

Was the 1960s Beat Buddhism Phony?

Ishmael Reed Interviews Monisha Shiva

Monisha Shiva: This is the image my dad was going to use in his book...



[From: https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/badaun-gangrape-a-year-ago-two-girls-were-raped-and-hung-from-a-mango-tree-in-badaun-this-is-a-story-about-how-we-failed-them-231340.html](https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/badaun-gangrape-a-year-ago-two-girls-were-raped-and-hung-from-a-mango-tree-in-badaun-this-is-a-story-about-how-we-failed-them-231340.html)

Poet and critic Ranjit Hoskote makes no bones in the same documentary about Ginsberg's attitude towards India in general and terms it as an example of Orientalism. This is further illustrated by the Hungryalist poet Malay Roy Choudhury in the documentary. He mentions that Ginsberg only clicked beggars, lepers and the poor in India, at the exclusion of almost everything else. He narrates that his photographer father had admonished the Beat poet for the same, telling him: "Whether a poet or a tourist, you white people are all the same."

By choosing to look at India as being good only for a certain kind of experience and refusing to consider that it was a developing nation coming to terms with its own destiny — not willing to stay encumbered by expectations of foreigners — Ginsberg is certainly guilty of prima facie Orientalism.

It must be noted that Ginsberg also met with tantriks and bauls who are not traditionally upper-caste and it is not this author's intention to suggest that he was a dyed-in-the-wool Orientalist; rather, there were traces of Orientalism in his attitude.

His love for Benaras, a continually inhabited city, which is how he described it in his last poem too, was a metaphor for his love for the Indian civilization: a continuum existing as it was for millennia, regardless of space and time. However, it was only an image in Ginsberg's mind when he came; his fault was to deliberately stick to this image despite contrasting facts, and his sullen refusal to accept the country in all its contradictions. For example, he did not once mention in his book that the burning ghats which fascinated him so much had a caste system of their own and Dalits could not be cremated at the spots marked for the higher-castes.

It is entirely possible that Ginsberg was following the foot-steps of the Transcendentalists, his literary fore-fathers whose debt he always accepted but he did not question their attitudes towards India. The Transcendentalists had also looked towards India for spiritual guidance and glorified the Gita, a text which is abhorred by India's Dalits for its militaristic and reactionary philosophy that asks people to leave everything in the hands of God and keep perpetuating the system ad infinitum, regardless of the violence inherent in Hinduism's caste system. Had Ginsberg not heard that B.R. Ambedkar gave a call for the annihilation of caste decades ago? Why was Ginsberg so obsessed with Indian sadhus and their mumbo-jumbo instead, who have, through the centuries, acted as agents of perpetuating Hinduism along with its pernicious caste system which has oppressed and enslaved millions of people for so long?

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Ishmael Reed: I read a book by John Giorno about Beatniks going to India.

Monisha Shiva: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: And he and Allen Ginsberg got into a big fight over whose Buddhism was the best. And soon, everybody was going to India to receive wisdom. What do they get wrong about Indian Buddhism?

Monisha Shiva: They exoticify it, first of all. They think it's about attaining spirituality or something. They believe they have to capture peace and spirituality and all that by going to someplace that seems exotic. Many of them don't see the difference between Hinduism and Buddhism. It's all about sitting in this lotus position and chanting mantras that they don't even understand what they're chanting.

Ishmael Reed: So how do they get Hinduism mixed up with Buddhism?

Monisha Shiva: Yeah. Hinduism gets mixed up with Buddhism. Buddhism was a response to Hinduism. I believe they got the two mixed up.

Ishmael Reed: Does Buddhism make Hinduism softer? You said Hinduism had a lot of misogyny and rape and all this stuff, right?

Monisha Shiva: Buddhism is separate from Hinduism. Hinduism contains misogyny and also the caste system. There are many epics and tales in Hinduism where you see misogyny and the caste system exemplified. There is a tale where Ram killed a shudra because he was from a low

caste. Or there is the god, Brahma, who rapes his own daughter, Saraswati. Also, what people don't understand is that the caste system came from Hinduism, a religion that is 4,000 years old. The oppression as ancient as that runs deep in the country. When Buddhism came to South Asia, it was like a revolution. Buddhism puts everybody on the same plane. And that's why right now, people in India convert to Buddhism as a response to not accepting the doctrines of Hinduism, including the caste system. And when people from the outside are chanting these mantras or going to the East to look for spirituality and peace, and they get mixed up, they do a disservice to the culture. They cause harm by misunderstanding the culture and the history and showcasing their interpretation.

