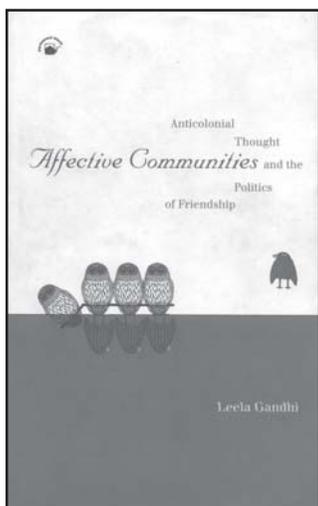


Book Reviews

Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought and the Politics of Friendship by **Leela Gandhi**

Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006. pages 254, Price: Rs.495/-

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In her book *Affective Communities*, Leela Gandhi builds in narratives of friendship that feature, in her words, western non players at the end of the nineteenth century. She appreciates the patterns of anti imperialism that these players initiated, and contests the position of imperial binarism. Gandhi refers to observations made by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha on the fictitious nature of the binarism and acknowledges Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* (1983) as one of the few works of postcolonial scholarship that studies responses by Englishmen who favoured the cause of India. Gandhi also points out other such narratives: Kumari Jayawardene, *The White Woman's Other Burden* (1995), Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilised* (1999), Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (2001) and Emily Bernard, ed. Vol I, *Remember Me to Harlem* (2001).

Early in the book Gandhi cites Forster's defence of friendship in *Two Cheers for Democracy*: "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country"(10). To choose between country and friend must also mean to choose between identifications and values, presumably between imperialism and autonomy. Speculatively, the non player crosses border when the largely

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inherited world that has been demarcated for him or her, fails, sometimes collapses, and almost always betrays, in the search for order. The movement appears from clean categories to regions without borders, to chaos as it were; the subjects, as Gandhi specifies, Fanon's wretched of the earth; the players, sexual misfits, slaughterhouse animals, factory slaves, colonized subjects, unruly women; the terms, anarcho-utopian politics. The border crossing itself is critical in that it is both the search for utopia, and the acknowledgement of affinity with groups that had seemed largely alien. The politics of friendship that comes into play between these groups seems to appropriate the sense of trust, the grain against violation, as suggested by Forster. Gandhi's line of western non players includes Edward Carpenter, C F Andrews, Henry Salt, Mirra Alfassa, and Oscar Wilde.

Gandhi is meticulous in tracing the development of thought and action in diverse anti imperial protagonists. She examines traditions of thought and political practice that include the harsh architecture of separation in the Panopticon and utilitarian projects that aimed at producing disciplinary society both at home and in the colony. It is against these well laid out systems that she seeks to understand marginal cultures at the end of the century. Any group on the margins must necessarily also be outside of social contract, thus activating the process of queering. For Edward Carpenter his experience of homosexuality formed the basis of human agency; for Henry Salt "sentiment" was critical to progress; animal welfare activists underscored his observation in identifying sentiment as the critical faculty essential for ethico-political transformation in social order. Almost as if she were capping this emergent sense of affective communities, Gandhi cites Darwin on interactive sociality: "As natural selection acts by competition, it adapts and improves the inhabitants of each country only in relation to their co-inhabitants" (113). Gandhi takes care to identify the "noncommunitarian understanding of community" (26) that came to characterize nineteenth century radicalism. Most significantly, for Gandhi, the distinctive feature here is the presence of friendship that brought together non identical singularities. The writer's classic example is M K Gandhi's acknowledgement of Edward Carpenter in *Hind Swaraj*—on the one hand the queering of sexuality; on the other the queering of ahimsa. Really, in Gramscian terms, the networking of social minorities and the reimagining of hegemonic cultures. The representations Gandhi provides are remarkable. For example, take what she calls the iconic anticolonial frieze: the image of C F Andrews touching Gandhi's feet. The image is of Gandhi in his new avatar, bare feet, shorn head, coarse dhoti; of Andrews as valuer: "The London-trained Indian barrister defying imperial polarities of class and station in an elaborate costume drama; the Anglican priest recovering the fundamental civilization hierarchy of Empire in a single defiant gesture of self abnegation" (14).

For the Indian reader, in particular, *Affective Communities* provides the much needed break in postcolonial writing. In 2006, positions such as west versus non west or first world versus third world, and postures such as postcolonialism as political activism or agency, appear, in a way, laboured. Increasingly nation states find that they have to clarify positions, to the people who eventually make up the nation, on various issues—nuclear deals with countries of power, policy decisions on HIV, road maps on development, responses to wars in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, recasting notions of rogue states, fundamentalism arising from nationhood, constitutional guarantees—the list is endless. To locate such positions within frameworks of binarisms would really be oversimplification. Indeed, Gandhi seeks to problematize political imaginations that preserve identifications through denial. In moving beyond reductionist schema of oppositionality, of infiltration and fundamentalism, she is able to make the reader begin to see, as she concludes, “a breach, that is, in the fabric of imperial hospitality” (189). The forms of resistance that Gandhi examines at the end of the nineteenth century, translate into the multiple registers of contemporary India. The powerful image of Andrews touching Gandhi’s feet finds echoes in the 9/11- 2006 commemoration of M K Gandhi’s call for Satyagraha in Johannesburg on 9/11- 1906. Interestingly in its new manifestation, 9/11 appears to have moved beyond the categories of the civilized versus the savaged. In the everyday identity politics of interpretation, non players, young Indians, 100 years after Gandhi, explore equity in kinship—outside state parameters—seeking, once again, ethico-political transformations.

Affective Communities is a tribute to the human spirit, when the empire ran strong, at the end of the nineteenth century. Her focus, that comes to rest very firmly on pragmatism and sentiment, opens up perspectives that seemingly affirm plurality of identities. Indeed, Leela Gandhi makes a case against “federal” identities, to borrow a term from Amartya Sen. Very clearly she appears to have committed the discourse on affective communities to the politics of the here and the now, of our so called postcolonial world.