

Anjana Raghavan

Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities

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Quote:

“Visiting the stories and story-telling traditions beginning with queer and cosmopolitan solidarities in India (specifically from Tamil Nadu) and working through a number of important texts of Indo-Caribbean women's literature, Raghavan invites us to begin to think deeply about what a decolonial, feminist, and corporeal cosmopolitanism looks, sounds, and feels like.”

Cosmopolitanism can be a bit of a dirty word: an oxymoron at best, a hangover of colonialism and imperialism at worst. In *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities*, Anjana Raghavan recommends that we keep in mind these legacies of liberal cosmopolitanism, while we simultaneously we take our inspiration from under-told stories of cosmopolitan solidarities all over the world, that to make cosmopolitanism worthy of its name, we need to do, feel, live, and love like the cosmopolitans of the queer communities of the subaltern. Visiting the stories and story-telling traditions beginning with queer and cosmopolitan solidarities in India (specifically from Tamil Nadu) and working through a number of important texts of Indo-Caribbean women's literature, Raghavan invites us to begin to think deeply about what a decolonial, feminist, and corporeal cosmopolitanism looks, sounds, and feels like. To articulate this, the main question that she considers throughout the book is not "whether the subaltern *can* speak" (à la Spivak), "--because they do, all the time--but whether there exist spaces for listening. Spaces where privilege names itself and opens up to comprehension, accountability, and love" (2). Thus she wants to make space for genuine dialogic cosmopolitanism, a large part of which has to consist of actually listening to the "subaltern." Raghavan's corporeal cosmopolitanism is the kind of cosmopolitanism that decolonial feminists can take up and study today.

The main wager of the book is that mainstream or liberal cosmopolitanism is mostly a legal framework that does not really get at what it means to be embodied, that is, to be a feeling, loving, and desiring human being. Liberal cosmopolitanism, Raghavan reminds us, is also inherently a space of exclusion "because of the ways in which its intellectual/historical legacy

was co-opted by Europe and liberal political thought" (4). As such, it excludes and silences the bodies that are not deemed "*capable* of reason and rationality, and in a more extended sense, of autonomy, sovereignty, and citizenship" (15–16). By means of feminist and decolonial undertakings of research such as storytelling, which she buttresses with additional theoretical frameworks from a wide array of authors, such as Walter Dignolo, Audre Lorde, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Sara Ahmed, and Gloria Anzaldúa, Raghavan engages with a multiplicity of cosmopolitan narratives with the aim of crafting a corporeal cosmopolitanism. This has the effect of structuring the text around a deeply inter- or transdisciplinary methodology, which reflects Raghavan's contention that politics requires just such an approach in order to speak meaningfully and holistically about human beings living together.

The first two chapters set the stage for us to see why a corporeal cosmopolitan is needed and where we can start. Chapter 1, entitled "Locating Corporeal Cosmopolitanism," offers us a brief but compelling survey of liberal cosmopolitanism from Diogenes to Kant to Appiah to Nussbaum, Beck, and Delanty, in order to point out its exclusions, to problematize certain understandings of its universalism, and to make space for a multiplicity of universal frameworks—for a *pluriversality* of sorts, à la Dignolo, as we learn later in the book. Even as some contemporary Kant-inspired cosmopolitan theories acknowledge colonial violence and oppression as a part of the history of Western liberal democracies, they recommend that "we move on," forgive and forget, and start from a clean slate of "here and now," as if this history had no material bearing on the here and now. One of the book's major achievements is the constant reminder of the material and psychic wounds inflicted upon black, brown, queer, female, disabled, and working-class bodies by cosmopolitan/colonial enterprises, and the need to take seriously the difficult questions of how to express, acknowledge, and, (if possible) heal these violences as we *try* to move on.

Raghavan is unwilling to concede the Western monopolization of the idea of cosmopolitanism, pointing out and urging us to start with, at every turn, the already cosmopolitan lived identities and solidarities of the subaltern spaces. Already in chapter 1, we begin to find examples of what we may call "critical or radical cosmopolitanisms" as a set of corporeal cosmopolitanisms that Raghavan wants to map out: she tells us about Kalpana Ram's work in which cosmopolitanism is "an orientation rather than a set of tenets, rooted in the political activism of *Dalit* women's movement" (45); and about Kris Manjappa's work on the anticolonial revolutionary, philosopher, freedom fighter, and Marxist cosmopolitan in India and the world, M. N. Roy, who emphasizes internationalism and pluralism (49).

Chapter 2 explores how we can move toward corporealizing cosmopolitan ideas, especially those of belonging and identity. This requires, Raghavan contends, contextualizing its exclusions together with its corporeal and emotional layers. This is another theoretically rich chapter that will be hard to summarize, but I must note that it offers an astute critique of Cartesian mind/body dualism and its variants. Raghavan shows us how this duality makes the body inferior and disparages affect, and how this picture of the body in turn undergirds cosmopolitan imaginaries of the European and/or Western variety. Furthermore, some poststructuralist theorists who imagine "the body as a radical singularity that contains multitudes" are helpful to a certain extent, but as Raghavan reminds us, this view is also "not cognizant of real power inequalities, structural violences, and marginalized peoples and communities" (75). The concept of

"abjection," used in an explicitly political context by Kristeva, for example, is helpful for bringing the body back to politics, but it does not offer a "spatial recognition of the body as an experiential and epistemological site within cosmopolitan identity production and creation, and that is one of the things that corporeal cosmopolitanism would address" (57).

