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Yogis: Spiritual Practitioners, Tricksters, and Subjugated Subjects

Over the course of yoga's expansive history, there has been an effort by Europeans to create a distinction between the goals of moral, philosophical yoga and deceitful yogi characters. Western perceptions of the "yogi" trace through British colonial rule in India and into the modern day. Commonly described in medieval literature, trickster yogi figures became conflated with real-life ascetics and fakirs who impeded British colonial trade routes. The representation of malicious yogis was placed in opposition to the devoted, moralistic yogis described in the *Yoga Sūtras* and other ancient texts. When yoga was reintroduced to the West, it was compared to ancient moralistic Patañjali yoga in order to appear nonthreatening, and therefore appealing, to a predominately white, Western audience. The shifting perception and understanding of the yogi figure is indicative of strained Western/Indian relations rooted in a deeply divided and problematic colonial past.

The *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, an ancient scripture comprised of 195 aphorisms, provides a step-by-step guide to meditation in order to achieve enlightenment. In the *Yoga Sūtras*, yoga is translated as "the stoppage of the turnings of thought" or "the stilling of the changing states of the mind" (White 12, Bryant 477). Traditionally, the *Yoga Sūtras* and other ancient yoga texts have presented yogis as moral, devotional figures. Bryant's translation of the *Yoga Sūtras* cites "devotion to God" as one of the observances (Bryant 489). One translation of the ancient religious *Bhagavad Gita* text claims that when a yogi sits in a secret place and is engaged in meditation and deep thought, "he is divorced from greed and desire of reward" (Atkinson 61). According to White, *The Bhagavad Gita* and the Puranas even redefined yoga as "union with

God" (White 45). Through ancient texts, yogis are depicted as contemplative, non-threatening, and devoted religious figures. Since the reintroduction of yoga to the West, the Yoga Sūtras have been studied and revered by gurus and modern practitioners alike.

In contrast to the enlightened, spiritual, and liberated yogi practitioners described in ancient texts, medieval literary sources depict yogis as malicious tricksters and demons. In his book *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, White asserts that in India's medieval and modern fantasy and literature, "the evil villain is called a yogi" (White 67). A story originating in south India in the twelfth-century, "The Little Devotee," describes an ascetic, or yogi, who claims that the only meal he wishes to have prepared for him "should consist of the perfect body of a human child under the age of five" (White 33). The cannibalistic qualities of yogis in literature differ from ancient depictions. The "Mahābhārata," an ancient Hindu text, describes a yogi's humble diet of grains, avoidance of oily things, and "Eating only plain barley for a long time" in order to obtain power ("Mahābhārata" 370). Sinister literary yogis are also described stealing other peoples' bodies for personal gain or sexual pleasure, contrasting with the moral principles of "celibacy" in the ancient Yoga Sūtra text (Bryant 488). In opposition to the devoted, celibate, renunciate yogi often portrayed in ancient texts, literary yogis are more often portrayed as cannibals, lusty brutes, and tricksters. These discrepancies influence the European suspicion and mistrust of yogis that pervades into the twentieth century.

Originally, the *Yoga Sūtras* were studied, interpreted, and commented on by Indian and Hindu scholars. However, the ancient text dwindled in popularity and disappeared from popular and critical scholarship for several centuries. From the sixteenth- to eighteenth century, there was a "Yoga revival," which began to reintroduce ancient texts and iterations of yoga practice and meditation into the public perception. When it reemerged, yoga was studied by primarily foreign,

and often Western scholars, who were separated from Indian culture or philosophy. Thomas Colebrook, a founder of British Orientalism, largely discredited yoga as a philosophical system. Max Müller, a German philologist and Orientalist, claimed that modern yoga had "descended into 'its purely practical and most degenerate form'" (Laycock 113-114). Madame Blavatsky, the Russian founder of the Theosophical society denounced the hatha yogi as a "'common, ignorant sorcerer'" (Laycock 113-114). Singleton evidences that expressions of disdain for hatha yogis are frequent in Blavatksy's writing and serve as rhetorical foils for Theosophical renditions of true yoga (Singleton 77). Many European scholars attempted to differentiate between inferior, magical or physical types of yoga (hatha or tantra yoga) from the spiritual or moral yoga lauded in the *Yoga Sūtras*. However, White suggests that these Western interpretations of Patañjali's work "effectively cut the Yoga Sutra free from its Indian moorings – from which it has been drifting ever since" (White 60). Although European scholars helped revive the popularity of yogic studies, their outside perspective often misrepresented the history, culture, and philosophy in which it was founded.

