

2017

Book Review: Kirin Narayan, *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills* (Kirin Narayan)

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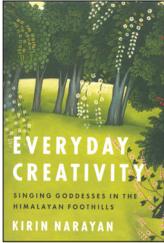
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Recommended Citation

Davis, Coralynn V.. "Book Review: Kirin Narayan, *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills* (Kirin Narayan)." *Asian Ethnography* (2017) : 418-421.

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Kirin Narayan, *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 256 pages. Notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$75.00, ISBN: 9780226407425. Paperback, \$25.00, ISBN: 9780226407562. eBook, \$25.00, ISBN: 9780226407739.

IN THIS ENGAGING and lovingly crafted text, Kirin Narayan creates an entrée for readers into the world of women in Kangra, a community situated in the Indian Himalayan foothills, through the medium of singing. Narayan's premise is that women's singing practices in Kangra constitute acts of "everyday creativity." The practice of singing, Narayan asserts, "may not carry value through institutions, commoditization, or acclaim, and yet remains a form of well-being and even happiness for individuals and their immediate community" (xxi).

For more than two decades, Narayan has been engaged in scholarly conversation with a group of feminist South Asianist scholars regarding South Asian women's expressive practices as loci for articulation of women's views on their own lives and the world they inhabit. This work has done much to counter stereotypes of South Asian women as passive, accepting victims of patriarchy, revealing such women's points of view and structures of feeling on their own lives, as well as the societies and the sacred worlds they (re)create and resist. *Everyday Creativity's* intervention into such discussions is through its emphasis on beauty and pleasure, with singing presented as a life-enhancing feature of individual and community life. Nonetheless, Narayan does not lose sight of the context of patriarchy, her premise being that "song offers a form of creativity accessible to people who might not control or own much else" (xx). One related function of singing—that it allows for the indirect expression and emotional processing of personal experience in the context of cultural restrictions on direct voicing—is also made evident throughout the book. In the words of one of Narayan's subjects, "You can't tell someone else what's in your heart. But if there's some pain then it comes right out of your mouth in the form of a song" (180).

While this is a book about songs and singing, for Narayan these phenomena are actually also a "pretext and a context" (219) for attending to more broadly philosophical and anthropological concerns such as the emergence of pleasure and beauty amid constraint and the weathering of change in individual and communal life. Listed in the University of Chicago Press's "Big issues in Music" ethnomusicology series, the text also speaks to what in his foreword Philip Bohlman identifies as a dearth of attendance to "smallness" in the field of music studies. An additional aim of the text is to offer songs as a resource that "extends and nuances our understandings of the Hindu tradition, taking it from the fraught domain of identity politics to loving acts of faith within and between households" (223). For readers in some fields, especially anthropology and feminist studies, this focus on smallness/the everyday/the domestic may not strike one as particularly groundbreaking, especially given women's exclusion from

the halls of power and prestige and the responsibility for much of mundane life.

Eschewing standard ethnographic or anthropological expectations, Narayan foregoes most overt theoretical and analytical writing in this book, opting instead for a work that centers Kangra women's song texts, their own interpretive words, and Narayan's descriptive (non-typologizing) passages about particular women's joys and sorrows, manners and embodiments, and ways of relating with one another and the world around them. (Only occasionally, as when feminist forebears were given very short shrift, did this reader miss such recognizable academic discourse.) While Narayan uses words to draw the reader into her artfully evoked scenes, the several black and white photographs she includes enrich the sensibility further, visually bringing the women to life and also appearing to honor them—their strength, suffering, intelligence, generosity and *joie de vivre*. In both word and photo, Narayan also makes evident her own presence, depicting herself at times as bewildered, and at others as mirthful or vexed. These photos establish Narayan's intimacy with the singers, as well as—through older and newer images—the longevity of her connection with them. The result of these strategies is a rich, highly aesthetic text of thematic eddies and character development, by the end of which one *feels* as much as cognitively understands the social and psychological functions, the cultural work and artistry of singing, as well as the tenor of the lives of women in a particular historical-cultural-social location. One may gain a new appreciation more generally for the role of mundane forms of creativity in the flow of human life, as well.

In organizing her text into chapters, Narayan employs locally relevant plant metaphors, starting with a “base” (background) chapter, then four chapters focused on the “fruits” of singing (somewhat corresponding to women's life stages). In each such chapter, she highlights a particular individual singer, clustering songs thematically and according to their focus on particular deities or devotees. The final chapter is the “head,” in which she reflects on what is to be learned overall from this tradition of singing. Frankly, I found I benefited little from this use of metaphor, which sometimes felt forced or became confusing (as when layers of metaphor multiplied) in what was otherwise a wonderfully crafted text.