In short, the frameworks of liberal European cosmopolitanism, even avowedly feminist ones, are more or less premised upon binary and rigid distinctions between mind–body, public–private, and group–individual, and these rigid binaries limit our capacity to engage with corporeal and affective dimensions of political identity and community-building. Liberal cosmopolitanisms are thus limited to legal distinctions that deal in abstraction, rights, equalizations. Such a disembodied and decontextualized ideal conceptualization of cosmopolitanism furthermore hinders the possibilities of dialogue and understanding, what should be a central tenet of any cosmopolitanism. Toward the end of the chapter, we find inspirations for engaging with these bodily dimensions of cosmopolitan experiences, such as Mamadou Diouf's work on the Senegalese *Murid* diasporic cosmopolitanism, which "explores the importance of eroticism and desire as a crucial part of the discourse of community identity and belonging" (82).¹

In chapters 3, "Occluded Rainbows," and 4, "Are Dispossessed Bodies Human?" we have a series of what Raghavan calls "sites" (as opposed to mere "case studies") where queer cosmopolitan solidarities are forged by means of a feminist and subaltern ethos. She maintains that it is in fact dangerous for marginalized communities to maintain a distinction between the private and the public, because such a distinction is practically nonexistent for them: "there are no political rights that protect their safety, privacy or personal choices--that privilege is only accorded to those who are deemed worthy of state protection and full citizenship" (87). In chapter 3, we have an examination of "some of the lived, personal-political reality of queerness in India, with a particular focus on transwomen's (also referred to as *thirunangai*, *aravani*, *hijra*, and so on in various parts of the country) communities in southern India" (88).² This chapter is organized around four rich sections: first, a history of the queer movement in India through the work of South Asian scholars and queer activists; second, the insufficiency of legal-constitutional changes for recognizing queerness; third, examples of identity-constructions among transgender communities within different contexts; and fourth, narratives of *thirunangai* women from Tamil Nadu. Raghavan shows, without glorifying these narratives and representations, that cosmopolitan belonging becomes meaningful if it goes beyond the binaries of private–public or personal–political, and "*if and only if* it speaks to the material, emotional, sexual, and gendered realities of how people inhabit themselves in the world" (119).

Raghavan in this way reminds us that cosmopolitan solidarity does not have to be a privilege of those who are accorded full citizenship under the state's recognized categories, that such a community based in solidarity "can be forged as much in pain and remembrance, and in music and art, as in political and economic realms" (123–24). Chapter 4 presents a number of nuanced narratives of hybridity of identities and bodily trauma and pain vis-à-vis Indo-Caribbean women's (specifically those connected to Trinidad and Tobago) diasporic, multiplicitous identities. I would urge readers to take in these stories on their own, rather than relying on my incomplete summaries of them here.³

One lesson I draw here concerns the discourse of "hybridity" that is prevalent in diasporic ontologies as well as cosmopolitan ones. As Raghavan points out, sometimes the notion of hybridity comes to mean a somewhat problematic "all-encompassing Creole, international identity" or a "violent erasure" signaling an abstract global belonging. Furthermore, our use of hybridity can often be too celebratory especially when we do not recognize its painful history. On this note, I appreciated Raghavan's nuanced approach to hybridity: her conceptualization captures the depths of its lived experiences, including experiences of exile, suffering, otherness as well as diasporic experiences of loss and unmooring. In the lived experiences and narratives with which Raghavan deals in this chapter, we see that there is a complex and deep hybridity that remains relevant to how we can think about corporeal cosmopolitanism.

We see the impenetrable depth of various hybrid lived experiences in the festival of *Hosay*, the commemoration of the death anniversary of Prophet Mohammed's grandsons, which is an inter-faith and inter-race community interaction among Hindu and Muslim Indo-Trinidadians, including Afro-Trinidadians in its nonritual aspects (133); or in Chutney-Soca music form, which arose out of Soul Calypso (Soca) and Chutney music as a music of resistance (138); or in the stories and lives of the *Jahajee* sisterhood, originally formed as a domestic violence support group of Indo-Caribbean women in Queens, New York (142); or, in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bride*, where we find songs adopted and refashioned from the *Ramayana*; Raghavan tells us that these songs of "exile, of deadly sea voyages, rape, resistance, and the creation of new homes, new lives, and new identities are songs of cosmopolitanism; of inhabiting many worlds and of dismantling, destroying and rebuilding new ways of living and new codes; and most importantly, of embodying the kind of brittle fluidity that contains infinite, rhizomatic roots that are so central to understanding cosmopolitanism" (152). In all these stories, variants of cosmopolitan identity and community are performed by an embodied, affective core, through the shared memory and experiences of trauma, pain, and violence, (sometimes, not always) healed and held together by love: in brief, "This is cosmopolitanism of the grim, unrelenting, embodied realities of foreign travel and exchange" (154).