In addition to the views propagated by Colebrook, Müller, and Blavatsky, many other Europeans were skeptical of yogis. Europeans were familiar with the Hindu ascetics and mercenaries who leveraged their status as "holy men" to turn pilgrimage routes into trading networks (White 70). This common misidentification reinforced the perception that yogis were dangerous and untrustworthy. During modern European colonial rule, the identities of yogis and fakirs were conflated as catch-all phrases representing the "itinerant holy man who would periodically disrupt the East India Company's trade routes" (Singleton 36). Ancient texts also caution against men practicing trickery under the guise of a yogi, echoing the sinister yogi figure from medieval literature and modern European mistrust of ascetics and mercenaries who

operated under the false pretense of a yogi. The "Dattātreyayogaśāstra," a sanskrit work on Hatha Yoga from the thirteenth century warns, "Crafty men try various deceits; declaring 'We are yogis,' they are fools, intent on nothing but their own satisfaction." ("Dattātreyayogaśāstra" 61). The use of yogis as a disguise for trickery led to widespread suspicion and created a wider gap between fraudulent charlatans and the moralistic followers of Patañjali. From the sixteenth century onward, yogis were viewed by Westerners similarly to the modern-day Taliban, emblematic of both religious fanaticism and terrorism (White 66). Skepticism of yogi figures, although partially grounded in real-life events, is also symbolic of colonial hostility toward non-Europeans.

Yogis were identified by both Indian and European critics with "black magic, perverse sexuality, and alimentary impurity," distancing them even more from the wholesome reputation of practitioners of yoga in ancient India (Singleton 35). The deceptive yogi characters cautioned against in literature, ancient texts, and in European colonial discourse are starkly contrasted to the morally elevated and superior practitioners of "true," ancient yoga. In an article from "Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation," Joseph Laycock explains that the appeal to Protestant sensibilities entailed condemning yoga, particularly hatha yoga, as an inauthentic or degenerate form of Hindu tradition (Laycock 113). Because the term "yogi" was conflated with fakirs and ascetics, Europeans denounced practitioners of yogic austerities as "powerful, dangerous, and irascible beings, capable of supernatural feats and horrific maledictions against Europeans" (Singleton 67). Physical demonstrations, like Yogi Bava Lachman Dass's public performance of postures, and photographs, like the yogi on a bed of nails, became indicative of India's moral and spiritual backwardness (Laycock 15, Singleton 48). An article published by *Cultural Anthropology* also articulates the distinction between the yogi

who attempts to achieve union with the highest reality as described in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the sadhu or fakir as practitioner of the penances popularized from other quarters (Narayan 490). Images and performances, evidencing the yogi as a symbol for trickery, sexuality, and bodily strangeness, were largely denounced by Europeans and Americans.

The idea that hatha and other bodily practices of yoga were inferior to spiritual devotionalism was reinforced by Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda, an Indian Hindu monk, is largely credited with the revival and popularity of yoga in the West in the nineteenth century. In the book *Yoga Body*, Singleton asserts that the new, English-language yogas formulated by Vivekananda and others emerged in a climate of opinion that was "highly suspicious of the yogin" (Singleton 35). In response to mass skepticism, Vivekananda sought to rebrand and reclaim the definition of a true yogi. In his famous speech on "The Ideal of Universal Religion," Vivekananda describes Karma, Bhakti, Raja and Jnana yogis, claiming "So this word Yogi comprises them all" (Vivekananda 1). This comprehensive description reframes yogis as agents of union through work, love, mysticism, and philosophy. White asserts that most people in the twenty-first century view India's traditional yogis as peaceful, forest-dwelling sages who live in harmony with nature and spend their days meditating (White 66). This is representative of the positive reception that Vivekananda's moral framework of yoga achieved by American and European audiences. Vivekananda's presentation of yoga in the West connects back to ancient Patañjali yoga and rebrands the yogi character as a symbol for devotion and benevolence.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Physical Culture Movement reflected an emphasis on bodily exercise and muscularity in Britain and the United States. Influenced by bodybuilding, gymnastics, and other forms of physical exercise, individuals became 'transfixed with the idea of improving their own bodies and were often equally obsessed