Ishmael Reed: Why do you think the rich people got interested? Many wealthy people got into Ginsberg's stuff following his adoption of Buddhism. Rich people supported Lower East Side Buddhism.

Monisha Shiva: Yeah. Rich people supported them then; that was a thing in the sixties. In the nineties, there was another fascination with India. And that had to do with, was also because India opened its economy to the world. It had restrictions before. That was also when you saw Miss India winning Miss World, Miss Universe. Rich people had access to traveling there.

Ishmael Reed: Carla and I met a wealthy woman, a prominent heiress, and she was supporting Lower East Side Buddhists like Ginsberg and them. Giorno says when they brought over a teacher from India, and there wasn't a place for him to live, a Dupont heiress bought him a townhouse.

Monisha Shiva: I see.

Ishmael Reed: Where does the concept of Sutra come from?

Monisha Shiva: That comes from Hinduism. Buddhism has it too.

Ishmael Reed: These guys who went to India came back. They were misogynists. There's a book, an anthology called *Women of the Beat Generation*. And they said the guys were misogynists. So that's not Buddhism, right?

Monisha Shiva: No.

Ishmael Reed: Did you read that piece I sent you that gender relations in India were defined by people like Rudyard Kipling—English colonial officers, German and American Indologists, and upper caste Bengali people. What do you say about that?

Monisha Shiva: That's a very interesting concept. My analysis of India is through translated text. But if you look at it, it could be very skewed. And it could be possible. However, my knowledge also comes from translated texts from Indians or my father. A documentary I saw a long time ago said that Hinduism had a female deity in its original form.

Ishmael Reed: The English ridiculed Indian men for worshiping women. Were you aware of that?

Monisha Shiva: No, I didn't know.

Ishmael Reed: They ridiculed that as being effeminate. The point I wanted to make, Monisha, was that the same thing was happening here. Outsiders define gender relations between Black men and women. Like Daniel Moynihan and Steven Spielberg in "The Color Purple." All these guys, these outsiders, are making money from Black feminist products. So I wanted to make that parallel. I'm writing a book about William Demby, an author who lived in Italy for a long time. He was a Black author, and he got wrapped up in the gender wars, and he never felt as a Black person because, you know, he lived in Italy all those years. But when he came back here, the upper-class part of the feminist movement was in full bloom. And so there's a big fight between, you know, the Black writers. It's still going on. Alice Walker jumped on me in a book recently and said I hated Black women writers. I published most of them. You know, not only do I publish them here, but I published Black women in Africa, South Africa, and England. I published maybe ten times as many Black women writers as my critics. But anyway, she put that in the book. And then she insulted my mother. So it's still going on. But the book, her book, was published by a white patriarch-run company. So I'm saying that they're making all the money. And the parallel I wanted to make was how because I got the book by this feminist Indian author. I said this is very familiar that Rudyard Kipling's always got Indian women pining after British officers. So German and British men defined Indian women as prostitutes. This thing about prostitution being the oldest profession comes from Rudyard Kipling talking about Indian women.

Monisha Shiva: So, you know, I never read Rudyard Kipling. I was never attracted to his books. I never cared for his writing.

Ishmael Reed: The movie "Gunga Din" was cartoonish about the Indian religion.

Monisha Shiva: I never got into it. I couldn't even watch the movie, to be honest. I wanted to watch it before our interview. I couldn't bring myself to watch it.

Ishmael Reed: Do you see the image they had of Kali?

Monisha Shiva: Yeah, I saw it. Similarly, you also see Kali in Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. She is the terrifying goddess for the bad guys in the movie.

Ishmael Reed: "Gunga Din" had the Thuggies. This Indian woman said that it was full of stereotypes about Thuggies. And they're depicted as highway robbers and all this kind of stuff. But that was created by outsiders. That's how the British saw them, and the scholar said they stereotyped them,* right? So in the movie, I think I told you this, the British wipe out the thugs with a Gatling gun, like an early AK 47, that repeatedly fires and massacres them. The Sikhs come in and help the British. So I asked a Sikh friend. I said, "What's going on there? Sikhs helping the British wipe out other Indians?" And he, he said, hadn't seen the movie. So did the Sikhs aid the British?

Monisha Shiva: There were lots of Indians who aided the British, doing a disservice to those who wanted to be free from the British.

Ishmael Reed: Wasn't it a massacre of the Sikhs, and the Sikhs took revenge by killing Gandhi?