It is in the final chapter, entitled "Love in the Time of Corporeal Cosmopolitanism,"⁴ that we see that the stories we have heard a bit about throughout the book are the blueprints of a larger and more difficult conversation regarding corporeal cosmopolitanism. Here, Raghavan presents the possibility of transforming some of the key foundations of cosmopolitanism by conversing with what she names "sister articulations of decolonial theory."

In brief terms, we are presented with constellations of new ways of doing, feeling, speaking, and theorizing as we are also called to revise or lose some of our modern/colonial ways. Elaborating on what Mignolo calls border epistemology, or more broadly, border gnoseology, Raghavan now encourages us to move toward another logic; rather than merely changing the content of the conversation on cosmopolitanism, we need to be changing its very terms (166). This is why corporeal and decolonial cosmopolitanism is a *pluriversal* project--there are many different conceptions of cosmopolitanism across different cultural, historical, and spiritual spaces, and "colonial difference, gender, class, sexuality, and corporeality will all need to be constitutive elements in articulating this pluriversality," as shown throughout the book (168).

Among the sister theories that enable us to undo the key foundations of liberal cosmopolitanism, in this chapter we find, bell hooks's radical definition of a love "as action and participatory emotion, that is, as a practice"; Boaventura de Sousa Santos's call to create a counternarrative of modernity toward building sustainable global solidarities; Lorde's notion of the erotic as a source of immense creative and political energy; Anzaldúa's writing from and in different languages that informs the tensions of what we mean by solidarity and belonging.

Effectively demonstrating the multiple but not the comprehensive sites of border gnoseology throughout the chapter and the book overall, then, Raghavan gives us some signposts toward "an intellectual, emotional, and practical space of compassion, dialogue and healing; but in order for [corporeal cosmopolitanism] to realise that potential, we must first recognise and acknowledge wounding" (190). In this way, Raghavan carefully leads us out of what we may call the neocolonial double bind in which we find ourselves regarding the use of important concepts of political philosophy such as "cosmopolitanism": hers is neither a cosmopolitanism subsumed under European coloniality/modernity nor is it restricted to just a postcolonial paradigm.

Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism is one of the most earnest and genuinely dialogic academic books that I have read in a very long time. Her *locus of enunciation* is clear and clarified at each point, so it is not that she is giving disclaimers--rather, I can imagine us talking about these ideas together in person, because she is more interested in dialogue than in convincing me that she is absolutely right. The dialogue style enables us to experience what corporeal cosmopolitanism *feels* like: reading this book is like talking to someone who is as interested in remembering and moving through the violences of colonialism as you are, and also willing to openly discuss hard topics about pain, suffering, trauma, but also love, joy, and gratitude.

Raghavan's book places affect and corporeality at the heart of cosmopolitan identities, communities, and solidarities. I would like to see how the dialogue or the journey of corporeal cosmopolitanism would unfold here if the chapters and main figures in the book were ordered or spaced a bit differently, for example, if Raghavan had started with and foregrounded the stories from the subaltern in more detail, highlighted Lorde's and Mignolo's theoretical framing early on, and just footnoted Kantian or liberal forms of cosmopolitanism along the way. But I understand all too well the author's "real fear of intellectual ostracism" (176–77) as well as her bona fide effort to start a genuine conversation with where things currently stand in academia and in the world, and thus I cannot propose an alternative order of things as an actual critique of her choices.

As a remedy to the overly legal and depoliticized theories of liberal cosmopolitanism, and mostly to ideal-theory variations at that, this book puts forth various models of refreshingly embodied, feminist, decolonial cosmopolitanisms in the plural that are capacious enough to be both descriptive and normative at times. I recommend this book to anyone who is looking for ways to have a genuine conversation about cosmopolitanism in the decolonial and feminist key.

¹ The *Murid* are a Senegalese Black African Islamic community known for its diasporic networks of trade. Although they are nomadic, they are "tied to their spiritual heartland, to which

they make an annual pilgrimage." Instead of following "an assimilation or absorption model, they add on their identity to the global diasporic network in an informed, deliberate way" (82).

² It is important to point out that although Raghavan uses these terms interchangeably, she reminds us that they do not always mean the same thing in all places and times (93).

³ At some point, Raghavan tells us that the corporeal cosmopolitanism she envisions "is not unlike a *jahaj*, traveling in an ocean of stories" (146). This is partly why I cannot do justice to the particular stories she is telling as she hopes to make "a beginning in terms of illustrating the depth and complexity of corporeal cosmopolitanism as an embodied inhabited community of practice" (155). You need to feel your way through these stories in order to appreciate the richness, bravery, and fragility of the lived experiences that they narrativize.

⁴ Raghavan's chapter title is inspired by Gabriel García Márquez's 1988 novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*.