



Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and Its Provocation of the Modern

Kalpana Ram

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In her innovative new book, Kalpana Ram reflects on the way spirit possession unsettles some of the foundational assumptions of modernity. What is a human subject under the varied conditions commonly associated with possession? What kind of subjectivity must already be in place to allow such a transformation to occur? How does it alter our understanding of memory and emotion if these assail us in the form of ghosts rather than as attributes of subjective experience? What does it mean to worship deities who are afflictive and capricious, yet bear an intimate relationship to justice? What is a "human" body if it can be taken over by a whole array of entities? What is agency if people can be "claimed" in this manner? What is gender if, while possessed, a woman is a woman no longer? Drawing on spirit possession among women and the rich traditions of subaltern religion in Tamil Nadu, South India, Ram concludes that the basis for constructing an alternative understanding of human agency need not rest on the usual requirements of a fully present consciousness or on the exercise of choice and planning. Instead of relegating possession, ghosts, and demons to the domain of the exotic, Ram uses spirit possession to illuminate ordinary experiences and relationships. In doing so, she uncovers fundamental instabilities that continue to haunt modern formulations of gender, human agency, and political emancipation. Fertile Disorder interrogates the modern assumptions about gender, agency, and subjectivity that underlie the social improvement projects circulating in Tamil Nadu, assumptions that directly shape people's lives. The book pays particular attention to projects of family planning, development, reform, and emancipation. Combining ethnography with philosophical argument, Ram fashions alternatives to standard post-modernist and post-structuralist formulations. Grounded in decades of fieldwork, ambitious and wide ranging, her work is conceived as a journey that makes incursions into the unfamiliar, then returns us to the familiar. She argues that magic is not a monopoly of any one culture, historical period, or social formation but inhabits modernity---not only in the places, such as cinema and sound recording, where it is commonly looked for, but in "habit" and in aspects of everyday life that have been largely overlooked and shunned.

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