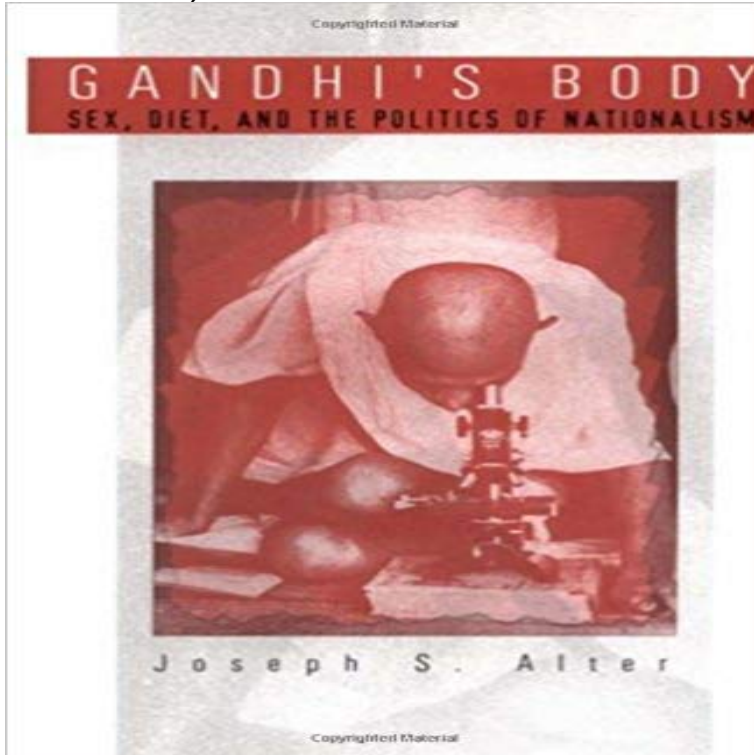


Gandhis Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism (Critical Histories)



No single person is more directly associated with India and Indias struggle for independence than Mahatma Gandhi. His name has equally become synonymous with the highest principles of global equality, human dignity, and freedom. Joseph Alter argues, however, that Gandhi has not been completely understood by biographers and political scholars, and in *Gandhi's Body* he undertakes a reevaluation of the Mahatmas life and thought. In his revisionist and iconoclastic approach, Alter moves away from the usual focus on nonviolence, peace, and social reform and takes seriously what most scholars who have studied Gandhi tend to ignore: Gandhis preoccupation with sex, his obsession with diet reform, and his vehement advocacy for naturopathy. Alter concludes that a distinction cannot be made between Gandhis concern with health, faith in nonviolence, and his sociopolitical agenda. In this original and provocative study, Joseph Alter demonstrates that these seemingly idiosyncratic aspects of Gandhis personal life are of central importance to understanding his politics and not only Gandhis politics but Indian nationalism in general. Using the Mahatmas own writings, Alter places Gandhis bodily practices in the context of his philosophy; for example, he explores the relationship between Gandhis fasting and his ideas about the metaphysics of emptiness and that between his celibacy and his beliefs about nonviolence. Alter also places Gandhis ideas and practices in their national and transnational contexts. He discusses how and why nature cure became extremely popular in India during the early part of the twentieth century, tracing the influence of two German naturopaths on Gandhis thinking and on the practice of yoga in India. More important, he argues that the reconstruction of yoga in terms of European naturopathy was brought about deliberately by a number of

activists in India of whom Gandhi was only the most visible interested in creating a scientific health regimen, distinct from Western precedents, that would make the Indian people fit for self-rule. Gandhi's Body counters established arguments that Indian nationalism was either a completely indigenous Hindu-based movement or simply a derivative of Western ideals.

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