the scattered and disparate actually *form* the whole, how the spectacular lives in the quotidian, how the everyday ordinariness of life needs to be centred rather than abandoned in pursuit of the impossible promise of neo-liberalism. In both its provocative political imperatives and its accessible style connecting theory and practice, this book will definitely appeal to the readers of *Feminist Review*. This book is an invitation to its reader, to actively engage a politics of relationality, to consider radical shifts in perspective, be they about sex, identity, religion, industry, advertisements, art, prayer or anything else that constitutes daily life—to take a leap of faith and embrace the integral nature of things.

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