

Book review

**ARYANS, JEWS, BRAHMINS: THEORIZING AUTHORITY THROUGH
MYTHS OF IDENTITY BY DOROTHY M. FIGUEIRA**

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Book details

Title: *'Aryans, Jews, Bra mins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity'*

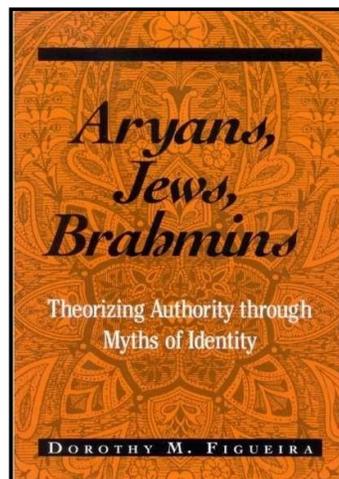
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At the end of Donald Trump's presidency, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) which was published almost 70 years back suddenly became one of the best-selling novels in the U.S. One could postulate that Trump's various repressive racial policies, totalitarian mindset, shared cultural insecurity of the Americans and Orwell's broad minacious dystopian vision were the reason behind this hasty popularity. This is the process, I think, by which a book becomes canon by rediscovering its significance in every new 'turn' of history. Dorothy M. Figueira's *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* although was first published in 2002, the book is in similar fashion more relevant at present than ever before especially in the context of India. Why? I would provide an answer to this statement at the end of my discussion.

The scope of this book is broad and provocative. The University of Georgia's comparatist scholar, Figueira provides a theoretical paradigm of the shared Aryan race from the European Enlightenment age to the twentieth century India. It is a difficult task as she reflects, to trace, isolate and explore the elusive figure of the Aryans because within the cross-cultural pull the historical figure of the Aryans develops into myth. Her systematic investigation covers both Eastern and Western literature, philosophy and numerous political texts across the wide range of thinkers. Not only her sound knowledge on texts and authors but her linguistic excellency ranging from Sanskrit, German to French is also discernible here. The book primarily focuses on how the ideology of the Aryans and its identity have been articulated in Europe and India. "Historiography then becomes the treatment of absence (*of the Aryans*). Certeau's concept of the heterology structures this investigation. The various myths of the Aryan that we will encounter all address concerns central to the heterological process: assimilation, authorial control, and absence."

The book is divided into two major parts, 'The Authority of an Absent Text' and 'Who speaks for the Subaltern' respectively, entailing four chapters in each part. Figueira starts her argument with the French Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire whose work produced the pretext of Aryan myth. Voltaire's reading of the forged Veda text, *Ezourvedam* which happened to be written by a French Jesuit, in a desire to critique Christianity especially the Roman Catholic church posits Asia and Aryans as the epitome of virtue and logic. It not only undermines the long Judeo-Christian tradition, their historical significance, it claims to 'discover' the true, undistorted origin of Christian faith in the Aryans.

Since the Sanskrit text started to translate into European languages roughly in the early twentieth century, the study on the history of the Aryans is, therefore, constructed through the myths. In this connection Figueira mentions two German scholars, Fredrich Schlegel and Johan Gottfried von Herder who view India as the *Urheimat* or the original homeland. This envisioning of an *Ur* utopian past in the distant India finally is being accomplished with the Indologist Fredrich Max Muller's cunning critical interpretation of the *Veda*. The presence of the textual connection legitimizes their claim of existing a long tradition perhaps older than

the Bible, which decentres the Jews from world history merely reducing them into the degenerated subaltern.

Then Figueira offers a critique of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of *Übermensch*. Nietzsche's Aryan-Vedic thoughts particularly his interpretation of *Manu* was based on Louis Jacolliot's popular book *Les législateurs religieux: Manou-Moïse-Mahomet*. "Nietzsche's reading of *Manu* focused exclusively on caste and its relationship to breeding (*Züchtung*)... Because of Christianity, modern society is no longer a society at all, but a "sick conglomerate of canadas" without the strength to excrete" (54-55). Thus, Nietzsche's partial and influential reading of the Aryans identity provides the basis of Nazi ideology. Figueira concludes the first part by focusing on the racial ideology expounded by Gobineau, Immanuel Kant, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Alfred Rosenberg and others who further strengthen Nazi ideals.

