

Calling Her Bluff

Contributed by Chitra Raman
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There is an old story involving French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. It is said the artist once noticed a woman staring at one of his paintings with a particularly disdainful expression. The painting in question showed a woman with her coat partly off her shoulders; and a man standing behind looking fondly at her, holding the coat in both hands. "How vulgar!" this visitor is said to have exclaimed. The artist asked "Why is it vulgar, madame?" The woman said it was quite obvious from the painting that the woman in it was a prostitute, since the well-dressed man was shown taking her coat off. "What if I told you madame, that the man in the picture is the woman's husband; that he is putting her coat on, not taking it off; that his wife has just recovered from a long illness, and he is tenderly helping her get dressed so that he can take her out?"

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An appraisal of Wendy Doniger's

ALTERNATIVES TO HISTORY

Everywhere I go I'm asked if the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them. There's many a best-seller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.

--Mary Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) American novelist, short-story writer and essayist

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And as the woman, now mute, looked at the painting again, Toulouse-Lautrec added:

"The only thing that is vulgar, madame, is your mind."

It is exactly such a mind that the celebrated Wendy Doniger applies to her observations in her latest work titled "The Hindus, An Alternative History." The book contributes little, if anything, to a proper understanding of Hindus or Hinduism. But it does contribute greatly to Hindus' understanding of the cultural biases and effortless bigotry of Doniger's class of "scholarship."

Doniger wears her much-vaunted double PhDs in Sanskrit and Indian studies like a pince-nez, turning her gaze to details circumscribed and informed by her prejudices. Her inquiring mind seeks out sources that corroborate her preferred paradigms. Her attention to detail ignores the forest and focuses on fungi. Her creativity prompts her to read between lines, metaphorically speaking, that do not exist.

What explains the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Professor's stature and pervasive influence in the field of Hinduism Studies? How can ordinary Hindus who feel that her book caricatures and misrepresents their history and faith, challenge someone with her credentials and hope to be taken seriously?

An ancient Sanskrit subhaashitam (teaching) gives us a hint. It is particularly apt in this context, given Doniger's preoccupation with animals in Hindu scriptures.

Ushtraanam cha vivaaheshu geetham gaayanthi gardabhaah I

Parasparam prashamsanthi "aho roopam!" "aho dhwanih!" II

At the wedding of camels, the donkeys perform songs.

Each praises the other: "What beauty!" "What melody!"

Camels and donkeys may well bask in mutual self-admiration. But this should not hold the rest of us back from seeing them as they are.

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