Drawing for materials on her own ethnographic archive of recordings, field notes, and translations from years of visits in the community, Narayan is able simultaneously to portray a sustained tradition of singing and to depict the unfolding lives of women she has known across long periods of time (and in some cases has outlived), learning about their lives even as they tutored her in song. Following the instruction of her doctoral thesis advisor, Alan Dundes (also referencing Lila Abu-Lughod's work), Narayan makes much effort to elicit singers' own interpretations of their songs. Indeed, this investment in “oral literary criticism” is a hallmark of Narayan's scholarship that both remains relatively rare among folklorists and is much to be admired. Though sometimes thwarted in this effort, Narayan is still able to exhume singers' elided, partial, and/or coded comments for clues toward culturally resonant exegesis. While Narayan highlights singers' own interpretations of their songs and singing, she occasionally adds her own “feminist sense of how songs might offer additional routes to well-being beyond conventional goals” (219–20). She uses the soft linguistic touch of “wondering,” for instance “if there might not be a frisson of pleasure in celebrating a goddess who made up her mind and then single-pointedly attained her heart's desires” (92), and “about the ways this song expressed the trauma of violence against girl

children, cautioning perpetrators of a goddess's fury that could be unleashed to strike them" (118). These are examples of the stylized and unobtrusive way she incorporates cultural critique into the book.

While Narayan admits that everyday acts of creativity like singing do little to alter the difficult patriarchal and other circumstances (of health, material welfare, etc.) in which singers live, a central point of her book is to demonstrate that such acts "can help establish an inner way around or through hardship" by "gaining skills to establish one's own stamp on received practices; companionably messing about and playing with materials; finding the comfort of inner escape even in difficult times; and opening oneself to a sense of possibility" (xxiv). Such activity encompasses what Narayan means by "everyday creativity," corresponding to the Kangra concept of *sukinni* or *shank*, "the enthusiastic zest that draws people to particular cultural practices not because they have to but because they want to" (224). While for some women singing is certainly characterized by such zest, Narayan notes that singing is also a form of ritual work necessary to the well-being of households and the community, a means by which women create bonds across households, and an accompaniment to various sorts of physical labor, "potentially transforming expected duty toward others into a space of personal flourishing" (149). In *Everyday Creativity*, Narayan also demonstrates that in their sung stories referencing the worlds encountered in the Sanskrit Puranas (sacred texts), women often shift the lens toward the perspectives of goddesses and female devotees, as well as to Kangra women's own concerns, bodies and landscapes, and structures of feeling.

From Narayan's opening words—"Who is that young girl listening from the courtyard outside?" (xvii)—the author places herself at the heart of the text and its project. She seems to have a dual aim in doing so: she wants the reader to know her positionality vis-a-vis the knowledge she is producing for us, and she wants to relate her own process of research and writing as itself a form of everyday creativity that has developed in the course of understanding the creative process of her Kangra interlocutors. By the end of the book, the reader realizes that alongside the subject of Kangra women's lives and singing, we have received a coming-of-age tale of Narayan's own ethnographer-self. In addition to the portrayal of herself as an "insider-outsider" ethnographer, we gain insights into the process of ethnography itself, with its initial half-understandings, social navigations, and cultural ambivalences. We also see just how dependent a researcher is on the particular relationships formed under particular and shifting conditions, exemplifying Donna Haraway's insight about partial and situational knowledge. By now, this technique of "reflexive" ethnographic writing is no longer new, but it is still appreciated and deftly carried out in this text.

Narayan points out that networks of women singers tend to be of the same caste or castes that interact socially. She notes further that because of her personal connections with upper-caste singers, they became her mentors. Unlike their younger counterparts, this older generation of high-caste women are among those who were "raised with the vision for a flourishing life located squarely within domesticity, child-rearing, and the nurturing of others" (224). Also, she states that it is upper-caste singers who hold cultural capital in relation to their singing, while those of stigmatized caste identities were more reluctant to share the songs associated with their communities. Unfortunately, due to these factors, her text therefore fails to address the frequent bias of ethnographic and other research in Hindu South Asia toward upper-caste experiences

and perspectives. On the other hand, the book does attend to decades of change in material and cultural life as well as individual aging characters. Shifts toward greater literacy in national languages and English, and away from oral tradition and toward film, television, and social media, are now literally drowning out Kangra women's voices even at local ritual events, giving a particular urgency to Narayan's close attention to women's oral performances.

In the end, as Narayan has hoped, her "lingering over commentaries on songs in general and songs in particular" has indeed "conveyed [more than] a little of the beauty, value, and wisdom that singers perceive in them" (220), and given the reader pause as to the sources and expressions of joy, creativity, and wisdom in our own lives.

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