In the second part of this book Figueira focuses on the individual social reformer of India and shows how almost at the same time like the European Romantics they fashion, speculate and posit the Aryans myths to contrive a radical social change. She started her discussion first on Raja Rammohan Roy who translated Sanskrit scriptures into vernacular Bengali laying the inscription of Brahmo Samaj with the intention to liberate the Hindu tradition from the Brahminic rituals. To defend the Christian attack on Hindu polytheism and to modernize Hinduism from its core, Roy validates the Aryan past that disapproves the existing Hindu regressive practices such as Sati and idolatry.

Rammohan's 'strategic syncretism' was subsequently followed by Dayanand Saraswathi, another subaltern reformer of Western India. With the establishment of Arya Samaj, he in the similar fashion translated the *Veda* into vernacular languages for its wider reach. His own interpretation of Hindu scriptures always tends to disentangle the pure Aryan past from the over-ritualisation of Brahmanism. Saraswathi even claims that the Aryans had the knowledge of Chemistry and telegraphy to prove an uncorrupted, modern Indian past.

Figueira then focuses on another two nationalists Justice Ranade and Lokmanya Tilak who further fostered the Aryan myth. Tilak envisioned the Aryans as superhuman, scientifically empowered and technologically advanced so much so that they migrated from the North pole to the other parts of the world on the civilizing mission. This established stage of Hindu nationalism was further developed by Vivekananda not only in India but abroad also. Vivekananda talked about the Indo-British solidarity in terms of shared Aryan identity although he eventually upheld the Aryan supremacy especially on the spiritual domain over their European distant cousin. Figueira succinctly put forward that this valorisation of Aryan myths, positing cultural and racial superiority would finally bestow the upper-class Hindus the similar social status like the colonial masters and resolve the question of modernity for them.

The last section of the book entitled 'The Anti-Myth', Figueira engages into the reversal of the myth-making process and explores its lacuna manifested in the radical movements of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Phule in Maharashtra rejected the superfluous racial glorification of Aryan myth, deconstructed it with logic and rationality and called for a non-Aryan past. He explored the Aryan past as the barbaric past of India when the foreigners forcefully attacked and subjugated the native *Shudras*. Discarding the Brahminic ideals Phule vouched for the local deities like the king Bali, Khandoba and so on against the elite Brahmin caste but never intended to validate religiosity.

The book ends with the last discussion on Dr. Ambedkar who started his mission just at where Phule left. He rejected the racial valorisation of the Aryan past and contested the sublime authority of the *Veda* which he argued was philosophically worthless. The social reform in 19th and 20th century India based on textual practice, Ambedkar pointed out, impliedly upheld the elite Brahmanical lordship and pushed the untouchables more off to the margin of the society. "He maintained that the Veda had been consistently misread by brahmin scholars in a racial sense in order to foster a two-nation theory that benefitted their interests" (154). Both Phule and Ambedkar engaged themselves into the reversal of the Aryan myth making structure. They impart the sense of rationale, science and logic into their discussion to debunk the course of Hindu nationalism.

Figueira's book is insightful and thought provoking that entails a number of disciplines including sociology, history, literature and of course mythology. Across the continents, cultures, languages and thinkers she follows the shared myth of the Aryan which is typical for a comparatist scholar. Her observation on how both in Europe and India the Aryan myth has produced a politics of narcissistic, civilized self which demands the centre of everything while 'the Others' including Jews and Untouchables could be subdued, marginalized and even destroyed is nothing short of commendable. However, it is noticeable that she sometimes oversimplifies some contexts to provide an all-encompassing paradigm. For an instance, the case of Raja Rammohan Roy or Vivekananda cannot be read only in the light of Hindu nationalism since the context of colonialism is extremely significant here. Moreover, with the shift of tempo-spatial condition, politics in its true sense also changes, takes different connotations and so on, that requires different reading too. Nonetheless, the value of this work of Figueira simply cannot be denied.

Now coming to the statement about the relevancy of this book, I would strongly put that the content of this book resonates with the present reality of India than before. With the turn of the right-wing politics in India in 2014 when BJP led NDA alliance won the general election of India, suddenly there is a popular cry of 'Rama-Rajya' cropped up. The political leaders of the secular India are now digging our ancient, illustrious past which they claim, had the scientific knowledge of aviation, medical surgery, digital technology etc This tendency of upholding its spiritual, moral and scientific superiority once again reverberates that exclusive Aryan myth and Hindu national ideology. Therefore, it would be the ideal time to

re-read this work of Figueira keeping the contemporary political context of India in mind and to reflect on the ideals of Phule and Ambedkar that she upholds.