with the vision of improving the collective national or racial body'" (Singleton 84). Demonstrating a rhetoric of European superiority, yoga's revival in Britain and the United States evidences the continuation of the strained colonial relationship between India and the West. Shri Yogendra, a householder yogi, used the public health and fitness rhetoric of the Physical Culture Movement to advocate for the scientific and health benefits that yoga could provide. Yogendra emphasized the possibility of racial evolution and "the potential of yoga to cause permanent eugenic improvement in the individual and the race" (Singleton 117). The connection of yoga to Social Darwinism and eugenics reflects the potential for yoga to be used as a "transgenerational fast track to genetic and spiritual perfection" (Singleton 98). In a chapter from *Gurus of Modern Yoga,* Smith and White describe how Indians under the British and Hindus under the Mughals were often depicted as weak, soft, and easily ruled (Smith 127). The myth of Indian degeneracy sought to "justify in the minds of the colonizers continued British subjugation," while leaving behind a sense of cultural inferiority in the national consciousness in India (Singleton 95, Murali 155). According to an article called "The Dual-Ideal of the Ascetic and Healthy Body: The Jain Terāpanth and Modern Yoga in the Context of Late Capitalism," Jain asserts that modern yoga resulted from colonialist, nationalist, and global processes by which yoga became a transnational product interlinked with modern ideas about fitness and health (Jain 35). Yoga's connection to health, race, and superiority demonstrates its lingering connection to Indian colonization.

In order to appeal to Western audiences, yoga was separated from Indian philosophy, religion, and culture, and instead, superimposed over Western values and traditions. In "Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu Masculinity and Muscular Christianity," Joseph S. Alter argues that the muscle development and athleticism advocated by Muscular Christianity was meant to result in "character development, ethics, morals, and 'devotion to God and Country'" (Alter

502). Yoga became a popular mode of reinforcing Christianity through its popular practice at the YMCA (Singleton 91). Although bodily practices of yoga were commonly denounced by Blavatsky, Müller, and Vivekananda, yogic postures and breath control became an important part of its integration and popularity in Western culture. A new unified form of yoga, modern postural yoga, sought to unify the discrepancy between bodily and spiritual practices of yoga, fitting in with both Patañjali's ancient texts, the Physical Culture Movement, and Western religiousity.

While attempting to divorce yoga from its Indian bearings, yoga was commonly used to enforce Christian rhetoric and teachings. In the article "Yoga Comes to American Physical Education: Josephine Rathbone and Corrective Physical Education," Vertinsky describes that modern postural yoga was adopted by the West in its search for physical and spiritual renewal while simultaneously reigniting nationalist struggles in colonial India by blending with a Muscular Christianity-inspired Indian physical education (Vertinsky 289). Keshub Sen, an Indian Bengali Hindu philosopher, also incorporated Christian teachings into his understanding of yoga in order to reclaim the term "yogi." Keshub Sen claimed, "'Christ is a true Yogi, and he will surely help us realize our national ideal of a Yogi'" (Killingley 22). Krishnamacharya, coined the "father of modern yoga," also advocated for a vision of yoga divorced from Indian history and culture. In the year before his death, Krishnamacharya declared, "'We need to de-Indianize yoga in order to try to universalize it,'" and claimed that it had "'great usefulness for the human community as a whole'" (Singleton T. 95). Yoga, a meditative practice originating in India, was used to authenticate and reinforce Western teachings of Christianity. In order to appeal to Western audiences, it was explicitly divorced from its Indian roots. The ironic use and

exploitation of yoga to fit the needs and desires of a Western audience demonstrates the lopsided power dynamic as a result of British colonization and Western exploitation of India.

Through yoga's revival and reintroduction, it was displaced from its Indian culture, history, and language. Often read, translated, and analyzed by Western scholars, ancient texts, like the *Yoga Sūtras*, became tools to reinforce Western ideals and cultural values. Modern postural yoga operates under the guise of health, fitness, and spiritual enlightenment, masquerading like the sinster yogis in medieval mythology and trickster ascetics along European trade routes. At its core, modern postural yoga is deeply ingrained in a past fraught with colonialism, subjugation of Indian subjects, and misinterpretation of primary texts in order to appeal a predominately white, Western audience.

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