Monisha Shiva: They wanted their own countries, and Indira Gandhi wasn't having it.

Ishmael Reed: In the Sikh religion, are women treated the same as men?

Monisha Shiva: I mean, they're still a patriarchy.

Ishmael Reed: But they rejected Casteism, didn't they? By using the device, everybody's got the same last name.

Monisha Shiva: They rejected Casteism. So they're better on that front, for sure. Sexism exists all throughout in India, irrespective of religious or philosophical beliefs. I used to work for an organization that helped survivors of domestic violence within the South Asian community. Professors were running the organization. And they would tell me about the difference, the South Asian sexism. So in Western culture, women are considered feeble, like you need to help them because they can't help themselves. You need to open the door for them. But in India or South Asia, the belief is that women are so powerful that you need to control them. You have Kali, a mighty woman, but you must possess her.

Ishmael Reed: She kills all these guys.

Monisha Shiva: She kills the bad guys.

Ishmael Reed: In this propaganda movie, "Gunga Din," she heads the Thuggie blood cult. What is your concept of Kali?

Monisha Shiva: My concept of Kali is greatness. It's showing fierceness when needed. Kali also has different versions of herself. She dominates. She kills all evil, and she's like one of the most powerful goddesses, ...and to make her a thug or someone, I don't know. She's considered to have the ultimate power. She can destroy things. There's another version of her called Durga, and she's also very nurturing, ...but to minimize her image as the object of worship by the blood cult. Thuggies. By the way, a version of Kali is also worshipped by the Roma people.

Ishmael Reed: Why is she so angry about guys? What happened to her? We tried to read all the stuff about her in the Britannica and all that. I got lost.

Monisha Shiva: I want to find out too. Since she's a god, I don't think there's the creation of Kali. Kali's just there. She always existed. That was always my interpretation. So that's why I have yet to learn about her birth. There are stories of other gods' births, of the gods Rama or Krishna. But I have yet to hear of Kali's birth. So in my childhood, I always thought she just existed.

Ishmael Reed: Like the protector of women.

Monisha Shiva: She's the protector of good.

Ishmael Reed: In Hindi, Kali and Krishna mean black.

Monisha Shiva: Kali means black.

Ishmael Reed: And Krishna too.

Monisha Shiva: Krishna means black too.

Ishmael Reed: Why do they paint those people blue?

Monisha Shiva: Because they're so dark that they look blue. That's what they told me.

Ishmael Reed: The Aryan thing is in trouble because now they extended it to Hungarians and Italians. There are some blonde blue-eyed Hungarians and Italians, but they are not typical. And I guess this Black guy that runs the Proud Boys is an Aryan too. Indian scientists say there was never an invasion by blonde, blue-eyed people in India. It's a myth.

Monisha Shiva: B. R. Ambedkar. He wrote *Annihilation of Caste*. An important piece overlooked by many and many South Asians.

Ishmael Reed: Yes. Ambedkar suspected that it never happened. So now, using DNA and the genome and all that stuff, Indian scientists say it never happened. If all Indians have the same origin--,

Monisha Shiva: So we're all on the same plane.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah. That's what they're saying. This is a myth, but then the Germans picked it up. They picked it up because they believed that humanity originated in India. There was this whole thing among German philosophers, including Nietzsche, about everything coming from the East. Humans' origin in the Himalayas is what all these ignorant German philosophers were saying. Hitler picked up on all that kind of stuff.

Monisha Shiva: When I was a kid, one of my social studies teachers in elementary school told me that Northern Indians were Aryans. And I was so confused.

Ishmael Reed: Well, well, many of the people in the Nazi party didn't have blonde hair or blue eyes. So this has been a very, very dangerous myth. Are there a lot of Indian women in American shelters who've been battered?

Monisha Shiva: Yeah, of course. There are so many. Many Indian women come to this country following their husbands and leaving their families, and they get trapped here. In a recent study of 468 South Asian immigrants living in the US, it was found that 48% of them experienced domestic violence as in physical violence. The rate was higher amongst women than men.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah. And so, is there a lot of domestic abuse and violence by Indian immigrants in the United States?

Monisha Shiva: Absolutely.

Ishmael Reed: Thank you.

Monisha Shiva: Thank you.

SOURCES

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Durba Mitra wrote about outsiders defining gender relationships in her book *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, Published by Princeton University Press, 2020.

The statistics on domestic violence experienced by South Asian immigrants in the US are found here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08862605211015262>