

the most part, however, she documents mismatches between the intentions of HIV interventions and the local reception. To some degree, these are practical. Boxes of condoms often sit locked up in government offices until they become useless because officials are awaiting permission or lack access to networks to distribute them, for instance. At a deeper level, however, there is an ontological divide between the Western understanding of disease vectors through individual behaviour and the Trobriand conception of serious illnesses and accidents as the consequences of moral breaches of collective morality—an understanding that, for now, places the invisible but highly dangerous condition of HIV infection into the class of *sovasova*, chronic illness resulting from clan incest. At a more fundamental level, there is a serious mismatch between the moral assumptions of HIV awareness discourses that portray sex as dangerous and an individual responsibility and a culture which celebrates sex in the context of collective well-being. The running theme of the book is that a truly effective HIV intervention must be built upon “a foundation of respect for both the commonality and diversity of human sexual desire and experience” (133). She demonstrates just how challenging this is to accomplish even with the best intentions.

Lepani brings a quiet authority to this complex study. She has long experience with HIV awareness campaigns and was the principal author of the *National HIV Prevention Strategy* in PNG. She is also a member, through marriage, of the Trobriand community. While addressing a dark and difficult topic, the ethnography presents a positive, compassionate and intimate portrait of contemporary life in the Trobriands. Drawing effectively on personal vignettes, the text is wonderfully evocative, accessible and engaging. It is an important book that will be of considerable interest to specialists studying cultural responses to HIV around the world. Yet it is at the same time an engaging introduction to a contemporary Melanesian society that I enthusiastically recommend for undergraduate teaching.

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THE WORLD BEFORE HER. *Written and directed by Nisha Pahuja; producers: Ed Barreveld, Cornelia Principe, Nisha Pahuja; editor, David Kazala; original music, Ken Myhr. Toronto: Storyline Entertainment; Distributed by KinoSmith, 2012. 1 DVD (90 mins.) C\$150.00, Educational Use; C\$23.98, Home Use. In Hindi and English with English subtitles. Url: www.worldbeforeher.com. Url: www.kinosmith.com.*

This self-assured documentary by Toronto-based filmmaker Nisha Pahuja alternates between the run-up to the popular Indian magazine *Femina's* Miss India beauty pageant (2011), showing the hopes and aspirations of the girls taking part in Bombay, and the annual training camps of the Durga Vahini,

the women's wing of the largest Hindu nationalist group in India who have an altogether different idea of what it means to be a woman in India today.

Those who do not know India well tend to see Hinduism as a relatively non-violent and tolerant religion. But one of the strengths of the film is that with rare access to the Durga Vahini, we see women and young girls being trained to take up arms and defend Hinduism against Christians and Muslims who are seen as infidels.

As the Miss India contestants are botoxed and have their skin bleached they talk about a passport to a new kind of freedom and progress for themselves (with the implication that this applies generally to women in India). In the speeches they practice for the "big night" they learn how to champion social causes without being too political.

Meanwhile the girls at the Durga Vahini are being told that it is a woman's duty to bear children and that they should be married by the age of 18. Durga Vahini opposed the Miss World contest which took place in India in 1996 and we see archive footage of widespread street protests against the "Americanization" of attitudes to women.

The Durga Vahini trainers tell their girls that they should be anti-ego and anti-career while Ruhi, one of the Miss India contestants, proudly proclaims she is being transformed from a "person into a personality," a desire underwritten by a drive for individual success and career.

There is much to commend this film. It is a non-judgemental portrayal of an alternating succession of scenes which present two Indias that could broadly be described in terms of capitalism versus fundamentalism, tradition versus modernity. But herein lies the problem of the film. Perhaps because of this alternating structure, a perception develops that these worlds are being portrayed as being diametrically opposed to each other. Anyone who knows about contemporary India and party politics will know, for example, that the Hindu fundamentalist Narendra Modi, running for prime minister at the time we are writing, is India's strongest proponent of Western neoliberal development, American-style presidential campaigns and the cult of the personality.

The alternation of the scenes eventually becomes monotonous, as there is no intrinsic development to push each narrative forward apart from the revelation of who will win the beauty pageant. But we are not given the opportunity to care enough about any of the contestants for it to really matter to us as an audience. Ultimately the film is about exposition as opposed to explanation or analysis. "Look, these are the two faces of India," it seems to cry out. But what more? Are we to believe that these two strands of women's experience represent the spectrum of what it is like to be a woman in India today? The film scrapes the surface of a huge range of issues around what it is like being a woman in India today but frustrates us by not enabling us to enter them in more depth.

Though presented as a clash of values, reading between the lines we

realize that in fact both attitudes to women—Miss India or Miss Militant—are underpinned by a perspective which sees women as “the second sex.” Perhaps one of the most shocking and enduring of images is that of the beauty contestants parading up and down Goa’s Baga beach, with their heads masked in white sheets with holes cut for their eyes like the Ku Klux Klan members, so that the leering male judges are not distracted while rating their legs. Whether they are being encouraged to use their beauty to have power or women are brandishing their swords to gain power, ultimately in both these cases it is at the service of patriarchal values. Patriarchy is alive and kicking in India.

Though it is the beauty pageant contestants who see the contest as a way to freedom from the limitations placed on their lives by patriarchy, in fact the most subversive, complex and fascinating character of the film—one who could be the focus of a film in her own right—is Prachi, a volunteer at the Durga Vahini camp. She embodies nearly all of what it is like to grow up as a young woman with a fiercely independent mind, desperately seeking a route out, amidst all the pressures of Indian patriarchy. Early in the film she states that she wishes that she had not been born neither as a girl nor a boy. She rejects her parents’ wish for her to get married yet respects her father for disciplining her with a red hot iron rod when she was young. She is deeply troubled, living with all the contradictions and complexities that come from being an independent-thinking female caught in a deeply patriarchal society. And despite her claim that she would use violence to defend her religion she is the one character in the film with whom we can build empathy. It is definitely a film that should be watched by anyone interested in women in India today.

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